

Roger Ricco, Artist, Has Something to Show You

by [Edward M. Gómez](#) on August 20, 2016

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Roger Ricco, "Snow Owl" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches (photo courtesy of Savery Gallery)
(click to enlarge)

[Roger Ricco](#) is an artist.

He is also a steel-foundry worker's son, a former rock-band promoter, and a co-founder and co-director, with Frank Maresca, of Ricco/Maresca, a well-known New York venue specializing in contemporary art by both schooled and self-taught artists. In fact, their gallery is probably best known as having been, for many years, one of the main presenters in the United States of definitive work in the related *art brut* and outsider art categories. With Maresca, Ricco has co-authored books showcasing the work of self-taught art-makers and assorted "vernacular" art forms, too.

Over the years, as anyone who has ever attempted to keep a gallery running after a first flush of success will admit, the partners have learned the need for big investments of energy, money and time.

It's that last resource, Ricco hints, that has been the most fleeting and always in short supply, so much so that, at 76, he finds himself charting a path out of the long shadow of his own accomplishments to face many of the same challenges as those of an "emerging" artist. His goal: not so much to get back to being an artist, for he has consistently produced paintings and photographs even as the decades have raced by, but to let the public know about another big part of his life, one that, as he sees it, has informed everything he has ever done on the business side of art. Now, his just-opened solo exhibition, [Roger Ricco: Photography & Paintings](#), at Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery, in Chelsea, through August 28 (presented in collaboration with Philadelphia's [Savery Gallery](#), Ricco's main representative in the US), offers a revealing glimpse of what he has been up to.

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The artist Roger Ricco at home in Woodstock, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

"Nature is psychedelic," Ricco says as I arrive for an interview at the home he shares with the artist [Elizabeth Rogers](#) in a forested area of Woodstock, New York, in the mid-Hudson Valley. It's about two

weeks before the opening of his current show, and he is still putting finishing touches on a couple of paintings. One is perched on an easel in the art-studio corner of the house's loft-like living space.

I ask him about his past, and he tells me that, growing up in Milwaukee, his mother took him to local cultural events, but that producing art himself was a notion that grew on him later; he earned an undergraduate degree in art at the University of Wisconsin in his hometown and, remarkably, while still a senior, won the Rome Prize. That award from the American Academy in Rome allowed him to spend two years in Italy, where he made what he describes as “mostly figurative paintings” and examined in person Renaissance masterpieces he had previously seen only in books.



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The artist Roger Ricco, looking through a selection of his new photographs (archival pigment prints) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

He recalls, “I had been exposed to contemporary art through magazines, but in Italy, seeing the art of past centuries, I got a vivid sense of a long lineage of people who had made things over a broad sweep of time. That has stayed with me throughout my career.” From Europe, Ricco headed to New York, where waning Abstract Expressionism had given way to Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns’s mixed-media experiments, and to Pop Art.

“Everything that was going on at that time – I was loving it,” he tells me. He continued making art. With collaborators, he created psychedelic light shows for rock bands. He hung out with the Grateful Dead. He and his pals produced the traveling show of a rock group of their own (in which Ricco did not perform). Later, teaming up with a more moneyed business partner, he worked as a dealer in the folk art field, offering such novel “American vernacular” items as scarecrows and wood carvings from fraternal lodges. He met Maresca, a photographer who was also wading into art-dealing and handling similar objects, and in 1979, they opened their gallery in Manhattan’s SoHo art district.

In the studio corner, Ricco points to the canvases he is planning to show in New York. I remember having seen his color photographs of found-object studio set-ups at a now-defunct Manhattan gallery several years ago, and his newer, more abstract photos at [Savery Gallery](#) last year. An admirer of the photographer Irving Penn (with whom he worked as an assistant on an assignment at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute many years ago), in his newest photos Ricco emulates that master's portraits-of-objects approach in close-ups of old glass bottles, antique toys and voluptuous peonies, reveling in the light playing upon their surfaces and oozing through a milky, glass-sheet background.

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Roger Ricco, "Cube, Shell and Sphere" (2014), archival pigment print, 32.05 x 32.05 inches (photo courtesy of Savery Gallery) ([click to enlarge](#))

Then there are Ricco's paintings, which appear to constitute a completely separate body of work, even if, to their maker, they share a common spirit and, subtly, a central theme with his photographs. As though anticipating my question about this point and his art-making motivations in general, Ricco begins to

articulate his own version of that most dreaded personal testament, the artist's statement. (He tends to speak in seemingly disconnected patches of thought; however, they do add up to multi-layered, multi-referenced arguments. A listener must pay attention and let them come together and find their coherent form.)

"Whether it's in the photo set-ups or in a painting, I'm interested in the consciousness of sentient beings," he says. "The subject of these images really isn't the bottle or the flower or the animal you see but rather that primal moment of engagement with something, your awareness of it. How do you paint that?"

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Roger Ricco, "Deer 1" (2016), acrylic on canvas, mounted on panel, 32 x 37 inches (photo courtesy of Savery Gallery) (click to enlarge)

Somewhat hesitantly, daring to sound like an artist's statement myself, I propose, "You're interested in the phenomenological? That's actually your subject?"

Replacing the canvas on the easel with another, Ricco utters something about the "dance of recognition" and then turns away to reveal "Deer 1" (2016, acrylic on canvas mounted on panel), a picture of an animal's ghostly, transparent silhouette set against a forest background and, in the distance, a penetrating light glowing through sputtering, sometimes watery brushstrokes that conjure up a lush but forbidding lair. He declares, "Everything changes when someone sees something and reacts to it," then switches the

work on display again. On the easel now appears an image of an empty swimming pool at the edge of a forest, with a large tree looming over it like a mighty spirit. Ricco teases out its leafy fluff with shape-tugging strokes of black, burgundy and blue.

He recalls, “As a kid, I visited the zoo. I saw the big cats in their cages. Thinking about them there – it was almost as though *their* awareness became *my* awareness. The paintings I’m making are about the flash of that moment of ‘Aha!’”

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Roger Ricco, “Pool with Ladder” (2016), acrylic on canvas, mounted on panel, 33.5 x 32 inches, on display in the artist’s studio (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

As I’m digesting these reflections, Ricco refers to his long career as an art dealer (calling it “the hurricane of all that”) and speaks appreciatively of “all the talented artists whose ideas I’ve been exposed to and from whom I’ve learned.” He cites the black American self-taught artists Thornton Dial and William Hawkins with special praise, noting, “In their art they describe the excitement they feel about *seeing*

things. As humble as their lives were, what I get from their art is their sense of *wonder* about what they were seeing in and thinking about the world.”

Ricco’s tone shifts, as though the thought of having studied so much art so close up for so many years is so daunting, it should cause weariness or fatigue. With a sigh he admits, “I almost quit yesterday, realizing that the deed had been done.”

At first stumped, then seizing upon my own aha! moment, I understand that he is referring to the history of painting itself – all of it, the whole, millennia-long shooting match, from the first scratches on cave walls to the Sistine Chapel and Jackson Pollock’s paint-flinging exuberances. Ricco does not sound so forlorn, after all, but we’re definitely moving into Samuel Beckett territory. (“I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”)

Brush in hand, Ricco assures me that, even in his own creative-block moments, he always chooses to go on – and then we’re back to perception, awareness, and the power of paint. He says, “When you give physical embodiment – I’m talking about color and form – to what we feel as sentient beings – isn’t that what art does?” Puttering around the studio, he remarks, “I remember reading that some people cried when they saw Rothko’s paintings. But that’s what he wanted! As an artist, you hope someone or something will come into view, other than that damned canvas itself, and say – about the art, that is – ‘I want you!’”

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The artist Roger Ricco in his studio in Woodstock, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

He places another picture on the easel, and I notice that a corner appears to be unfinished, with what looks like light underpainting showing through. I ask Ricco about it, and he explains, “I’ve been experimenting with some of my own photographs, printing them large on canvas and using them as compositional guides but not literally ‘painting them in.’” I think I want to keep that one corner exposed.”

I point out that such appropriation of his own photographic source material is the kind of textbook postmodernist gesture many a contemporary art-maker would not fail to trumpet in an artist's statement, but Ricco moves to the floor-to-ceiling window at one end of the big room and looks out into the woods.

Elizabeth Rogers tells me as the three of us look out upon a thicket of vegetation of the kind that turns up in Ricco's new paintings, "We both paint the landscape but we approach and use it in different ways." If his goal is to give visible form to something ineffable, by contrast, Rogers appears to take pleasure, with her sure line, in *interpreting* found, visible form through semi-abstract drawings and paintings on paper. Elsewhere, in full-bodied abstractions, her romance with saturated color finds rapturous expression in tiny compositions the size of postcards and in much larger works, too.

Ricco acknowledges the verdant view and says, "I don't come up with a picture that has anything to do with an art idea per se; it has more to do with things that press in on you and *become* visible."

I ask, "So, it's that effort to depict a particular subject, even an abstract idea, that seizes your imagination?"

"Yeah," he replies. "It's like the self-taught artist from Idaho, James Castle, who *had* to draw what he saw around him, or Van Gogh: 'This chair is eating me alive!'"

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I ask him to show me some of the canvases from his previous series of paintings; I'd like to get a sense of how his work has evolved. From a small storage room he extracts half a dozen square, medium-size, semi-abstract pictures of rock formations, a star-filled sky, and a waterfall, along with a more recognizable image of a white owl. All of them are rendered in broad strokes of relatively thin acrylic color, layered and built up to suggest volumes and create luminous passages.



Roger Ricco, "Snow Owl" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, on display in the artist's studio (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) ([click to enlarge](#))

"All of this," I inquire, "is evidence of your effort to capture what you're calling the awareness of a sentient being?" He daubs paint on the picture on the easel, then turns to face me as I add, "Roger, could it be that what you're really trying to capture in paint or in your fine-tuned photographs is the consciousness we humans have, uniquely among all species, of our own consciousness?"

Smiling, he approaches me with brush in hand, and I realize that, for Ricco, as for so many of his peers, art-making may also be some kind of redemptive activity that can and probably does get all mixed with their feelings about their subject matter.

"Who knew that you were up to all of this for so long?" I ask as I stare back at the painted owl.

Ricco steps forward, and as I begin to anticipate a bracing slap on the cheek like the one Nicholas Cage, declaring his love, receives from Cher in *Moonstruck* ("Snap out of it!"), the painter smiles at me like a hardy Sicilian *nonno* who has just spent all day picking olives on the rugged coast of his ancestral homeland and replies, jubilantly, all existential doubt and studio demons melting away, "But this is what I've been saying: I'm an artist!"

Roger Ricco: Photography & Paintings continues view at Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery (547 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 28.

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