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Architect artist: Aaron Wittkamper follows his bliss

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Aaron Wittkamper's Untitled 4, 2019. Submitted image

The course of modern history altered irrevocably on [Aaron Wittkamper's](#) first day of graduate school. While listening attentively to the inaugural lecture at MIT's prestigious School of Architecture, a classmate leaned in to whisper that an airplane had just struck one of the towers of New York's World Trade Center. The date was Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001. The news was too surreal for Wittkamper to comprehend: an entire day of classes would pass before the reality of that life-altering incident could sink in.

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On behalf of Minneapolis Climate Action, a community solar garden was recently installed on a Northeast Minneapolis mattress-recycling facility. buff.ly/3aufs3m



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The 9/11 attacks portended a global tenuousness that uncannily paralleled Wittkamper's own subsequent years — years where arduous hours of coursework combined with the complexity and heartbreak of his core romantic relationship — producing a period of elevated exhilaration and emotional exhaustion. Though trying, those years proved to be a fertile crucible — one that forged this Minneapolis architect, designer and studio artist's current, admired and desired creative sensibilities.

Since his junior year at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Wittkamper has been an oil painter. In fact, it was painting that galvanized his then blossoming interest in design and architecture, eventually drawing him away from his declared psychology and neuroscience studies. Infected by an immediate love of the visual and spatial, Wittkamper was smitten with the intangibles that emerge when a primal, pre-thought consciousness applies color and texture to a blank canvas.



Aaron Wittkamper poses with his oil painting, Untitled 3, 2018. Photo by Susan Schaefer

A fan of the austere abstraction of artists such as Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly, Clyfford Still and Richard Diebenkorn, Wittkamper's work echoes their abstract expressionism, which he calls "a form of deeply concealed truth telling known only by the artist, but sensed on the surface by the viewer." Each stroke of Wittkamper's brush is spare and decisive. His early, large canvases radiate vast, gleaming white spaces, suggesting a bird's-eye view often rendered by urban designers where much of the surface is left bare, "the negative white space being as much a part of the expression as the brushstroke." Viewers can observe an almost contradictory blend of the mystic and the professional designer arising from Wittkamper's art.

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Hanging directly over my bed, a large untitled Wittkamper anchors the space, creating a dramatic yet peaceful focal point — a calm oasis for a sleeping room. Wittkamper reflects on his “Untitled Series,” to which my canvas belongs, explaining that the “necessarily incomplete, nuanced forms seem to emerge from the ether.” His “awkward mark-making,” as he terms it, is “sinuous and seductive,” suggesting that “a potentiality is about to happen, like that beautiful, luminous state between the dream world and waking reality when your consciousness has not fully humanized. It’s what we enter into with deep meditation,entheogens and other visionary and ecstatic states,” he reflects. His work embodies this primal, pre-thought state to which he devotes a lot of attention.

In fact, Wittkamper has been meditating regularly since college. He is drawn to these states of consciousness that conjure how the world is constructed from a quantum level and how humans operate within it — equating Eastern mysticism and quantum theory, which he believes basically express a similar truth in different languages. Accordingly, he’s recently shifted his paintings away from expressionism and into the realm of sacred geometry. The resulting works are large-scale, slightly abstracted mandala paintings on 5-by-5-foot canvases that he regards as “evolving forms” — his creation journey is an “eye-opening exercise,” where the works remain a little “clunky, yet coherent.”

“Painting,” Wittkamper stresses, “like anything, requires tuning, practice and many iterations, but the evolution is very rewarding.”



The middle panel of a Wittkamper triptych hangs above the author's bed. Photo by Susan Schaefer

The mindful architect

Painting has been a constant alongside Wittkamper's design career. He describes the immediacy of brush to canvas "as being the true content, the product, if you will, that has been an appreciated departure from the endless process of design and architecture ultimately built and fabricated by someone else."

The practice of architecture entails a hive mentality. It is where art meets business. By nature, the client's vision must occupy center ground in an architectural project; the designers, architects and countless project managers serve as the professional conduits who shape the abstraction of the vision through the alchemy of art and technical knowledge with, one hopes, fiscal prudence. Ultimately, engineers and building contractors bring the vision to a concrete reality — a space and place that meets the rigors of budget, location and materials. Wittkamper bridges the creative split between what I term the "singular authorship" of painting with the collaborative provenance of architecture by contentedly practicing on both sides of aisle. His studio is a nexus.

As is his personality. Though Wittkamper's quiet, highly contemplative character marks him as an introvert, he believes he's an extrovert at his core. He gains energy being around people and enjoys a vibrant social life, much of it spent in the pubs, bars, cafes, breweries and distilleries he designs. His work in the hospitality world resides at the confluence of his many creative interests — not just in art, architecture and design, but also in creating an environment for social interactions. Doubtless, this harkens back to his university roots studying psychology. He envisions his designs as settings for memorable dinners, animated happy hours or quiet liaisons — as places where humans can make deep connections. Wittkamper finds the vitality of life resides at these junctions, and he strives to create spaces where patrons' perspectives are redirected — places where they are surprised and inspired.

One such space is Windom's [Wild Mind Artisan Ales](#), where Wittkamper's handiwork offers a bright and airy gallery vibe, perfectly befitting a brewery that specializes in European-crafted sour ales. Referencing the wild, offbeat flavors in their brews, Wittkamper transformed this former commercial car wash into an unconventional-yet-cozy communal environment — a haven in what was once an industrial hub. Here both the space and the taste surprise and inspire!

Another well-known Wittkamper hospitality project is Tattersall Distillery, which is tucked into a former manufacturing/event space down a bumpy dirt road behind the Thorp Building in Northeast Minneapolis. The opportunity to work with his good friend, a Tattersall co-owner, was a turning point in his career, opening an avenue of exploration that continues to unfold into his current projects. In collaboration with his former partner Amy Reiff, Wittkamper unearthed the hidden potential of the cavernous room that once hosted light manufacturing, fashion shows and art sales, flooding the raw space with natural light by uncovering banks of clerestory windows.

Another new space he recently completed is La Dona Cerveceria, a vibrant Latin-inspired brewery just west of Downtown Minneapolis. Here his colorful “mark-making” strokes playfully pattern stark concrete walls.

Keep an eye out for his latest project, a restaurant called Heather’s, set to launch at 52nd & Chicago in late July.



Wittkamper designed the interior spaces of Windom's Wild Mind Artisan Ales.
Photo courtesy of Wittkamper/Reiff

Childhood idyll/career ideal

Wittkamper grew up in the old part of Anoka, near the Mississippi and Rum rivers, in a charming little neighborhood with houses dating back to 1852. The carefree and innocent boy, along with his mates, rode his bike in a kind of endless summer, much like Elliott and his friends in the film E.T. And like Elliott, Wittkamper’s imagination was lifted heavenward. His parents instilled a great sense of adventure in the young child, taking the family on many road trips out to the Black Hills, up to the North Shore and beyond. Though they didn’t travel far, they encouraged Wittkamper’s imagination, opening him to the world of experience. “I recall watching a Native American drumming ceremony at Grand Portage,” he reminisces, and “looking through a telescope in the Badlands of South Dakota on a clear night and seeing the rings of Saturn.” Those ephemeral hoops of cosmic dust seem to inhabit Wittkamper’s images and designs.

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Upon his return from MIT, Wittkamper had the great fortune of landing a position at the office of the late Jim Dayton, whose practice, James Dayton Design, earned a stellar national reputation for its modern Minnesotan architecture. Dayton's work benefited from, and some say surpassed, his foundational collaboration with his mentor, Frank Gehry. In this creative cauldron, Wittkamper, too, found a mentor whose "positive energy, patience and excellence played a significant role in his appreciation and awareness of the delicate boundaries between architecture, interior design and art."



Untitled 1, 2018. Submitted image

Art-worthy conversation

Much of what Wittkamper designs relies, he says, "on making the unnecessary elements fade into the background to become unconscious to the inhabitant, while the primary elements, the stuff that raises your temperature and tickles awareness, steps forward and presents itself." This is accomplished through a dialogue between architecture, interior design, graphics, branding and art. He understands fully that it is wonderful to participate in this art-worthy conversation, as long as "an active discernment and critique is in play."

It appears that he adequately engages this discernment. His unique vision and talents are in demand, both as an architect and an artist. Wittkamper's artwork has appeared in various group shows in Boston, New York and Minneapolis. In 2015, Studio Visit Magazine, a juried publication, published his work. Last year, he had paintings shown at the 801 Washington Atrium Gallery. He enjoys avid collectors as well. And an exciting exhibit is on the horizon. Wittkamper is creating new works for

Wittkamper believes he has always been a mystic who abounds with endless curiosity about our intelligent, complex multi-verse. “I don’t feel like I have a job,” he comments, “just a day-to-day involvement in good things with good people.” As is evident in the success of both his two- and three-dimensional work, he has followed his bliss. To paraphrase Joseph Campbell, it seems that Wittkamper has put himself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for him, and the life he ought to be living is the one he is living.

Susan Schaefer is a freelance communications consultant and writer who can be reached at insights@lifeintrans.com.

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