



"MDMA," a 5-by-8-foot painting completed in 2013, is based on the molecular structure of the party drug ecstasy.

Microbiology on Acid

SoCal artist Kelsey Brookes has melded a background in molecular biology with a passion for painting, creating dazzling psychedelic abstractions that please the eye and tease the mind.



The artist standing before his 2013 abstract canvas “One-Pointed Attention.”

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

A recent solo show of Kelsey Brookes’ paintings at Quint Gallery in La Jolla, California, presented paintings based on the molecular structure of LSD, psilocybin, mescaline and other hallucinogens. The show, “Serotonin; Happiness and Spiritual States,” brought together the 36-year-old artist’s interests in microbiology, wellness and altered states. A commercial success, Brookes says the eye-dazzling “Serotonin” series is a breakthrough in his stylistic trajectory. (His earlier work frequently featured animal-headed nudes and other fantastic beasts exploding into galaxies of floral and geometric designs.) These latest canvases are kaleidoscopic abstractions with a pulsating, psychedelic feel.

His appearance—tall, thin and bearded, long dirty-blond hair often in a topknot—looks every bit the part of someone with an affinity for hallucinogens. But while the San Diego-based artist is an avid

surfer who oozes New Age mindfulness, his artwork actually reflects his background in molecular science more than mind-altering narcotics. His interest in meditation combines to imbue the pictures with a complexity and self-conscious precision that transcends the decorative vibrancy of psychedelia, yielding a unique style that has garnered him much recent success.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego owns “Mescaline,” 2012, the largest painting in the “Serotonin” show. Another work, a 6-foot, circular abstraction, has been chosen for “State of the Art,” a survey exhibition that draws from every region of the United States, running from September 13 through January 19, 2015, at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, established in Bentonville, Arkansas, by Walmart billionaire Alice Walton. “The eye-popping piece is at once meditative and vibrant,”

Photos: Profile photo courtesy Judith Charles Gallery by D.M. Spizziri. All other photos courtesy Quint Gallery by Philipp Scholz-Ritterman unless otherwise noted.



In addition to large-scale works, Brookes creates 7-inch circular paintings such as these recent pieces.

says Chad Alligood, the museum’s curator. “And it beautifully illustrates our criteria: it’s engaging, virtuosic and incredibly appealing.”

In his San Diego studio, Brookes works with two painting assistants who help to generate dozens of works each year, but demand is outstripping supply. “Serotonin” sold out, and so did his first solo exhibit in New York City, a show that Quint consigned to

Judith Charles Gallery last winter. Titled “Better Living Through Chemistry,” it comprised paintings based on the molecular structures of psychiatric medications including Thorazine, Prozac, Ritalin, Zoloft, Xanax and others. According to Ben Strauss-Malcolm, director of Quint Gallery, there is a waiting list for his work. “I think he’s on the verge of breaking out in a big way,” says the dealer. ▸

The Art of Science

Brookes' breakout doesn't entirely come out of nowhere, but his entrée into the art world has been somewhat nontraditional. Raised in Denver, Brookes scored high on early aptitude tests that pushed him toward science and math. He completed an M.S. in microbiology at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, then in 2001 held a fellowship at the prestigious Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, where he worked in a lab scanning blood for rare diseases. He eventually moved to San Diego in his early twenties, working for a biotech company where he helped develop an HIV diagnostic test—all the while surfing on his days off and painting at night as a hobby, which eventually became his passion. The self-taught artist began to sell a few paintings in coffee shops and decided to change career paths, quitting his day job to focus on an art career.

Avid for exposure, Brookes noticed that street art was in vogue and responded to a call for submissions from *Pavement Liquor*, a magazine published by taggers associated with the London print shop Pictures on Walls. He submitted a drawing that he describes as featuring “Hindu-inspired animal-headed women in erotic poses,” which they published along with several of his related images. From 2005 to 2007 he participated in “Santa’s Ghetto,” an annual Pictures on Walls showcase of street artists including the now-renowned Banksy, Paul Insect, Invader and the New York collective



“One Pointed Attention 2,” 2014, a hypnotic canvas measuring 6 feet across, is in “State of the Art,” a national survey exhibition organized by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Faile, among others. The 2007 edition took place not in London but the West Bank, where Brookes painted on the barrier wall alongside Banksy, who had hired him to help install his exhibition in Los Angeles the previous year. By 2011 Brookes had a solo show at The Outsiders, a London gallery run by graffiti promoter Steve Lazarides, but he was already slipping away from the street-art scene.

“There had been a huge explosion of interest in street art, and I felt it was disingenuous to keep showing with them,” he says. “I was more a studio artist—anything on the streets was kind of a lark—and I felt my artwork would be better served outside of that world.”

The dizzying ascents of several street artists also made him uneasy. “Suddenly they had million-dollar sales, and it seemed way too much way too fast,” he says. “I felt there was going to be a downfall and I didn’t want to be in a bubble that burst. I wanted sustainability.”

In the past few years, the figurative fantasies earned Brookes solo shows everywhere from London, Berlin and Bern, Switzerland, to Santa Monica, but he wanted an established gallery that would cultivate his career, which he has now found at Quint Gallery. The La Jolla gallery works with noted California artists Robert Irwin, Peter Alexander and John McLaughlin, as well as Ryan McGinness, Thomas Glassford and Mel Bochner. ▷



Going Abstract

Like most contemporary artists, Brookes is steeped in theory about aesthetics and culture and readily speaks about materials and methods. Neurobiology, psychology and psychopharmacology segue into meditation, mysticism and religious practice, all converging on the mind-body duality. Brookes is obsessed with the interrelationship of consciousness, the physical body and the molecules that influence them both. “I’m constantly curious,” he says. “If I hear about something I don’t quite understand, I feel the need to figure it out.”

Curiosity also led Brookes to abandon figuration for abstraction. “I was doing illustrative work for a long time, painting people and animals, and it became a lot of effort,” he says. “I was weighed down by having to draw a face or hand and kill myself moving an eyeball a quarter inch or two. I was doing the same thing over and over again, and I didn’t feel I was evolving through new territory.” Brookes explains that in the course of experimenting, he took figures out of the picture and was left with abstractions. He started creating circular abstract paintings, more meditative, repetitive work as a way of distracting himself from the frustration of the figurative rendering.

In the four or five years he has been doing them, the abstractions have evolved. The early pictures usually begin at a focal point and spread methodically like telephone-pad doodles into cosmic constellations. “The components are still the same, but my technique has improved and the process is more complicated,” he says. “I use different brushes and a more varied color palette, and the linear patterns are more complex.” The more densely worked examples carpet the canvas in an elaborate web of repeating gestures and hues that look like organic blooms of paint.

Expanding dots into patterns was pleasing, but as a scientist Brookes sought a model in nature. “I

thought: What in life is individual points? And my mind flashed to molecular line drawings I used to do in molecular chemistry,” he says. The paintings would end up showing how individual atoms are arranged in a molecule. He had been reading about “molecular consciousness,” the notion that molecules are more than physics. Because of their tendency to bond to reach a stable state, they seem to have behaviors that in turn can impact the human mind. “Chemistry becomes less mathematics and more behavior,” he says. “Molecules are the basis of all consciousness.”

For his first series, he decided that the neurotransmitter serotonin would be especially interesting because its molecular structure closely resembles that of many hallucinogenic drugs. “It also controls feelings of happiness and spiritual states,” he says. “I thought that would be a great concept to hang a show on. That is how it all began.”

Prior to the “Serotonin” abstractions, his work had consisted of sexually charged Pop Surrealism bursting with the sort of adolescent imagery favored by Salvador Dalí. “Two Cats,” 2009, for example, features an explicit nude pin-up girl with a hissing feline head haloed in floral-printed diamond shapes. “Save our Souls,” 2010, depicts a boat overflowing with a phantasmagoria of cartoon skulls and fabulous creatures. Now, instead of chimeras striking Tantric yoga poses and jungle creatures radiating splintered rays of color, the new abstractions are pure pattern. Some may loosely suggest comic facial features or subtly weave cryptic texts into their delicate fabrics. For example, barely legible within the black-on-black brushstrokes of a 2012 painting is the title “Better Luck Next Time.” But usually the abstractions—some rectangular and others circular—appear to replicate microscopic organisms, polished agates or sections of the brain. They call to mind anything from aboriginal Australian Dreaming stories to Op Art. ▶

Molecular abstractions are composed of thousands of brushstrokes radiating around atomic points, as evident in this detail of the 7-by-5-foot canvas “Lithium Carbonate,” 2013.



A view of the 2012 exhibition “Serotonin; Happiness and Spiritual States,” at Quint Gallery in La Jolla, California, includes the 2012 acrylic paintings “Serotonin” (left) and “Mescaline” (right). The latter was acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego.

Hallucination, Meditation and Migraines

Brookes might be called an oneiric artist, from the Greek *oneiros*, which means “dream,” as his images have the feeling of visual reveries—or perhaps something a bit more illicit. Mind-bending chemicals inform much of his iconography, and the artist, now married with a young child, is upfront about the psilocybin mushrooms and LSD he started taking in high school and consumed more enthusiastically in college. “The subtle shift of the visual landscape was super-interesting and awesomely fun,” he admits. “It was the closest thing I have found to religious experience.” Now, he finds similar effects through meditation. “It’s a much more acceptable way to go about it as I get older,” he says.

If the serenity of meditation helps produce a dreamlike state of mind, an added element of drama likely comes from his chronic migraines, a condition that has afflicted him since his early teens. Brookes says he often sees extraordinary visual effects during the aura period before the headache. “The 30 minutes is like free psychedelic imagery,” he says. “It looks like an opening in the upper-right-hand field of vision. Through that rip are shining undulating color geometries on top of each other that grow to encompass the entire right eye. That is what I was originally trying to convey in a static way in the abstract paintings,” he says. ▶

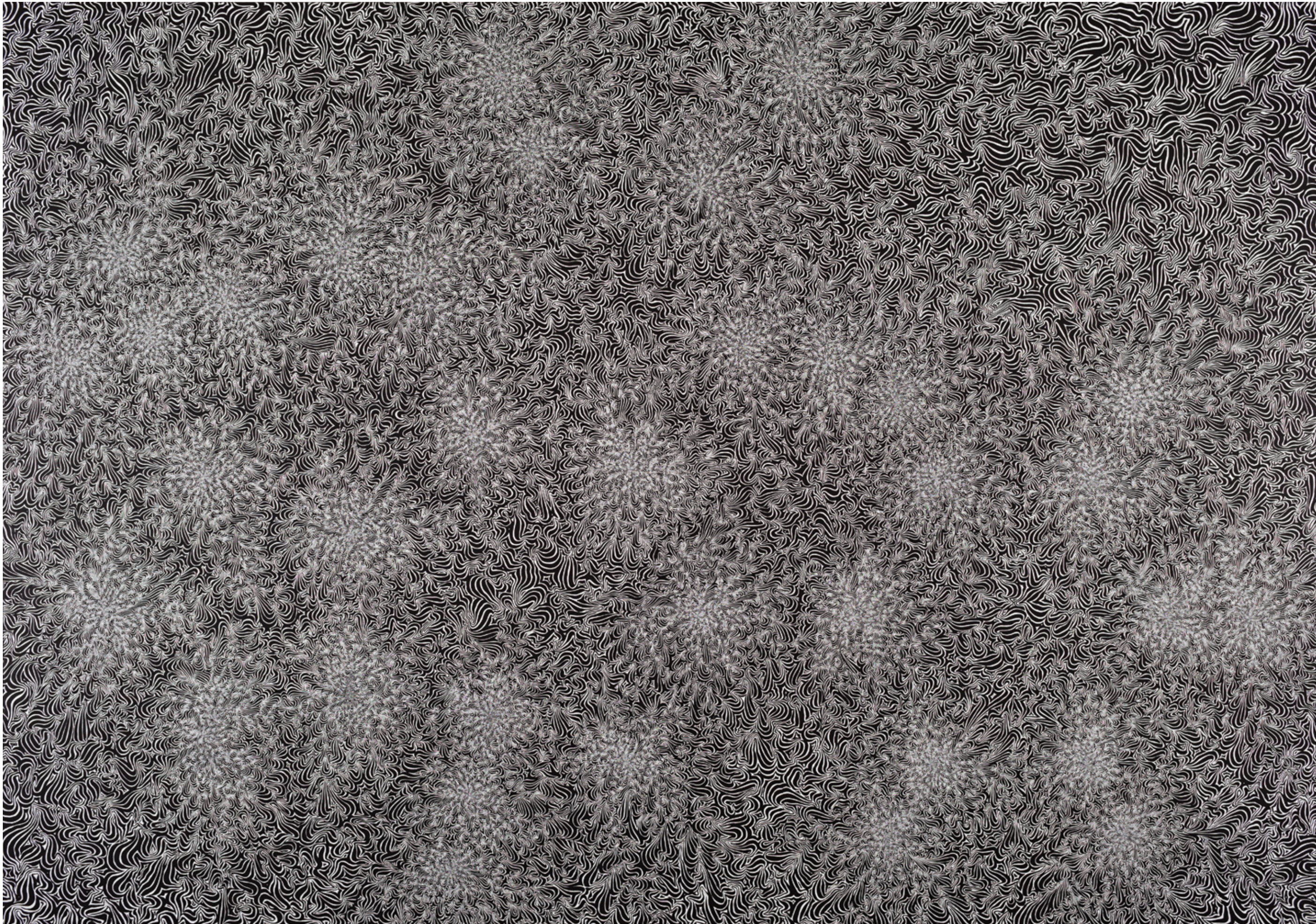
Making Molecular Abstraction

These visionary experiences inspire his art about mind-altering substances seen through the lens of microbiology. Each composition begins with Brookes searching the Internet for a two-dimensional diagram of the molecule he is showcasing. “I put it into Photoshop, scale it up to the size of the painting, then figure out the coordinates for each atom and draw a dot on the canvas where the atoms would be,” he explains. “Once I have 20 dots on a canvas, I start painting, working out from each dot according to rules that change from series to series. You might go out two inches, make a squiggly line and paint parallels in different colors, leaving blank spaces between. It’s almost like how Sol LeWitt made his paintings, starting with a set of rules.”

Brookes devises aesthetic formulas appropriate to each molecule. “It’s conceptual,” he says. “If I’m going to render the molecule of, say, a psychiatric medication, a hypnotic, I try to figure out the human experience you’re having if you need to take those drugs. I try and give the paintings the feel of taking the drug,” he says. “So it’s like taking LSD and looking through an electron microscope at an LSD molecule—molecular biology on acid.”

Following the “Serotonin” series, he completed suites based on party drugs such as ethanol (alcohol), THC (marijuana) and MDMA (ecstasy), and the psycho-pharmaceuticals. His latest are black-and-white abstractions of neurotransmitters involved in sleep, and he says he is thinking about exploring sculpture as “a way to break free.” ▷

The 7-by-10-foot painting “Alprazolam (Xanax),” 2013, is entirely black and white, appropriate for a work inspired by a drug associated with sleep.





The exhibition "Kelsey Brookes: Better Living Through Chemistry," at Judith Charles Gallery in New York City in late 2013, included paintings based on the molecular structures of Ritalin, Zoloft, Xanax, Lithium Carbonate and other pharmaceuticals.

Photo: Courtesy Judith Charles Gallery by Nicola Bailey.



A close-up of “Methylphenidate (Ritalin),” 2013, shows the methodical patterning that goes into its design.

In Studio

His workplace is a 1,000-square-foot room with hardwood floors, 13-foot ceilings and two 20-foot-long walls with south-facing windows on one end, worktables in the middle and a little kitchen. He often paints alongside two assistants who follow graphic and chromatic sequences that he initiates. Working simultaneously on several pieces, the team can produce two shows a year, each with around 20 large rectangular paintings and scores of smaller circular ones.

“Dealers and collectors are responding to the beautifully detailed abstract paintings,” says Quint’s Strauss-Malcolm, noting that a number of his collectors are trustees of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) San Diego. The Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation in Los Angeles purchased a circular molecular abstraction, and Red Hot Chili Peppers vocalist Anthony Kiedis owns several paintings. The group featured the circular abstraction “Iris” on the cover of the 2012 release “I’m with You.” Jen and Tom DeLonge of rock bands Blink-182 and Angels & Airwaves are also Brookes collectors, as is Los

Angeles-based singer-songwriter Sia. And his fan base among skate, surf and indie culture has led to commercial deals designing clothing for RVCA, VANS and Insight 51.

According to Strauss-Malcolm, prices have climbed to around \$20,000 for a 5-by-8-foot canvas or 6-foot-diameter circle. The largest to date, a 20-by-7-foot canvas, sold recently to a private collector in Los Angeles for \$45,000. Very small circular abstractions sell for around \$800, and the artist is completing modestly priced prints of four paintings from the “Serotonin” series.

Brookes says he is satisfied with the steady ascent of his post-biotech career. “Working in science meant I would get a Ph.D., have a 401(k) and my life would be totally planned. It seemed too slick and perfect and there wasn’t a lot of soul in it,” he says. “Then I imagined a life as an artist, and art seemed like a great adventure. Every day could be different, and that ability to have variation and spend the day doing what I want to do instead of what someone tells me to do—it fills me with joy.” ♦