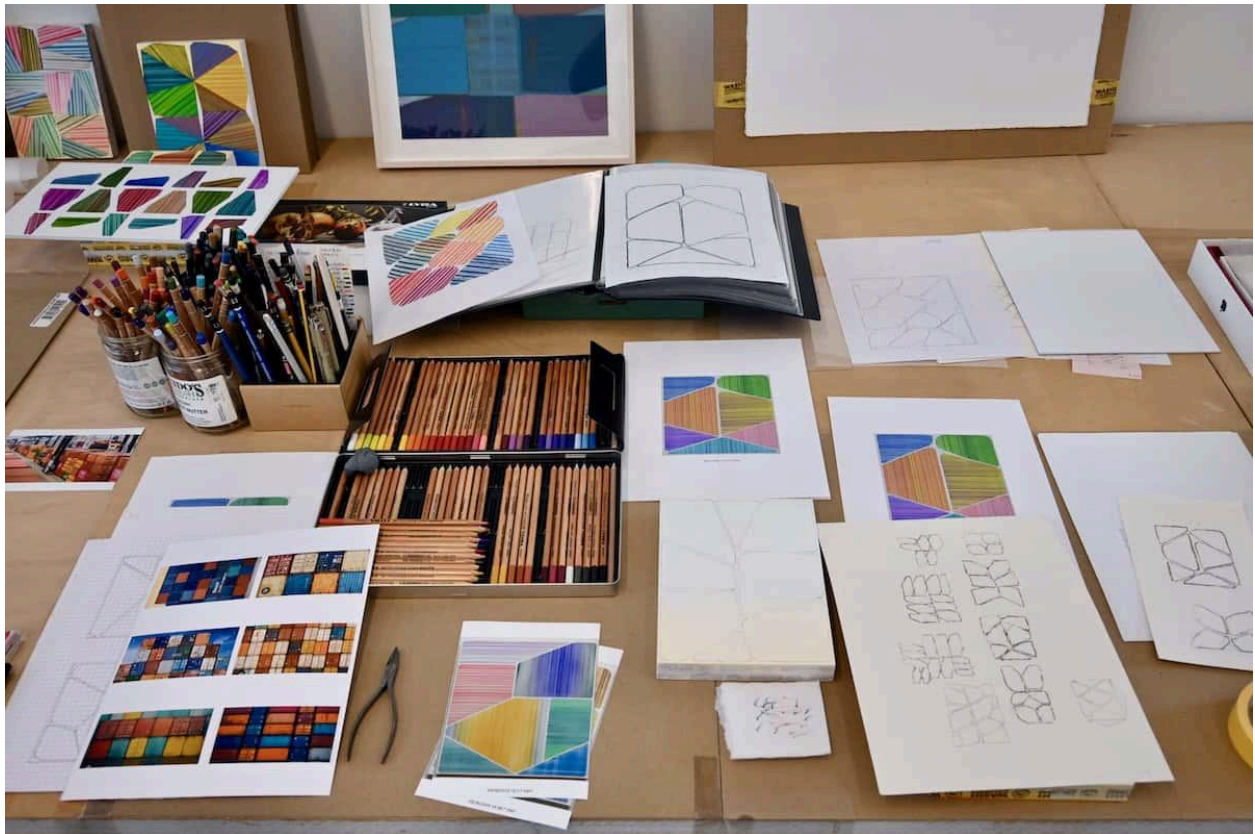


Featured Artist



Walking Through Colour – Erick Johnson

By [Leora Armstrong](#) Published On: June 27th, 2025

Erick Johnson's work narrates rich surface textures, layered chromatic decisions, and an intuitive approach to composition. He creates paintings that are simultaneously architectural and emotional, intimate and expansive. Johnson's works are a study in contrasts: finely flat surfaces carry the memory of earlier paint layers pushed and pulled, while negative space winds a whispered line through overlapping color fields. Movement and light crossed the surface, much like looking out of a speeding train, where, at times, the image outside can blur when captured through a lens.

Walking into the gallery is like stepping into a visual echo – colors reverberate, shapes accumulate meaning, and the viewer becomes a participant in an unfolding spatial story. The exhibition presents a new body of work that continues Johnson's exploration of "soft geometry," transparency, and the tactile memory embedded in surfaces. Johnson and I caught up to discuss his practice and new work.

Can you tell me how your journey started as an artist?

I was born in San Francisco, California and then lived in Los Angeles until I was seven. I really didn't want to leave but our father had taken a job in New Jersey and so it was goodbye to California. I carry memories of that place and time, the light, the culture. As a kid I loved to draw and make things. Our mother was a potter and was always encouraging us kids. My sister Sue is an artist too, so we have that special bond.

In college I was studying liberal arts but really took to art. I earned my undergraduate degree in painting from Empire State College in New York. I later completed a painting MFA at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College.

When I arrived in New York City, one of my most formative jobs was working for Isamu Noguchi when he first opened his Garden Museum in Long Island City. It was an amazing introduction to the art world, and I learned so much. It was also a wonderful community experience with the other employees, most of whom were artists. We always had lunch together at a big table and talked about art or the issues of the day.

Years later, I worked for Wolf Kahn, who I also learned a lot from. Being an artist assistant can be a profound experience. The conversations, the skills one learns, seeing how something is done, are priceless.

What was it about this area that prompted the move here for your home and new studio?

I've lived and worked in New York City for years with my wife, Jennifer, also an artist, until we eventually found a little cabin in Hillsdale, New York in 2002. This decision was influenced by our growing connection to the artistic community in the Berkshires, particularly through poet, artist and gallerist, Geoff Young, who until recently, operated a gallery in Great Barrington. We would come up for



openings and dinners and meet artists who became friends. Geoff had created this great hub of artists, poets and art lovers and it was the best thing.

Today, Erick and Jennifer each have dedicated studios in the Hillsdale area. While he maintains a connection to New York City, a slower pace, natural beauty, and the local creative community of the Hudson Valley has become an essential part of work's daily rhythm.

What motivates your practice, and what does art mean for you?

I've always wanted to make what's in my mind's eye, to see that idea become a thing in the world. Lately I've wanted a quieter place to concentrate my thoughts, and a more rural setting is making more sense. A creative life is full of challenges, and having exposure to nature can be very nourishing.



Who has influenced you on your journey?

One of my earliest memories was of a Van Gogh sunflower print we had in our house. I was also influenced by SoCal car culture and 1970's music including album covers. Later I discovered Matisse, Diebenkorn, and Brice Marden. I have always been inspired by ancient art: textiles, stone carving, things that were seemingly abstract but functional within the culture it came from.

Your work is color-based; can you discuss the shapes and what it is that decides how the work evolves?

Well, I decide – and there are lots of decisions! My work had a gestural aspect for a long time but then geometry, mostly hard edge but sometimes softer and looser, started showing up in the drawings. The framework of my painting always comes out of a slow and steady drawing process.

So that's the structure. The paint is laid down in a way that references movement and, at the same time, is a record of my arm/hand's movement. I use multiple handmade tools, as opposed to brushes, to get what I'm after. I think of color as a subjective language with endless possibilities that I deeply enjoy exploring. I tend to work in series, and my latest work is addressing the idea of floating polygons that don't touch each other, creating narrow spaces, or passages, between the forms. The color is more transparent.

Yes, these latest works feel multilayered and, in some pieces, have a transparency akin to glass. The line running through the pieces reminds me of a mapping of a place.

The current series at Furnace definitely have a relationship to mapping. What comes to mind are the early maps of the London Underground, designed by Harry Beck in the Thirties. The design was based on electrical engineering drawings, a kind of schematic abstraction that helped with comprehension.

Do you have a color that you return to?

I don't have a favorite color; I think more in terms of color relationships, where the context and juxtaposition is influencing the adjacent colors. I like the musical analogy of a guitar chord. It's a blend of tones, much more interesting than a single pluck of a string.

How do you maintain focus and motivation during long-term projects?

Hopefully, a strong enough idea will see you through. Again, that goes back to wanting to see the thing in your mind become an artifact.

Do you have a project you are proud of or something you are considering for the future?

I'm thrilled to see my latest work up on the wall at Furnace Art on Paper Archive. It's a bit of evolution from my previous work but then the work is always evolving.

During a recent trip to Paris, I was reminded of the way light filters through colored glass in Gothic cathedrals. The transparency, the movement of light across the day – it's staying with me. There's also a resonance between these cathedrals and light filtering through a forest canopy, something I can ponder just by walking out my door.

If you could beg, borrow, or steal a piece of work from anywhere in the world, what would it be and why?

It would have to be a Noguchi basalt piece. Those works have incredible tension between the oxidized "skin" or surface of the basalt and Noguchi's interventions,



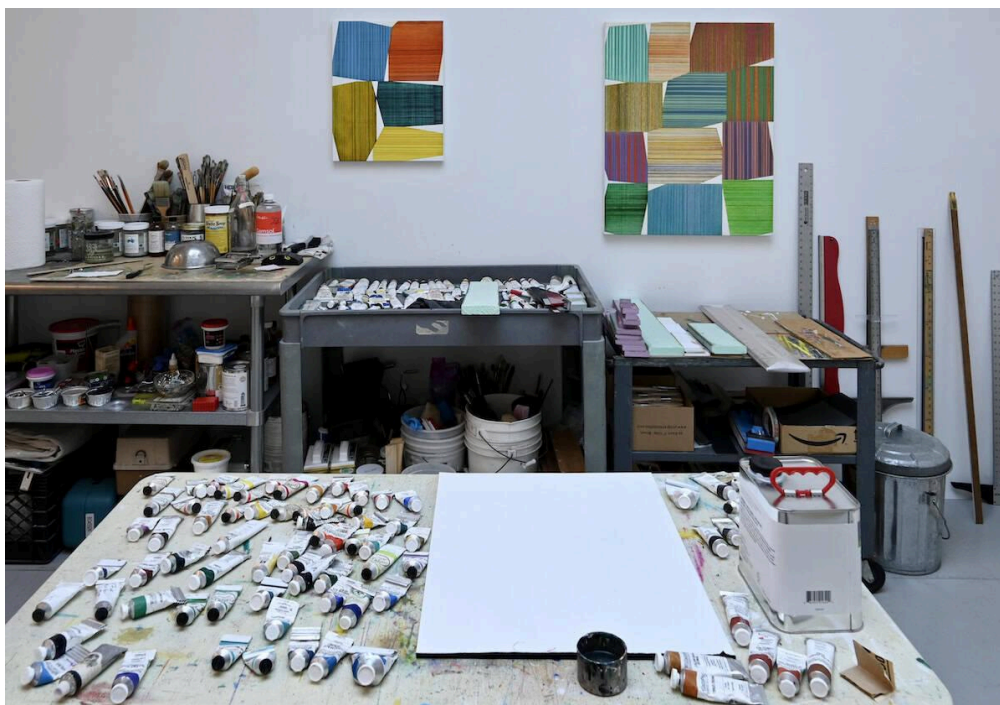
using modern stone cutting and polishing tools. It's nature and culture fused together.

Collaboration – alliance -partnership. Can you talk about any collaborations you have made.

Although I'm quite happy alone in the studio, I value the friendships that make up my art community. Because artmaking can be such a solitary pursuit, relationships and community that I've found in the Hudson Valley are special to me and nicely balances out all that alone time. I co-curated a show with artist Janice Caswell at LAB Space in Hillsdale. That experience reinforced my interest in curating and collaborating more regularly. It's another form of dialogue.

Johnson's meticulous practice and attention to detail are evident in his work. Tightly masked edges create corridors within his compositions, expressing both tension and flow. The repetitive stacked shapes throughout his practice remind me of cairns built up from smaller rocks, gradually decreasing in size at the top, each touching but allowing spaces to flow through. Surfaces show the underbelly of earlier layers scraped back, each building a new color.

Johnson's larger earlier works and canvases, filled to the edges, had color leaching over; now, the edge is defined by space, where the eye lingers, wandering around the formed path. The linear is more defined, each shifting toward and away from its neighbor, conversing both horizontally and vertically. Color dances across the surfaces, and only when you closely examine the work can you truly see the immense detail. I encourage you to view this work in person at Furnace Art on Paper Archive, Falls Village, CT. •



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