

WALLACE PIATT WORKS HIS ASS OFF AND DOESN'T QUIT

THE
BEAUTY AND
THE CHAOS
OF RODEO
GALLERY'S
VERY CANDID
RESIDENT
ARTIST

BY TIANA MOLONY



Photo by Kim Relerson

The first thing you should know about Santa Barbara artist Wallace Piatt is that he's not afraid to tell you how he feels.

For starters, he hates the rain. "The rain drives me bonkers," Piatt says. When it's raining, he feels unproductive, which, to him, is the worst feeling of all. "If I take a day off, I'm like, 'What am I doing?' Taking a day off? There's so much to do to keep yourself busy."

He doesn't want anyone in his studio while he's creating. I asked to watch him work, but he declined.



He wants agency over his creativity. Once, a woman asked him to paint Chewbacca for her son's room, a request he found preposterous. "First of all," Piatt says, "it's not fair to you because I'm not going to paint it with my heart. And it's certainly not fair to me, as a professional,

because I'm going to f**ing hate every minute of it." Not everyone's a Star Wars fan.

The most prevalent of these idiosyncrasies is his view that if someone doesn't like his work, he doesn't care. As long as he likes it, he's content.



1730 ANACAPA STREET | SANTA BARBARA | CALIFORNIA

4 BEDROOMS + OFFICE | 4 BATH | 3,712+/- SF | INCL. LEGAL ADU | LOT SIZE 0.58 ACRES

For sale for only the 2nd time in 80 years, this iconic 1888 Santa Barbara residence has been elegantly enhanced and expanded for today's living. The stately grounds feature a spectacular signature oak tree adding beauty and presence, while the house is set back from and above the street for privacy and quiet. The home's layout combines traditional high-ceiling common rooms on the entry-level leading to a spacious newer kitchen and family room. The primary bedroom is also conveniently on the entry level, and has been expanded into a modern-sized suite. The 0.58-acre estate offers multiple outdoor areas for entertaining, dining and relaxation, including a large rear deck, roof terrace and several manicured garden spaces. A detached 3-car garage has been newly rebuilt with a legal ADU above. As the 1st estate property at the gateway to the prestigious Upper East, a new owner will be only 4-5 blocks to downtown Santa Barbara's fine dining, theaters, museums and parks. Come tour this amazing property and home in an A++ location.



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At almost nine years sober and 61 years old, he concedes that his sobriety transformed not only his art, but his life. He openly discusses his journey on his Instagram account, acknowledging how his works evolved from drug and alcohol-induced creations that lacked depth and significance to art that has “a voice.”

There’s no singular moment that he can recall when he became an artist. He admits that he’s always had an artistic eye and a good sense of style, so creativity flowed naturally. In 1991, Johnson and Piatt opened True Grit, a store that selectively sold Levi’s in Santa Barbara. The store was a huge success, but Piatt admitted that his partying contributed to its closing in 2006. Shortly after, he experienced a bout of homelessness. “I think, to be a true artist for me, I think you have to lose everything,” he said.

French novelist Gustave Flaubert once said, “Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.” This quote appears at the top of Piatt’s website. I barely finish reciting it to him before he says the quote simply applies to his life. “Everything is like this in your life,” he says as he makes a straight line with his hand. “But your art is the one thing that should ebb and flow.”

His art explores Mexican and Native American culture and he says he often sympathizes with victims of injustice and reacts through his artwork. He also has an affinity for pop art and vintage Americana, as seen in his large horse prints and cowboy series, reminiscent of Andy Warhol.

He brings his ideas to life through house paint, spray paint, and oil pastels, which he jokingly refers to as “adult crayons.” Using his knowledge from mending vintage Levi’s, Piatt started sewing canvas pieces together, scraping them, and creating textured surfaces that add another dimension to his work.

Walking through his gallery, you’ll see familiar faces like Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, as well as those of unknown people with unknown stories. Piatt often incorporates people, words, and phrases in his art, building a story. One of his more recent works is a canvas commanding one wall of the gallery and, in large letters, reads: “IT’S 2004, I’M HIGH AS F*** AND CRYING TO MR. BRIGHTSIDE!”

He’s sold his artwork all over the world.

Piatt doesn’t regret any of his mistakes—in fact, he’s grateful for them—because each pitfall was vital to his journey. He’s often reminded of this sentiment when he’s in his studio, working on his hands and knees. He likes to think that the process of putting a piece together is a metaphor for putting his life back together.

“I don’t think it was suicidal,” he said of his addiction. “I think I just lost touch with passion. And that’s okay. You know what I mean?” He says this a lot, “You know what I mean?” I nod my head in understanding. Even if I can’t relate to everything he shares, I understand the universal search for passion, especially when lost.

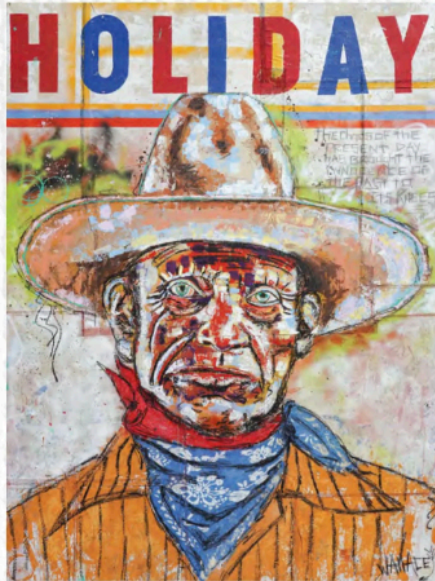
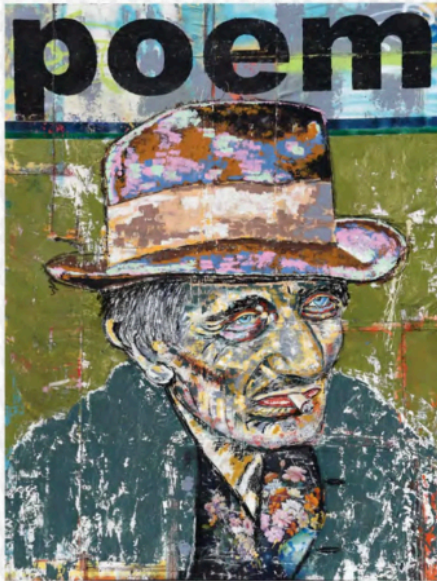
After almost an hour of talking, I stop recording and place my phone in my pocket. Piatt encourages me to be brutally honest and not sugarcoat anything he says. I told him that is what I always strive to do. We fist-bump, albeit slowly, as to avoid the rings. I walk out of the studio, wave, and look over my shoulder. Piatt is already back in his rusted metal chair, punching studs onto the cashmere sweaters.

rodeogalleriesb.com/home/
[@wallacelsart](https://www.instagram.com/wallacelsart)



Photo by Kim Reinerson





Piatt, who grew up in Santa Maria, moved to Santa Barbara in 1982 for college and earned his degree from UCSB. People often suggest that he'd be successful in New York, but he said he doesn't need the chaos of a big city. "I already have it here," he says as he points to his head. "Santa Barbara has this juxtaposition of beauty. And my brain has chaos. So it balances out."

When I walk into his Funk Zone gallery, Rodeo Gallery, I am struck by the sheer scale of Piatt's art, which graces entire walls. It's easy to get lost in the faces and ponder the lives of the people he paints—their expressions appear solemn at first, lost even. Though, I quickly realize that in many works, what comes across as sadness is actually a display of ineffable strength—the result of true adversity.

After my head performs a slow pirouette to digest his work, I spot Piatt in the center of the room, sitting in a rusted metal chair, hard at work on something. We shake hands. He wears a collection of vintage silver turquoise rings and the phrase "work hard" is tattooed across both his hands just below his nails.

Today, he tells me, he's adding studs to the cashmere sweaters sold at the adjoining store, Loveworn, which sells vintage Levi's jeans, reworked vintage, and original designs. His creative partner and ex-wife, Jill Johnson, opened Loveworn in 2017. And then three years later, Piatt opened his gallery next door. Johnson and Piatt share with me that they work well together. Both display a deep sense of respect for the other.

In this moment, hard at work on the sweaters, Piatt tells me there's no place he'd rather be. After talking to him some more, I realize that his contentment while punching studs into cashmere sweaters on a Friday afternoon comes from the mindset of someone who strives for routine in his life. Because for so long, he lacked it.