

ART + PRACTICE

TRANSCRIPTION OF ARTIST TALK: GREG ITO FROM JUNE 1, 2021

JOSHUA ODUGA: Hello, everyone. My name is Joshua Oduga, and I am the public programs and exhibitions manager at Art + Practice. Thank you for joining us for this virtual program, Artist Talk: Greg Ito. Today I'll be joined by Los Angeles-based artist Greg Ito. Greg is an artist whose work I accompanied and... I'm sorry, not accompanied. Whose work I discovered in Los Angeles, viewing it at various different gallery spaces in my time kind of trying to figure out what I was going to do in art. Greg, I'll hand it off to you.

GREG ITO: Hey. Nice to see you, Joshua. Thanks for having me. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, this is super awesome. I'm really happy to have a chance to dive more into my personal journey as an artist, is the direction I hope to take with this time with you, give people a little bit more background on where I came from, my time in San Francisco, and my time being back in LA, where I was born and raised, and just been developing my practice here since moving back.

ODGUA: Yeah, definitely. I'm so excited to get into all of that stuff. Greg and I have been meeting in person and having a few different conversations about his art practice and where we both are in our lives, so I'm really excited to start off by talking about that early journey for you, when you were in San Francisco and making work. You were there for school, correct?

ITO: Yeah, yeah. So I was born and raised in LA. I went to high school at Venice High School, and that's where my journey into wanting to become an artist began. I grew up around art, so my family has always been pretty artistic. My uncle is an artist. His name is Peter Shire. My grandfather was a craftsman, and my grandmother was a seamstress, and my aunt was an animator, so watching her draw all the time was really influential. And we also had architects in the family, someone in visual effects for movies. My dad did calligraphy and my mom also liked doing her crafts. So we had a very artistic upbringing, but my parents were also pharmacists, so they always supported me doing art, but they never really thought I would want to become an artist. It was kind of like a little bit of a joke in the beginning.

But that's where I first went to this program called CSSSA. It's called the California State Summer School of Art. It's at CalArts, And you go during your 11th or 12th grade in high school. And staying on the campus at CalArts and taking college-level classes with professors who are working artists in LA really opened my eyes, and I think that was one of the moments where I was like, "Okay, I really want to go to school for art."

So after finishing up high school, I ended up going to San Francisco Art Institute, SFAI, in 2008, I believe. And I was there for three years in school, and that was a really, really amazing experience. That campus is completely magical, and the way that they run their school is pretty no-boundaries. They were the first New Genres department in the country. A lot of amazing artists have gone there and also taught there. And I was just really interested in San Francisco as a place. I really loved it. It's the opposite of the LA landscape. It's really small and dense. So anyways, I went there for school.

After school, I did some time on a couple of endeavors outside of my artistic practice. So I started a gallery. I co-founded a gallery called the Ever Gold, and I also co-founded an art magazine called San Francisco Arts Quarterly, as well as, you know, doing my curatorial work and being an artist. And that

was such an amazing period, because it's such a small city, and the community is so tightly knit that you can really bounce around and work with all the artists that work in the Bay Area as well as show in different pockets of the city.

But I started having some creative differences with my collaborator, and it just... You come to this moment where you're like, "Well, I'm doing so much work in San Francisco," but it didn't feel genuine to me, because I really missed LA. And I think at that point in my life I was pretty unhappy with how things were going artistically for my own artwork, because I still knew what ideas I was into, but my artwork... The way I approached my practice kept changing, and I wasn't really sure what direction I wanted to go into. And then mentally I was just in a darker place [crosstalk 00:05:44]

ODUGA: Yeah, definitely. I have a question for you, actually, related to that. Do you think because you were doing so much work to show other people's artwork, whether it was in print or whether it was in the various exhibition projects that you were working on, do you think that that influenced that mode of thinking that you were thinking about, like kind of feeling angsty about your own practice or thinking about ways to level up or just change things a little bit?

ITO: Yeah. I think where my most enthusiasm came from was just bringing people together and curating really cool shows and working with artists that I really enjoyed working with. But my collaborator at the time wanted to... We needed to make money to run the business. It was consuming so much of our time that we had to try and get paid for the work that we were doing. And so the programming and the intentions shifted to more of... It needed to make money. So I wasn't really into that. I wanted it to just be this cool artist-run thing and run off the support of people's donations and the occasional sales once in a while. I feel like with anything, if you do a lot of work and you don't really get much back in return, if you're putting up that energy, I guess feeling resentment is natural. But I really was just... I was battling other things at that time, and I just needed to regroup myself. And so I stepped away from those endeavors, and I just kept making art.

But a friend of mine, his name's Nate Hooper, who I'm still good friends with still, we started this curatorial project called Moroso Projects, and we only did four shows. We did quarterly shows. But that was really fun, because it was a space that someone's like, "Hey, I love what you guys do." He had a space that he was running at the time with one of his business partners, and that relationship shifted, so we were both free at that time, but we were like, "Man, we still want to put on cool shows." So we curated some shows together, which was amazing and fun. And it was like I really felt reconnected to that experience of just being excited about putting together shows.

ODUGA: I feel that. I feel that. And you showed me some really great images of shows that you put together during that time. Should we jump into those right now?

ITO: Yeah. So after San Francisco I came back to LA, and I used the experience that I've had in San Francisco of curating and building and installing and shipping all these shows, and I got a job at a gallery in Los Angeles where I became their head of production and head prep. So these are just a few of the shows that I worked on, just to show the scope of the installation. And these are just a few of my favorite shows that I worked on, because they were more immersive. There were sculptural elements as well as flat works. They involved a lot of labor.

So this is some progress shots of a show I did for [Pobell 00:09:14]. And so moving back to LA and jumping into this job to put together these pretty incredible exhibitions... Production-wise, I just

loved how they were fabricated and put together and just the level of intentions of the artists I was working with. And they transformed into these beautifully detailed, considered, almost theatrical installations. And this is one of my most favorite shows that I worked on in this space.

ODUGA: Yeah, these are all really beautiful images. And it's really great to hear, hearing about you going to school, having that experience that you were having, and then coming back here to LA and really applying that, and applying it at a really high level, to be doing shows with Pobell and some of these other shows that you were doing. That's really great to hear. And then I also very much... As a person that's such a fan of your work, I can see how this experience has influenced the way that you think about the work that you're making and how you're presenting it in different spaces, so we'll get into that a little bit later. There's a few more images of these.

ITO: Yeah, and I just loved how they were like... They almost seem like a score, like each room, each section that you would go into all connected in this way, and they all had their own moments and melodies and harmonies.

So during this time, I was working on a bunch of new paintings, and this was the beginning of these paintings I called vignette series. And they're originally inspired off of Mark Rothko's paintings. And SFMOMA has this one that's incredible. It has like a orangy-reddish section up top, and a blue or deeper blue section on the bottom, and kind of this purple background. And it was one of these paintings where I was just sitting in front of before I left San Francisco, and I was like, man, "I love this painting." It really evoked an emotional response for me. And when I came back to LA, I wanted to figure out how to lay all of these moments and symbols and memories onto the canvas to evoke that same emotional response. So I had these vignette paintings where the top sections would have like a hand gesture and the bottom would have these symbols. And you can kind of see how I was building the content of the painting through these mood boards of just printing out paper and just pinning them up and just kind of seeing how they would fit. So some of the symbols I was interested in back then was like the hourglass and this vessel that has the two faces facing each other in the silhouette. And I started off with three.

And this ended up being my first opportunity to build an exhibition from the ground up on my own. So the gallery that I worked for, they actually had an artist that canceled their show, or they weren't able to do it anymore, and so they had this open slot with a very tight timeline. And the girl who worked there at the time, she was like, "Hey, what about Greg? His paintings are really cool. Why don't we show his stuff?" And the owner was like, "All right. Let's give Greg the project room." So he gave me this opportunity to do this show in the project room. So this is the first time I could actually build an exhibition from the ground up, figure out what kind of paintings I wanted to paint, and what kind of objects I wanted in the room, and what kind of mood I wanted to build.

And at that time in LA... Next slide. Being back in LA, I really... Just seeing all these fires everywhere that was going on, just these moments in LA like the fires rising, the helicopters, the seasons of summer being extremely hot. But whenever I would see the smoke rising from the horizon or like a car that exploded on the side of the street, it really made me think about omens, like things that are to come. Or like if smoke is rising on the horizon, is it either a smoke signal from someone trying to get your attention, or is it something disastrous that happened? And I like the duality of these fire pillars and... Next slide. So I started playing with the image of the island and then having this boat in flames, or the next slide, yeah, the perfect homestead cabin on flames.

And I was moving back to LA, and I was really trying to piece together my life again, because again, I was coming from San Francisco, just coming from a bad, bad part of my life where I just really

was battling a lot of demons, and I just needed to be back home and be close to family and just regroup myself, because I kind of like lost a piece of myself in SF when... I just wasn't happy with the things that I was doing. It ends up being a little self-destructive at times. So yeah, I was thinking about home. And so that painting progressed into this work. This was one of my first vignette paintings that I was really happy with. I actually still have it right here in my studio.

ODUGA: [crosstalk 00:15:37] talk about that after, because this was the first work of yours that I actually remember seeing.

ITO: Oh, okay. Cool. Yeah, thank you. It's just such a special memory for me. I was thinking about home and coming back home and feeling so blessed to like having a home. And when things aren't working out in the city that you put so much energy into, and you kind of hit a ceiling... I felt in a way defeated, or at least like time is ticking. Like, I need to come home, get my work flow going, get my studio, practice going, make stuff, and just really focus on growing my artistic practice. And I was totally not trying to do a magazine, not trying to do like a gallery space. I wasn't trying to have any kind of partnerships at that time. It was just too much.

But I love these hands, the gesture of the hands. I wanted to make these paintings that were really crisp and very kind of compartmentalized, almost diagrammatic in a way, where it's like, here's a symbol of time, here's an image of a house burning, and here is a gesture. And I was thinking, with my paintings there's no painterly gestures. It's all hidden within the technical way of just being really precise and clean. And so the only gesture that I can bring into these paintings was the hand gesture, so seeing them as a performative or theatrical gesture, you know?

ODUGA: Yeah, totally. I mentioned this to you when we first met and we talked. I talked about seeing your work and trying to figure out those stories, really obsessively looking at the work and trying to piece it together in a way. Hearing this from you... It's so great to hear, because it's the intention behind it. We also talked about the cleanliness of your work and all of that as well, so it's really great to hear from you how that intention also plays into the story that you're trying to tell as well. [crosstalk 00:17:51]

ITO: Yeah, like what do I place? What moments do I place in front of the viewer for them to try and connect the dots? And what kind of field? What kind of color field do they exist in for them to connect those dots within? How does their personal experience shape their experience with the artwork? Almost like a dream. You wake up from a dream, and you only remember this moment and that moment and that moment, and you lead the rest of your day just kind of thinking, "What was that about?" I'm obviously going through something, for me to take a second look.

ODUGA: So these other elements start to [inaudible 00:18:34] into the work. And I feel like what you just said is a really great transition into this.

ITO: Yeah. So just like the experience of building the exhibitions with other artists, I've always loved artists that had the ability to work in multiple mediums and make everything flow, even though the different bodies of work don't look exactly alike. Like Urs Fischer's show in MOCA, the one with the rain drops falling and the bread house and the floating fruit, to his clay carnival free-for-all thing over at the Geffen, that was so amazing, because it just showed how pure and playful and amazing art is. It's so essential to life, to living, at least for me. I'm a very creative person and a very visual person, so I use art

to really figure out my life, the steps going into my life, the steps that I've already taken, where I'm standing now.

And at this time of my life, I was dating my wife, Karen, and she was my girlfriend at the time. And I was coming back from almost being burned, or feeling burned from my time in the Bay Area, and coming back to LA and finding romance. So that's why these candlestick holders have the two faces, just like that source material for the painting that was taped on the wall. So I started using other fabricators and applying all the experience and infusing that into my practice, because I was like, "The only way for me to actually do these things is for me to actually do these things." So I had to start building stuff, contacting fabricators, managing... This was the moment where I started managing my studio more like a business. I still had a primary job to help pay the bills, but I wanted to expand my practice, so-

ODUGA: Yeah. It's really interesting to hear how closely that's tied to your personal life. A lot of people are like, "I'm going to make art, and I'm going to establish a studio practice." And I think, from the other conversations that we've had, the things that you're going through, meeting your current partner and having all of that, and that informing you, "I'm going to make work in this specific way," that definitely comes across for me in the work [crosstalk 00:21:24].

ITO: Yeah. I found out that making work that connects to your life is, one, easier to talk about. I'm not trying to talk about any critical theory or fill the work with any abstract meaning or... I don't really do research-based work. It's all a reflection of my life and things that I experience, things that I think are interesting, and also later on it starts to take a turn to include more of my family history and stuff.

So these are painted, and this is just when I started building the exhibition. So I made the paintings. I painted the walls. I built this table that has the same form as the candlestick holder, and you can see it in the lower left corner.

I love how things started echoing with one another to create this full experience. And when I started installing... This was when I could take all of my expertise and put it together. So those lights I installed, that's just with white. I ended up gelling those. So I started using surface treatments a lot more in the work. And these are some progress photos of my first LA debut. And that's with the gels on and the dramatic lighting. And then this is with the paintings up and the candlesticks on and...

ODUGA: Came together really nicely.

ITO: Thank you. Yeah, I was so... I'm still really proud of the show, because it has three paintings, one on each wall. It has this kind of installation [inaudible 00:23:15] in the corner, these sculptural elements that connect to the works. And it's just like, yeah, it was one of those moments that I really felt like I was doing something genuine to me.

And in San Francisco, I didn't feel that way. I think it's because I wasn't grounded in San... I'm not from San Francisco. I just did a lot of stuff up there. I still felt like an outcast at times. And also, San Francisco is changing. By the time I was leaving, the tech boom was happening. People were leaving. Galleries were closing. 49 Geary close, which was a huge hub. And yeah, things were just shifting a lot.

So this show was pretty awesome. It was called Soothsayer. And that actually got an Artforum review. And I was so pumped, because it was my first big project back in LA. And I was like, "All right, so what I'm doing... The direction I'm going is where I should be going." The paintings, the way I'm thinking about space, the way that I'm addressing space... My choices all had intention and reason and purpose, and it just felt really good. And I wasn't following any trends or any other kinds of artwork I was seeing.

This is the time where like Art Viewer and Contemporary Art Daily and all those kinds of our blogs were really big, and it's like everyone was chasing to get a little feature on these websites. And I don't think it was... It was just a different time.

ODUGA: Yeah. It feels good to get that validation. I hear from so many people that go through kind of similar experiences to you, especially after a MFA program, where things just don't go the way that they expect them to, but then you come back here and you decide to devote your time and create a studio practice. And then to get that validation when you're self-sustaining and doing it that way [crosstalk 00:25:30]

ITO: So I was in SF. At the end, I was at the bottom of... I was at the bottom-bottom. I was not doing well. So after coming back and seeing... When you put the energy out there, it comes back at you in a really beautiful and magical way. So then I started breaking out of the vignettes. And this is just some earlier paintings. I started doing the window motifs and the doors and the solitary objects, and those objects would then be included into the installations later. So it allowed me to be like, "Okay, I've got a really good foundation. I really know where I'm going with the direction of how I build exhibitions, so let's expand my vocabulary." And so that's what I started doing. This also shows just how the studio has changed.

ODUGA: I feel like a lot of things were in motion at this time, and you were thinking about it in various different ways. [inaudible 00:26:39]

ITO: Yeah. So this is the memorial at Gila River, which is an internment camp that my grandparents were at. And this is my brother. So this was actually a research project trip for his artwork. He wanted to revisit the internment camps that our grandparents were at. There were two. And they were on Native land as well, so we had to get permission from the Native tribe for us to go visit the space and for us to reconnect with the past experiences of our grandparents. And so this is us at the memorial that they have.

Now, this image is... This is a water tower foundation. And my grandfather, when he was at the internment camps... They gave people different jobs. Like you work in the mess hall, you do this. He was to watch the water tower. So he was actually standing at this water tower. On the top of this hill where this foundation was, there was a big water tower. And that was his job, was to just guard it.

And it was really hard for me to go on this trip with my brother and go to this place. My parents never took us to this place, and my grandparents definitely didn't care to go back. So it was like me and my little bro hitting the road for this cool brothers trip. And I just had this moment where I was like, "This is really wild, that I'm standing in the spot that my grandfather was forced to be for over 4 years, or almost four years, in this harsh, desert landscape." And just the tragedy that they went through, and then just losing everything. But at the same time, this is where my grandparents' relationship blossomed in their romance. So during this dark, terrible time, they were able to find love and happiness. And that was one of those moments that really hit a chord with me, because that's what I was painting, or that's what I was thinking about in my paintings.

Next slide. So this is the landscape. So all in this area that's undeveloped, not the farmland, but this area in the front that looks a little bit more undeveloped, that's where all the barracks were, and they were in different like gridded sections. And when you walked on this landscape, there was foundation pillars still there, the little stumps [crosstalk 00:29:46]

ODUGA: Yeah, I can see them kind of in the photograph, yeah.

ITO: From all of the barracks. And you would see steps from the barracks and old nails and stuff. Because the barracks were made out of wood, after the camps were closed, the native tribes went there and disassembled all the barracks and used all the materials, so all that was left was just tons of nails and random pieces of concrete everywhere.

And then the next slide... So where we were standing at the water tower, I'm pointing to the general area of where my grandmother's barrack was. And I was just thinking to myself, "My grandpa was up on this water tower thinking about my grandma, and he could see where she was staying. | And I thought that was kind of a beautiful narrative. He was also a craftsman. He liked carving and like making things with wood. So he would make these small figurines that he would carve for her and give to her as gifts, and my family still has a few of these artworks that he made while he was in camp. So this trip made me think... Let's stay on this for a second. So this trip made me think. It reconnected me to my family history. The first show, the one with all the purple light, was more of an open narrative where I was thinking about my experience coming from SF and feeling like climbing back into a better state of mind. And from this experience of the camps, I worked on another project where I was thinking about finding love in hard places, and I was thinking about incarceration. The next slide. Next one. Yeah. So, there's this bird cage, and I have this mirror, this vanity mirror and the hands holding. Go to the next slide. So, I was thinking about childhood stories of the princess being locked in the tower and then the knight in shining armor coming to rescue her.

That's what I was thinking about with this show, is people being far apart and working so hard and going on a crazy adventure to get back together again, and almost freeing somebody from that. I think that's what my relationship with Karen was doing for me, was opening up all these new doors and windows to, it sounds corny, but to my heart that made me really excited about life. I was stoked. She came with me on this trip, this is in Chicago, and I was thinking about my grandparents for this show. It's almost like a version of what this cell would look like. So, there's the bird cage with the window open, with the door open, and then the windows open with the smoke signal coming out of the window with the little vanity. Next slide.

And then this jail door was open, and there's a painting with the holding hands and it's making an escape. So, I was thinking even through the toughest of times, love wins. I just really loved that narrative. It was really uplifting to me. It's just what I was going through in my life. I was really stoked and happy with where I was. We eventually moved in together and we found a little spot in Chinatown that we lived in. Let's keep going, because I want to show how things are... This is also how I'm building the exhibition. This is when I painted the walls, did the lighting. I had the candles included and I carpeted the floors, and I really just wanted to create a mood.

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: I really loved how Tyrrell's works always evoked a mood with the simplest decisions that are also pretty complex, like these shaped rooms and just this one color light gradient going into this other color light. It was very Rothko to me, but rocking into a Rothko. I want to do something similar to that, where you walk into space and it evokes an emotion and it's an emotion that is tailored to that specific exhibition. What do I want the people to feel? How do I want them to enter the work? How do I want them to sit with the work? What connections can be made? And I also love the fact of having objects from previous shows in future shows, because I really love the idea of legacy, and lineage. When I

worked in the movie industry for a short period, or not really movies, but commercials and stuff like that, everyone who's an artist ends up working in...

At some point grabbing props, or just driving a truck or anything, but the thing about these props that are really cool is that you look, when you check out these props and you rent them for different productions, they'll have a list of all the things that these projects have been in. So, I really love that, and I want it to be able to fold that back into the work where I can have my visual vocabulary that I'm building, and bring back objects, or bringing back symbols and images back into paintings and folding them back into the story, but I want to be able to do that in the space as well. So, I don't always have to make stuff new. It's just, what context am I showing these works in?

ODUGA: I love that idea, especially because that comes across a lot, I think, with different colors and things in your work as well. So, thinking about the three-dimensional and the space that you're creating, that's really interesting.

ITO: So then what I did was after that show, I was thinking about my family history, and then when I was coming back, that's when I got my space in Chinatown. It was so amazing, because we were looking for spots like crazy. We didn't have very much money and we're just like, all right, we need to find a deal. We were driving everywhere and she was staying at her mom's place. I was still staying at my parent's place, and we just are so eager to live together and start our life together. That's really special. So, we found our spot in Chinatown, and I ended up starting to paint my neighborhood. The one on the left shows how I start paintings and they all just start with a sketch.

They all start with a sketch, just like that. It's all drafted out by hand, and then they're all just hand painted. I just go in there and I just paint my layers and I cut back, and I'll paint it by hand. The framework on some of these paintings are taped, but most of the elements on the interiors are all hand painted and that's a technical thing that I'm really into, is just how precise and how perfect can you make the image, and for me to hide my hand? No gesture, no brush strokes, just this perfectly manicured thing. It's like one of those Zen gardens or a bonsai tree or something. I was just really trying to hone in on the technical skill. That's just how I've always painted. That's just the kind of person I am. I'm super organized and detail oriented. I come off as a super perfectionist, but it's just how I am.

So, I started painting the neighborhood and I was also moving. This is cool. I've always lived on the west side. I'm from the west side. I grew up in the Mar Vista area, but I grew up hanging out in Venice. So, I was always a west sider. All the homies I kicked it with were from the west side. The only time I'll go out to K-Town is just to meet up with some homies once in a while. I was mostly on the west side, but my family before the internment camps were living in Boyle Heights most of the time, because Boyle Heights used to be a Japanese community. Right now it's a Latino community, but it used to be a very lush Japanese community, and thinking about contracting now where there's only one Japanese zone, like a sushi restaurant on 1st Street. It's barely hanging on, but it's like an amazing family run place.

But this was the first time I was living on the side of town where my grandparents were living. Then I was like, that's crazy. I'm in Chinatown, new Chinatown, and I could see across the river to where my grandparents grew up and where my family cemetery plots are in Boyle Heights. So for me, that was also a homecoming to be able to connect with that, the geography of where my family was based.

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: And so I started painting that. I just started painting that and I was thinking about time, and the life I was building with my girlfriend, and all of our hopes and dreams together.

ODUGA: I imagine with the way that you paint as well, you had a lot of time to think.

ITO: Yeah, dude. I had so much time.

ODUGA: Just thinking about it.

ITO: Yeah, and I also wanted to bring in... Because the images I was painting before were way more accessible images. So, it'd be castles. It was framing it more in connection to maybe folklore and stories that we grew up on, like nursery tales and stuff like that.

ODUGA: Yeah. Definitely. I studied children's literature at school, so that might be another reason why I was so deeply connected to your work. I wrote about how it's all written for adults. All of these symbols and all of these signs that are inherent in these things that are seemingly for young people is really for all of us older people to unpack it and to think about on a deep level.

ITO: You know that book Goodnight Moon?

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: The illustrations from that book were super big for me, and I love that. There's also this book of old Japanese woodblock prints, and I would just flip through that when I was younger and I just loved how things were laid out. I think that's how I get this flat, layered perspective feeling. Next slide. So, I started bringing in images from my city, and giving them their own meaning. Once the clock isn't a clock anymore, it's the symbol of time, or an owl is no longer an owl, it's a symbol for wisdom. A turtle becomes, it's not just a turtle, it's a symbol for longevity.

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: I was like, what about these helicopters, these blackbirds flying in the sky? It's oppressive to me. It's like they're just flying over the city and shining their lights, and it was really annoying, because the house that I was at was underneath where the helicopters would leave the police station and go towards Echo Park and Hollywood and stuff. So, they would just fly over our house all the time. I wanted to bring that narrative in there, the darker, more haunting parts of living in LA. You still have the smoke rising from this apartment, and the nightlights and the palm trees.

So, I was really expanding my language, but primarily focusing on LA's language, because the show that I was building up towards was called Sun Sprawl, and it was a collaboration between myself and another artist in LA, Mario Jala, where we were making a homage to Los Angeles, a love letter to LA. Being back in Chinatown, I had a really amazing community that was cultivated there. A lot of artists hang out. There's a bar that I completely was in love with and the people that owned it owned my house.

ODUGA: That's cool.

ITO: The house that I lived in, the owners also own Hop Louie, and so the bartender at Hop Louie, Shaun, rested in peace, he just brought me and my friends in. We were a bunch of knuckleheads. It became like our home for all my friends. All my friends, Karen's friends. It was just a place for everyone, and also our community would hang out there and stuff like that. So anyways, I'm getting off topic.

ODUGA: I think that that's really great, doing what you were saying earlier about that experience, and you coming back here and then building that community. That's really great to hear.

ITO: Yeah. Yeah. This is just an image that shows how my paintings look. So, I paint on acrylic, on prime canvas and on panels. I work flat most of the time and growing up in LA, you would see car chases all the time on the TV, and I wanted to bring that perspective into these works. You can keep going. So, this is one of the paintings. It's called Birds. It's the window, the locked window on the left with time ticking and the helicopters searching the neighborhood, and then the top right corner, you have the helicopter on fire, which is the middle finger to the police, I guess, or just oppression. The bottom right, which is the car that they'd been chasing with the spotlight on and the doors open.

They're out running away, and it just felt like it's that feeling where you always feel like you're running. I talk about this with my wife at times where it's like, life is... You're always pushing forward. If you take a break, you're already behind. When you're trying to build something like a family, it takes a lot of work. It also doesn't take a lot of work. It just happens on its own. These were echoes of my grandparents' experience.

ODUGA: Yeah, for sure.

ITO: This is Karen. She's going to hate that I showed this photo, but this is her helping me in the studio. She was there. She was helping me paint the paintings. I had so much work going on at the time, because at this time, I quit my job at the gallery and I got a job as a warehouse manager for our art collection. I was just a warehouse dude. So, I had a warehouse. I was the head manager. So, I just carried around a clipboard and we would just go do our daily tasks. It was really, really easy. I'm not building anything for anybody. I'm not building any art for anybody, or I'm not making art for the artists, I'm just making it for myself now.

So, my time became more focused on paintings. I think you can see that with the paintings, it became more involved. It became bigger. I got to think about the content a lot more, and I was building two exhibitions at the same time. So, I was building the show with Mario, but I was also building a solo exhibition for a solo presentation project in Hollywood. So, for that show, I was making something completely different.

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: So, this is just a shot of the bar. So what I did was in the exhibition I built a recreation of Hop Louie in the space. We had a program of events. We had a poetry reading, we had a video screening, we did a jazz night. At the end of the exhibition, we were going to do a publication release that cataloged all the events, and inside the space I had Sean from Hop Louie run the bar. So, he was actually making scorpion bowls, the same exact recipe at Hop Louie, and we decked out the inside exactly like it. Had a TV, and we had the bar stools, and it was red and shitty, but it was really awesome. We had a video that was replaying dodger games and OJ Simpson chase.

Just all these iconic LA newsfeed things, but this was right after Hop Louie got closed. Again, you lose something so central to your community and it's gone. We didn't really even get to have a proper goodbye. So, I made this space so that we can all get together and hang out with Sean mostly and make something special. Also the old man who helped co-run Hop Louie, he passed away. Sean wanted to do this in homage, in respect to him.

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: So, after that show, this shows how the production value or the production on my work went up. So, one thing that I've always done as an artist is whenever I make any money off of art I just put it back into my art. I don't know why. That's just how I am. I build things. I like to build things. You build something and then it exists and then someone supports that, and then you get financial support in return, and I just put that back into the practice and it makes me grow and grow and grow. So, you remember those small candlestick holders in the first show from 2016?

ODUGA: Yes. Yes.

ITO: I think the biggest one was maybe three feet tall. Now I'm making actual candlesticks holders with candlesticks on top that have wax dripping on the top. The tallest one is like 10 feet or something ridiculous. Me, as the maximalist person that I am, I didn't just make two, I made so many of these things, because the space that I was trying to tackle was huge. We'll look at those images in a little bit, but the space was really, really big. I was bringing in neon elements into the whole thing, and you could see the painting in the background. The level of the production just kept growing. At this point in my life with the Sun Sprawl show, the one with the Hop Louie bar, that was a difficult time for me, because it was really fun because Karen and I were living together and we're doing really well.

I changed my job. So, it became a little bit more freedom for me to do more of my artistic practice. Karen had a job. She was doing her fashion photography stuff, which was really cool, but her mom got sick with cancer. It was around this time where it was really hard for us. She already lost her father earlier in her life. So, seeing her mom sick was terrible. While I was building the show, she was actually at the hospital helping the family. That made me work even harder, because I wanted to provide for Karen and her family in terms of like support, because Karen and I had dreams together that I wanted to see us getting to. I really was just like, I got to make this art thing work. That's what I was thinking about. We got to make this work. You gotta make this work. Your next slide.

On the left, I was learning new things like neon bending, and then on the right is me doing the exact same thing that I've always done, which is installation art, building exhibitions. This is me installing the neon on these new sculptures. These are all new. It's all pretty new to me. I've never laid big wood objects that had channels running through them and electrical and hiding the transistor on the bottom, but this is what I've always done as an artist is like, "Hey Greg, I want to make this crazy thing. How do I do it?" And I'm like, "Okay. Let's start here. This is where we go. This is what techniques... We got to find a fabrication, people to do it. We might have to piece out that fabrication to save a little bit of money, because it might be more expensive." Just the whole thing. You deal with that all the time.

ODUGA: Yeah. I noticed when I came to your studio, I was really excited, because there was so much going on and there were so many different elements. You recently expanded upon it, which we'll get into and all of that, but it's really refreshing for me to see people that still want to challenge themselves.

Every time that you make something new, it seems like you're essentially adding a new element every time. In one way, that's a challenge for yourself. So, a lot of people are scared to do that. They're just like, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to stick with what's already working." But I think for you, it works when you do it. So, why not continue to challenge yourself in that way?

I also think going back to talking about some of the things that we've talked about, it's important when you're addressing these personal things and you put personal elements of it in it, if you want to keep continue doing that, you have to do it in a way that's refreshing for yourself, because there's a little bit of labor, emotional labor that goes into this type of stuff. You've already hit on that with some of your experiences and things like that. So, it's really great to hear and it's definitely great to see in your studio, how much you got going on.

ITO: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. How my personal experience echoed into the work is I've been nourishing that more and more in my practice, and then this show ended up being really incredible. So, let's look at the next slide. This is the final product from all the different facets in my practice. There's the pain, there's the sculpture aspect, there's the installation treatments, there's the execution of that, the lighting, the controlled lighting around the paintings, and how everything's laid out. I couldn't get to this point without having the experience as a curator, the experience as a fabricator, builder, production manager. Also, I wouldn't have been able to do this without having the organizational skills of a warehouse manager to know where the works are, the size, the dims, the shipping, all that backend stuff.

ODUGA: Where did this one take place?

ITO: This one was in Hollywood. It was like a project. It was a month-long project in Hollywood. It's called Hollow Ground. It was a solo presentation, and then in that doorway on the right, there was actually an area where they did a pop-up chef situation. So, people can come see the show, and then there's a curated meal. It was a new approach to art activation.

ODUGA: Should we move on to the next one?

ITO: Yeah, let's go to the next one. I wanted to show the transition between day and night. We can see in those arch paintings in the background, it's daytime blue. The middle one is pink. The bottom, the last one is purple. The transition of time. I went back, because this show was... The one show that was up before was more LA based.

With this show, I wanted to touch back on those more playful childhood stories. The toad frog and we have Swan Lake, just bringing in different stories, because this was meant for a slightly different audience. That's another thing that I think about, is the demographic that's going to encounter these works. How are they going to access them? And since most of the people were coming from the entertainment sector, I wanted to draw inspiration from stories that they can connect with versus my personal LA story, which they don't have access to. You know what I mean?

ODUGA: Yeah. That's really interesting. Do you think later on, that why in your practice, that's something you want to explore more, this idea of site-specific type work or things like that?

ITO: Yeah, totally. I think if I were to do something in Asia or Europe, or if I did a special project, that it would be tailored for that audience. I think that's what we do as curators. You curate your own space a specific way, but when you get asked to curate another space, you have to take in the architecture of that space. You have to take in the history of that neighborhood. You have to take in the history of the building, of the project itself, the artists community that surrounds that space. There's so many different spaces that are all leveled, layered and weaving into one another, and it's like, how do you do something that resonates with all of them without leaving any of them out?

ODUGA: Definitely.

ITO: And this was also a hard time because during the course of this show, my wife's mom passed away. That experience was also really hard, because I was working so hard on these shows that I felt like I really needed to be there for her more, but I couldn't, because physically, I just had to put together this show and it just made me really think. You're doing this for your loved one and for your family, but when you're working so hard on something for them without even being present, what's the good in that? What's better? Where does it all fit? How do you make it work? It's that duality of good and bad. It can go both directions. Most of the time it lives in the middle, in the gray area.

I went to go visit my mother-in-law in the hospital and I had plans to propose to Karen. So, when I went there, I brought some gifts and I would say, okay, this is going to be good. Karen's been down there for weeks now just making sure everything's going well. When I showed up, I was like, okay, this is what I want to do. There was some family, there were spiritual advisors. This is the best time to propose. So, I proposed to Karen during the day, and I wanted to make sure that Karen's mom knew that she was... One, that I had her blessing, but also that I was always going to be there to take care of her daughter. Karen is the youngest of seven kids or something like that.

Karen has a lot of siblings, but she was the youngest one. I just wanted to make sure that her mom knew that she was okay. So, I propose and it's really cute. Everyone was happy, but it was in these tough circumstances, because we were in the hospital. Later that night, she passed away. She transitioned, and that was so hard for both of us, because this beautiful union is shadowed by loss. In one way I felt honored to be able to have that experience and share that experience with her mom, but I felt like she could finally rest knowing that Karen was going to be taken care of. And that was a really hard moment for me because it made me realize everything that I'm doing is for her and our future together. And it made me think about the artist's ego and what I'm doing this for. And you want to be a great artist. You want everyone to know your art, but really, what are you doing it for? And for me, it came to I'm doing it for my family and my teacher. That's what energizes my practice. That's what I've been doing for this whole time.

And now at this point, now I'm engaged and I'm starting this new life with my lifelong partner who I met in high school at Cal Arts, at that art school when we were like 16 or something. And yeah, you just gotta push through. In difficult times, beautiful things can happen. Happiness can be found just like my grandparents in the internment camps. They were incarcerated for something that they never did and they experienced some really harsh realities of living in the United States, which many people have. That's the thing that I thought about this show is that accessibility to these stories is really important because in the end, we're all one kind. We're all human, we all have human experience.

We all deal with loss, tragedy, sickness, sadness. We all had the lows, we've had the highs and that's something that I want to really cultivate in the work. And after this exhibition, I now knew what I was making art for. It was outside of myself and now I knew what my work foundation is now. And I

knew what I wanted to talk about at work. So this show was like a tipping point. And after this exhibition, I was reached out by a number of galleries who were like, "Hey, we want to do something with you. Let's hang out blah, blah, blah." And I did some studio visits.

And from all the experience or from all that feedback I've heard from other artists that are more set up than I was back then. It was just like, "Take your time, man. You're going to find people that you like to work with." And I ended up working with a [inaudible 01:05:19] gallery and her director Stefano, they're both really close friends now. And you were able to really think about the work and how we wanted to introduce it into the gallery mode.

ODUGA: Yeah, totally, which I feel is such an important thing for you and any artists like yourself. People who are going to be watching this conversation between us, you're putting that much intention into it. That's such great advice for people to tell you to take your time and to wait because of the intention that you're putting into the subject matter and all of these different elements that we've discussed. It's so important for you to go about that process in a careful manner. I'm talking about a situation that's working out for you. That's really great to hear.

ITO: Yeah. Yeah. You just do what feels good. And if you do things that feel good, don't end up panning out. It's just like the test. Now I feel like weaving through life. It all becomes a dance of sometimes you take some blows, but sometimes you give some blows. So after this show, we got married, oh, also during this time, I just want to say that my space, I used to do everything out of one space, a 1400 square foot or 1200 square foot space. I share it with an artist. And then I have my wood shop in my cleaning area. Everything was really small and tight. And it was junk everywhere, it was crazy. And I always found that in these difficult times and these transitional moments in my life, I always get blessed with some more space.

Shortly after losing our mom, my landlord was like, "Hey, I have this space open. You mentioned to me, if there's more space that you wanted it." And there was just new warehouse space. And I was like, "Yeah, let's do this. Let's ride with it." And I was really scared because I was like, "Oh, how am I going to take on more space?" But I built out a couple of studios there and this is where I ended up putting my wood shop. So it just shows my studio was growing. Greg Ito Studio as an identity and as a space was growing. And I was really excited about that.

That's us on our wedding day and we're just super stoked for the future. And I just want to talk about this. This moment was really important because one is, I was following through with my goals. I wanted to get married to the love of my life. And this was the moment when I did and it also kind of happened in tandem with an unfortunate moment of loss. So I wanted to show that through these hard times good things can come from those and also props to Karen because this was the time when I was really unhappy with having a full-time job and I was the warehouse manager and doing my art stuff. So can you imagine building that exhibition, two exhibitions that are a month apart with tons of art works in there. Sculpture art works and building the bar and building this show and I just have one truck and I had one assistant at the time that was new and a new studio space.

My head was spinning and she was just like, "Greg, just quit your job." What? And she was like, "Yeah, quit your job. I got you." She's like, "I got my job now." She was working at Fashion Nova at the time and she was like, "We're married now. So I'll get you health care and you just work on your art." So I was like, "Yeah, but money." She's like, "Just do it." So she is the one that pushed me to just go do your art 100%. And that is something that I will love her forever and ever and ever for, because that's really

when things started going. When I was in the studio, because I would go to work at 10 in the morning, then I'll be there till five.

And after that, I would go to my studio from five to 10 o'clock at night, 11, 12, even later, two in the morning just to get all the work done. And Karen was there, you saw her, she was painting canvases, just hanging out in this studio. She was at home alone and we're going through all this stuff. She's grieving, we're excited about our wedding. We got married. Life is like a rollercoaster. And when she told me that, I was like, wow, having that support is really, really amazing. And that's another thing I want people to know is give your time to people who support you. Do not give your time to people that you think you should get their support from.

Genuine support is so hard to come by. Somebody's always trying to get something out of everybody or you're trying to please people because you think that being in line with them or being cool with them will bring opportunities. And then that way you're not being genuine with yourself. So for me, I just wanted to keep the sincerity of my relationships and the people I wanted to give my time to. And Karen is obviously one of those people. And after we got married, we still saw a lot of our friends, but also as a married couple, we were going off into our own little journey.

So we weren't seeing as many of our friends as we did before. So let's go into the next episode. So these are just some photos of some exhibitions I did after our wedding. So this is in Columbus, Ohio, it's called A Swamp Tale. This is a totally different narrative I was thinking about. No, no, no, no, no. It's okay. I just want to show the range of stuff that I was working on. And then I started going into these Tondo paintings. This right here also just shows a reflection of things that I was thinking about. Oh, here's a project I did in LA and with the chandelier.

So I was busy. I was actively super busy. And okay, so this painting right here, I just want to put this in here because it was as a result of the whole proposal experience. The proposal and then time like the candle burning and then you have your scene in LA with the smoke rising off the mountain and that smoke rising off the mountain could be a good thing, like a smoke signal, which is very rare, or it's a moment of disaster with the helicopters and then the car on fire. So it was just this was a portrait of my mental health maybe at the time where it was just these opposing forces, man. It is really what gives life its dynamic qualities. And yeah, it's just part of the journey.

ODUGA: Finding the beauty in those things. And I love this idea of this being your version of a Rorschach test. The various different things that you're going through because it's expressed very beautifully. And I don't think a lot of people express when they're dealing with those things in this manner. So I think you're hitting on something there for sure.

ITO: So I started playing around with different shape panels. So this is when I was starting to work with Anad and most of the shows that I did were all project shows, they weren't at big galleries and if they were, a big gallery is a project space. I love how when you start out, you're always at the little kids' table.

ODUGA: It's like, here's a room [crosstalk 01:14:29]

ITO: Children's table, project space and which is cool. That's where people find the best art. So this is the first time where I could work with the gallery entity and have their resources at my fingertips. And that was the first time where I didn't have to run the whole studio by myself. So I was the registrar of my studio, the art handler, the warehouse manager, the fabrication guy, and the artist. It was just so crazy. And now I finally had the ability to lean on somebody for some support. So they were really pushing my

ideas and they asked me, they're like, "Hey, what do you want to do? What's the first thing you want to do?"

And I was like, "Well instead of us jumping right into a show, let's do a presentation for a fair." And they're like, "Okay, what fair do you want to do?" And the previous year was the first year of Frieze. And I was like, "Oh, Frieze LA." And I was like, "I want to do Frieze LA, it's on the set." It's so LA, the best galleries are there. I love the energy that was there. I loved the backlot. That whole vibe was very fitting for me. Especially somebody who's been moved back to LA and that was working five, six years before tailoring my practice to be inserted into the art world. I was always on the periphery of the art world doing stuff, but this was a major presentation.

So I was like, "Man, I really gotta come correct with this." So we're really thinking about the work, the level of detail, the stories I was telling, it was really forming a full vision of what I was doing with my practice. What world was I building? What histories were involved with that? What currently was I dealing with at that time that pushed the work, what futures I want to see myself in, what features were I afraid of seeing myself in? And it was very much this dance between tragedy and hope. Love and loneliness. Success and failure. Happiness and sadness. These dualities, so I painted those in these works and let's go to the next slide. So this is in progress, but the vignettes, you see the hands breaking the vignettes.

They're no longer in the boxes. Now they're entering through different parts of the painting, but there's still that diagrammatic moment where there's this symbol here, this symbol there, this symbol here, this symbol here, but it's all living within this one plane, this one environment, this one mental space.

ODGUA: Should I go to the next one?

ITO: Yeah, sure. So this is me building my exhibition again. So on the lower left, you can see some furniture that I wanted to get involved in because every booth has a chair and a table, but I didn't want just a chair and a table. I wanted to build an environment for that chair and table. So you see in the back corner with the light under it, there's a credenza that I bought that I wanted to use. And these framed elements and I was still very fascinated with this fire, this primitive destructive force that really fueled creation, fueled food and warmth, civilization, technologies, steam technology. And it's the spark that made human civilization be where it is today. But you can harness it and use it for building. But when it's uncontrolled, it's just completely devastating. And so let's keep going.

So on the left, it shows the hand painted quality of the work, just that level of detail, all those little dots are actually placed on there by hand. And again, you have the motifs of smoke rising from the island and you have the same palette that I've been working on for many years, just dialing it in so that everything has this matte, flat, kind of pastel chalky quality that I've been working with for a long time. And on the right shows how I process those furniture pieces to look burnt and decayed.

ODGUA: Yeah. I love that. When I was at your studio, you showed me another version of this, but I think a newer piece that you are working on, I've been thinking about that piece a ton ever since you showed it to me. Because I haven't seen anything like that in a while.

ITO: So this is the booth empty. And I design that arch on the left wall. And we specifically asked for a corner booth so that we can do that. So in a sense, I am learning from my experiences to push a space and apply that to my practice of pushing a space. Push space, make the space something special and you

go into these fairs and people don't really use the space like they would for an exhibition, but this was not really a fair booth to me. It was a solo presentation. I needed to come correct. And do something that I really love doing. So I was like, "All right, let's build this space out." What's the narrative? The narrative is growing from destruction and being in LA with the wildfires and Malibu and all the wildfires happening and people losing their homes and people rebuilding and the city just going into this moment of it feels apocalyptic where the sky is red and orange and it was just really dark moments like that.

And you hear these terrible stories, but then you also hear stories of people coming together and helping one another. so I really loved that. So I wanted to make this show very much about LA because one, I'm representing Los Angeles in Los Angeles with my Los Angeles gallery and they're also just being in LA doing their thing for a while. So it was really important for me to do that. So let's go to the next slide. And this is how it was transformed. So I installed the light on the outside. We have the paintings on the inside and the outside of the booth, we had the furniture in the middle and it's like the flood is rising. Pressure's building, the floodwaters are rising up, the flames are burning down. You see the credenzas burn, all the frames are burnt. The table's burnt. The imagery is just fires running reckless, but also growth. You see the flowers growing from below.

ODUGA: I love this idea of disrupting the traditional art fair booth. When I saw this presentation, I went to Frieze. It was one of the last things I did before we all haven't been able to see art for so long. And what was really great about this presentation is the only other person that was doing something similar to this was James Terrell. And you mentioned him a little bit in the influence that he has on your work. He had a pretty immersive booth at Frieze as well, but it was only just one element. So to think about all of the elements, like the chairs and all of these things and how you're thinking about that, it's that philosophy that you were just saying, how are you going to work the space? What are you going to do to space? And that is no matter what it is, if it's an art fair or something like that, I would love to see what would happen if they gave you one of those outdoor things that they do for people at Frieze where you can just kind of [crosstalk 01:23:37]

ITO: Yeah. Doing public installation and projects and other programming like that, it's fun for me. You get an opportunity and it's like, what do you do with the opportunity? Let's make the best of it. Let's do something really, really special and unique. And the fair I put gels, like you see on the top middle light. I put some gels on there and they were giving me a hard time for wanting to do all this stuff because people don't ask that. They're like, "Oh, can I do this? Going to add carpet and paint all this stuff." And they're just like "Dude, why are you doing all this stuff?" And I'm like, "Well, it's because this is going to be the best thing in the fair. Come on now. I need your support guys."

ODGUA: I feel the same way. You're thinking these things and they are maybe a little bit extra, but it's things that other people don't get on board with. I'm just like, "How are you not thinking what I'm thinking?"

ITO: I'm like, "Come on now, let's get some camaraderie going." But changed the space dramatically. And it was at the far end of the fair in the LA section. And when people reach the end of the booth that they're going after white booth, after white booth, after white booth, after white booth, they get to the end. And it's just like this color filled booth with the carpet and everything, it just envelops you. It's very immersive and it still has that white wall quality to it, but it was changed enough for it to be pretty experimental, especially in that space. Let's go to the next documentation image. So that's the booth in all of its glory. And I was really, really proud of it.

It's just like all the other exhibitions, how they were built. I have my paintings that storyboard what's going on. And then you have the sculpture elements in the space that are echoes from the painting. So you see the chair and the painting and the keyhole shape. It's on fire. And then you see a version of that chair, very similar, standing in the space, half burnt. And then you also have in that same key hole painting, and you have the lamp on a post, on the left side on fire, then you have the lamp on the left completely burned to shreds. So this shift of perspective is really amazing. Because that's how it lives in a dream world. It's like you're the first person. And then you're second person. And then you see from a bird's eye view and you're experiencing it all, but you're getting hit from all these different angles, but it's all related to this one stream of consciousness almost.

So I like doing that. It's like, "What's this and this painting," then you look at the next one, "Oh, I see a connection there." And then you look down, you're like, "Oh, look at the water. It looks like the water in this painting. And like this chair, it's the exact same chair as that chair." And I really love when people walk into an exhibition and they spend time in there. Quality time, they spend quality time. They go in there and they don't want to leave.

I've had shows with the carpet and the lighting like that hollow ground shows. People came in and they just took their shoes off and sat on the ground and were just hanging out. The operation of the show, I wasn't wanting people to just go relax and just really soak it in but it was beautiful to see people doing that. And I was like, this is really amazing. When you have people spending 20 almost 30 minutes in a booth at a fair, that's pretty good. At least for me, most people breeze through, they barely even step inside the booth. But this, they were really hanging out, sitting on the chairs, looking at the paintings, looking at.

ODUGA: It creates this really amazing pathway into what you do as an artist. And that's one of the things that I really love about art galleries, but what I'm really missing about not being open right now is when people do want to spend a bunch of time in the space. That's usually because they have some questions or things that the work is making them think. In an art space, which is really great, people always want to ask those things. They always want to ask questions of us and things of that nature. And I felt the same way when I saw your work. So that was one of the reasons why I reached out to you to do this program and just to meet you so that we can start to have a relationship because I had so many questions about the way that you work and things like that. So you've definitely shared a ton of that with us so far.

ITO: Awesome. Awesome. Let's go back to the backslide really quick. The last one. One more.

ODUGA: Here we go.

ITO: Yeah. So this was February 2020. So during this time, man, I was like, "Yes, I made it. We got through all this stuff together, honey. Karen, we were doing this." All these trials and tribulations and everything, the ups, the downs, the grief, the loss, the happiness, the celebrations, the project shows, the random projects. The two person groups show everything. Just the whole moment of just us working through it together as a couple, as a team. And we got to this moment where I was like, "Frieze. It opened. The booth sold out." People were going nuts over the paintings. We were able to place paintings with some really amazing collectors, some collections, things I've always dreamed about because that hollow ground show and other shows, I didn't really sell very much. I was just making these

crazy shows and I almost thought that doing these immersive shows were hindering my sales. Because people couldn't see the work on a white wall above their couch or something. So it was harder to buy.

Maybe it was the scale. I don't know. I don't know. I was always like, why is it hard for me to generate sales when I'm putting so much time and energy into the work and people are connecting with the work. The conversations I had with them about the work they were hitting on notes, spot on. They're like, "Are you thinking about this and this and this with your work?" I'm like, "Yes, that's great. You're getting it. The access. You're making the connections yourself." Everyone was doing that. Everyone was clicking their own head, but the sales just weren't there. And so with my gallery support and them kindly sharing their resources with me, one we're collaborating on this together. It started a whole other sense of a wildfire for the work in getting a lot of support. Now with this being said, it was February 2020, everyone's like, "2020 is going to be our year. Clear vision, clarity, and new me." You remember all that stuff, like, "New year, new me."

ODGUA: Definitely like that in February 2020.

ITO: And I was like, "Yes, February, hell yeah. I got this, I got the booth." Now it's way more people are trying to hit me up to work with me and stuff. And I was like, "Okay, this is dope." And then March hit and one of my close friends unfortunately took his own life. And he was dealing with some personal stuff. And it was really difficult for all my groups of friends. And I was just like, "Man." No one saw it coming so it was very much a hit to my friend circle. And I helped organize his memorial and the GoFundMe and just doing all this stuff. And it was really hard.

Because as much as I wanted to celebrate, I couldn't really celebrate because I needed to be there for my family, my friends who are part of my family and we had to celebrate my friend's life. So we did that and right on March 15th, Maura was March 14 and the next day on the 15th, that's when lockdown started. That's when COVID was real. And that's when people were like, you remember there were zero cars on the street. [crosstalk 01:32:47]

ODUGA: I moved into the house that I'm in right now on March 14th. And it was a whole thing, a whole ordeal. I feel like I'll never forget that time of my life. And so many people have things like you. It's a memorial for a friend or something like that was what was really occupying your mind at that time. Or something like that was what was really occupying your mind at that time. And then instantly everything changed.

ITO: Right. With this booth, we're looking at it right now and I'm thinking about growth and coming from this destruction. But it almost ended up being an omen for what was to come. I did lose a loved one and we lost a whole way of life after this moment. And for me, Frieze was the symbol for that.

As much as I've worked so hard my entire life from when I left high school to go to college all the way up to that moment at Frieze, everything added up to that tipping point. And right when I got there, life just threw us a curveball, threw me a curve ball. It was hard, but learning from my paintings and all the meditations and thoughts that I have while I paint my paintings because they're so meticulous and they're so labor-intensive, I have a lot of time to think about stuff.

I was just thinking about what's important to me and what do I want to do? And Karen and I, we wanted to start a family and Frieze was definitely one of those moments that did. And I talked to my gallery about that. Before we started working together, she was like, okay, well, what do you want from me? And I was like, well, the only thing I want to know is are you going to be able to support my life to

where I can have a family and a home? I want to build a home and a family with my wife. And if you can't support that it's not a good fit I'll have to wait for another gallery. And she was like, all right, let's start this conversation because I can do that for you.

And I've done it for myself. I have a family and two kids and I built a gallery and I support the staff. We just seemed really eye to eye on stuff so we're able to talk about things like that with transparency. I feel sorry for artists that don't have that kind of relationship with their galleries, because the majority of them don't. They don't even know what the strategy is behind what strategy their gallerists have and where their work is going. They're just treated as a commodity. But here in my LA primary gallery, we approach things more on a family level.

ODUGA: That's so great to hear. There's so many people that are going to watch this that are going through various different things, whatever level they're at in their artistic practice. And they're thinking that they can't reach those things that they can, they're out there. It might take work. It's not always easy for everyone to stay in school. But you shared the various different things that you went through, both professionally and personally. Some of those things for other people it's like, I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm going to move away or I'm going to move into something else. You were working as a person that managed the warehouse and all these various different things.

ITO: That's grinding. That's grinding, really grinding.

ODUGA: It's refreshing to hear that in doing that you can also say some things like, hey, I want to have a family. I want to do this. To feel comfortable saying those things it's really exciting.

ITO: Yeah, it's important. Anybody who's watching this doesn't know where they should go, or what they should do, or if this gallery, everyone says the best gallery in LA. Look, those are other people's experiences. It's your experience that is the most important. Your art might not sell as well or be shown in the light that you want it to be shown at a bigger gallery. You might get more attention at a lower gallery and they understand your work better, and they can package it better, and they can get you better shows. I would say, get to know who you're working with on a people level. Don't worry about what other people are doing.

Don't compare, just do what fits you. If you have a gallery that might not be the best gallery but you work the best with them. And they can place your work, and you're building new relationships and doing cool shows, that's great. You don't need to be at Kordansky or Goshen. That sounds awesome but you might not have that clear working relationship.

ODUGA: It's the most important thing to have.

ITO: Yeah. So after this show, I was like, Karen let's start a family. Let's go to the next slide. So through quarantine, we had our quarantine baby Spring. On the left is when she was born. She was born on February 2nd. So now she's three months old. But during quarantine, we had to basically cut ourselves off from everybody. Because of COVID sickness and pregnancy stuff, no one knew what was going on. So she had to have completely no gas, no nothing. It was really hardcore. It was eight months of not seeing anybody. And then, the picture on the right is her now. And she's so cute.

ODUGA: She is. She is super cute. I've been really enjoying seeing all the photos. And over the past few months before I reached you, you took her out to visits and stuff like that. You had mentioned that to me, but I saw you doing that. I do that as well, my kids will be at practice with me if they can when I'm installing and doing that, all that kind of stuff. And I don't know a lot of people who have kids as well. So it's one of the things, seeing that there's someone else who's doing that and you have this whole studio practice and other things that you're doing, but family comes first. I think there's been times when I talk to you and you're making dinner for your wife or making food for the baby and stuff like that. All of those things go hand in hand with the work that you're doing also.

ITO: Yeah. It became a fuel for getting married. I was cooking with a different kind of gas. It was burning hotter and cleaner after I was married because I had more purpose. All my decisions and all my actions have more intention and are more thought through. I was really letting go of a lot of baggage that I had too. Really learning how to mentally sort through things and just know what's important. So this was during quarantine and about a month before I was working on now, I was working on a- So my solo show got canceled. So after this screening I was like I'll still do my show, everything's all good. And then, my guys like, Hey man sorry, COVID is going to bite you in the butt. We're going to have to cancel your show because your shows are so immersive.

We weren't even able to have anybody in the show. I was like, no. And I was like, alright that's cool. So I actually did a lot more activism stuff during George Floyd. I did some sign pop-ups. I was just doing other work outside of my studio practice. And I did pretty well. So I was able to focus on setting up my foundation for the family who wanted to build. And so about a week before I was supposed to take time off to be with Karen, my wife, I was thinking to myself. I was like, what am I going to do? I'm going to be a dad. What? You're going to have to make more art. You're going to have to do bigger shows. You've got to really push it.

ODUGA: Yeah man, that existential crisis hits at like nine months dude. Yeah, I know.

ITO: What've I been doing for the past few months, I got to do a bunch of stuff to get in line.

Yeah, and I finished one of the biggest paintings I ever finished. So what we were doing is we pivoted, instead of doing the solo show, I would do Basel Hong Kong. Because I saw that in Asia, there's still a lot of things going on and people are still actively seeing art and stuff. They had a little bit more control in the beginning. Anyways, I was like, all right, let's do Basel. Let's see if we can do something in Asia. So my gallery is like, let's do Basel Hong Kong. And I was like, okay, cool, let's apply. We applied with a two person booth and Basel came back and they're like, actually, we want to do a solo booth with you, Greg, can you send us a new proposal? So I sent them a proposal and I started working on that proposal.

They accepted it. And I was like, whoa, they accepted it it's so freaking cool. Basel, this is so amazing. And then what happened was, can you hear me?

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: Okay, cool. And then what happened was, Basel got pushed back. And I was like, ah, man, another thing getting changed up. So it was this very pushing pull. But anyways, I needed to increase my space and the day I was wrapping up, the day after I thought this, my landlord came up to me and was like, Hey, I got more space. Do you want to look at more space? And I was like, yeah I would love to. So another unit was available. Is that the next slide?

ODUGA: Yeah.

ITO: Yeah. So this is that double wide space. Yeah. Yeah. It's double-wide, it's in the same building as me. So it's within the same kind of building compound. And I was like, okay. And I literally signed the lease the week before my baby was born. So I signed a lease and at the same time, I was like, what am I doing? I'm crazy. I'm spending more money right when I'm about to have a baby. I have to build out this place. Cause look at it, it's completely, not cool.

ODUGA: You put a lot of work into it for sure.

ITO: Yeah. And I put a lot of money into it and stuff. I really kind of doubled down and I wanted to have a separate wood shop area, which I built. And then I wanted to build an extension of my studio space which then became a project space. Became a space called Sow and Tailor that I opened with my wife and my friend Stefano. Next slide. And this is what the space turned into. This is what it is now.

ODUGA: Amazing. Amazing. And it's been open for about two months now or how long have you been open?

ITO: So I've been open for three weeks.

ODUGA: Three weeks. Wow. Three weeks.

ITO: Yeah. This is the first exhibition. At first I wanted to build an exhibition space, or sorry, an extra painting space for me. But I'm only one person, so I can't paint in both places. I don't have the ability to have a full cranking assistant staff to fill two warehouses with. So I was like, what do I want to do? And I wanted to reconnect with my community and because of COVID and the quarantining, just recently, about a month ago we started getting vaccines and stuff. It really showed a shift where at least in Los Angeles, in California, that the tides are changing. Spring was born, even her name is a metaphor for what's going on. Sow and Tailor is the name of the space and it's sowing seeds and tailoring them and building exhibitions.

This is the first show of all LA based artists. It really connected me to my roots in the very beginning, back to SF. I kind of went full circle where I was like, let's bring people back into my creative space and share my resources. Help them with their work. Give them the resources to build anything if they needed to, through my wood shop. Any of my resources as a working artist, like talking about collectors, and curators, and people we should be talking to. It became a safe space for artists to talk, have those discussions, and a lot of people don't have that. Like we said before, a lot of people don't have a space where they can safely, with transparency, and sincerity, talk about the art world, the art market, and things like that.

So this project space aims to do that. To connect people that know each other within the community and haven't shown together before. People that have shown together before, but meet new artists. This is a multi-generational show from established artists like Peter Shire, who's actually my uncle and from him, this iconic LA like artists to younger artists like Tito, Whitney Lech, who's based in Long beach. She's a young artist. Straight out of school, she was doing artists' sustaining and stretching canvas at the canvas shop. And now she's doing really well. We were able to place all of her works with really amazing collectors. I love seeing that. This is a space for cultivating those relationships.

ODUGA: Yeah, that's really great. It was one of the first times that I had a chance to come through the space and see the art. Thank you for showing me. It was one of the first times that I had been in any art space besides Art in Practice in over a year. And I was familiar with a good amount of the artists in the show, but some of them I had no idea who they were. And it was really exciting to talk to you about their work because you were so excited about it and you're also an artist. And I also think that there's an element of this being a family run space, you know what I mean? That is really important to what you're doing. I know that your wife is there doing appointments for people and you're doing appointments for people that want to come through the space. I'm excited to have your space in the neighborhood and Mike around and excited to see what more you do on this end as well.

ITO: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, no, it's for sure. When I give people the walk-throughs recently they're like, man, this is so great. Every decision in this show is so thoughtful. I love when people pick up on that because it's these really nuanced conversations in the work. When you, kind of, turn the volume up by placing it next to another work, it's pretty awesome when those kinds of things happen. When you allow the artwork to speak for itself versus relying on exhibition text to explain what it's about.

ODUGA: Yeah, definitely. You're placing yourself in a long legacy of artists, amazing artists like yourself who are also platforming other people. Which I think is so important to think about the space that you're giving these other artists. And that you've just mentioned that that could be if they need help to fabricate something.

ITO: Right. Just like Mark Bradford and Art in Practice, you know? Yeah, yeah. We have to be there for our people. It's really important. So, this is a sneak peek of the works that are going to Basel Hong Kong. And I made these works after Spring was born. Once Spring was born, we started building the space. And I built it throughout that whole first month. After the first month of Spring's arrival, Karen and I had already started doing studio visits. Cause we're like, okay, we got to fill the space, let's build the show. And Karen, she comes from a different industry and she's not super, she loves artists and a lot of artists are her friends and she's part of the community. But she's not digging and likes how I am with my curatorial itch that I have where I'm trying to see things. Every little detail and what they're thinking about all this stuff.

For her to get a taste of that and seeing her really diving into that and bringing Spring along, who's like this big, literally a little nugget of amazing-ness, of magic coming to the studio visits, was really special. Because I also wanted to have a space where Spring can grow up around art and have a community and people that have seen her when she was little and watch her grow. For her to be in an environment that I think would be really nourishing for her.

And so these paintings were a continuation of my presentation at the fair or at Frieze fair. Where it's about the fires, but it's more about the growth that comes after the fires. So you can see in the clock, in the painting on the left, there's a little seedling growing. Then the candle again on the right, which is the more destructive, time is running out so that was one thing. And then on the right, you could see the flame ascending and in the flame is a little seed with a growth. So it's a continuation from that story. These are really special works because I'm pretty easy to connect the dots. I'm thinking of Spring and I'm thinking of new growth. And then I have all these little seedlings growing in my paintings and I also have a space called Sow and Tailor. And when you sow your seeds, you're planting them for that year's harvest. Again, all of these moments in my life are really shaping the decisions that I'm making in my artistic practice.

ODUGA: Yeah, that makes so much sense. And you have so much going on and I love how your paintings have become a little bit more maximalist in a sense, right? You're throwing more things at the viewer for them to unpack. I'm excited to see where you go in the future with all of this work and everything else that you're doing.

ITO: Thank you. This painting with the keyhole, I really enjoyed this painting. I also started doing a lot more imagery with the metamorphosis of the caterpillar to the butterfly. And those phases. I also think about Phoenix rising from the flames and how butterflies could act as that Phoenix. The symbols became more integrated into the landscape. And then the next slide.

So this painting is kind of like my, it's kind of like the period at the end of a really long essay. It's the last piece and this was the last piece that I made before my daughter was born. So this piece, it's called paradise. It's this 16 foot long, four foot tall painting. It's a multi panel, five panels that all make up one painting.

And it's the full spectrum of the years that I spent before in LA. And the lessons that I've learned and everything that I was preparing myself mentally. I was literally painting this for months leading up to my baby's birth. So I was going through a lot mentally. What kind of person I am, how I want to carry myself into the future? How do I support my family? How do I make the right decisions? Things burning around me with the wildfires and then also what's growing beneath my feet. So this was one of those moments, when I finished this painting, I finished this painting and then I was literally thinking in my head, oh, I need more space. And that's when my landlord, the next day, was like, Hey, I have more space. Are you interested? I was like, whoa, this is so weird how it manifests, on its own. I just have to jump in and ride it out.

ODUGA: I love that. This is big too. Is this the biggest work that you've worked on to date?

ITO: Yeah, this is the biggest work I've done to date. And now I'm scaling up because I really love how this painting unfolds. It's so cinematic. It's like when the curtains open when you're watching something like an opera or something. You're just like, you see the whole thing from beginning to finish. You see all the connections that I've been wanting to do. You know?

ODUGA: Yeah. Thank you so much for putting this one in here. This is a sneak peek that no one's ever seen. I'm assuming. So it's great to be able to see this progression. The first work that we've talked about in this program to this work here, it's like, so many things have changed in your life and in your practice. And that is definitely reflected in the work.

ITO: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. This was a special one and that's me for scale.

ODUGA: Love it.

ITO: Oh. And then I'll end with this photo because this is my wife, Karen, that's Spring in the middle, and that's me. I just wanted to end this conversation with the photo of my family, because it's what really, really guides me through my life.

Ever since I very first started dating Karen, when we first started living together, that set a new level for us. We went through a lot of stuff together, and a lot of shows have been made between that period and when we got engaged. We had some tragic loss on the way. And then we continued our

journey. We had to let go of some limiting behaviors, like saying that some things were impossible and things are possible, and just really had to let go of those pre-constructed roadblocks that are kind of instilled on us. And freed ourselves from that. And then building up to, through more shows, and learning things. And for me to process through these challenges that life brings you, but also all the beautiful moments as well.

And using all of that as inspiration for my life, for my work. My work is my life and my life is my work. For me right now, I always look into the past for guidance. I'm always living in the present and working towards the future. So in a way, all of these multiple perspectives and of entering my work, it's just how I enter, my life choices.

It's important for me to close things on this photo, because this is just a very candid, normal photo of us hanging out in the back of the project space, sow and Tailor. Karen's there with the baby, we had some friends roll through and a couple of advisory people. Just to look at the show, but it was a really safe, beautiful moment where we could just hang out, and talk about the work. I had some galleries that had some really major galleries come through and they're hanging out with us and playing with the baby. I'm there looking like a junkie, painter guy, kind of dirty. That's just my life, and this is a portrait of my life. It's really, thank you so much for having me.

ODUGA: Yeah. Thank you so much being here and for sharing so much about your experience and your family and all of these things. I think it's such a beautiful thing to hear. And it's giving me so much optimism about all the stuff that we do, especially after the crazy year that we've all been through. I'm so excited to have this conversation with you, but also to continue having the conversations that we've been having.