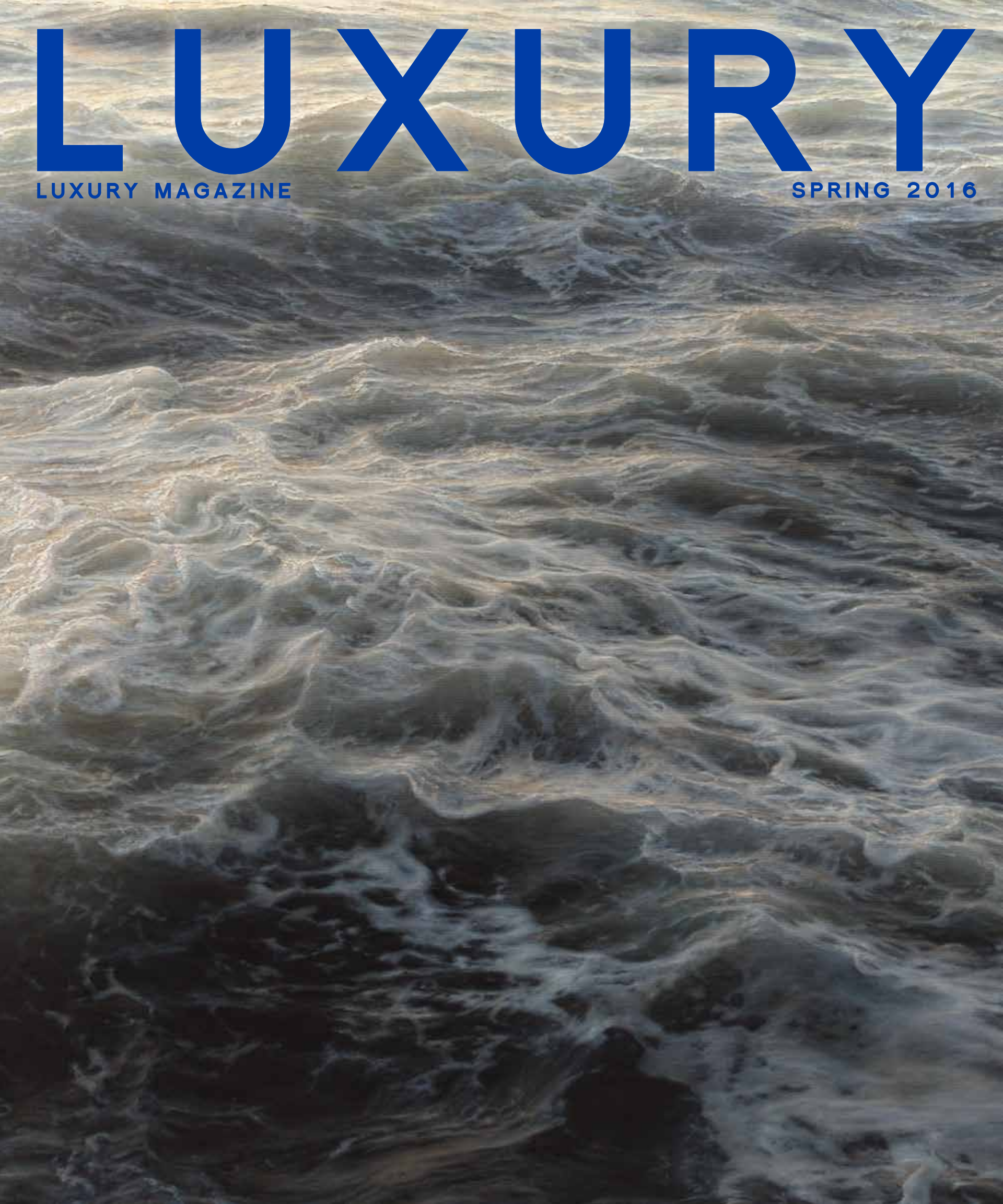


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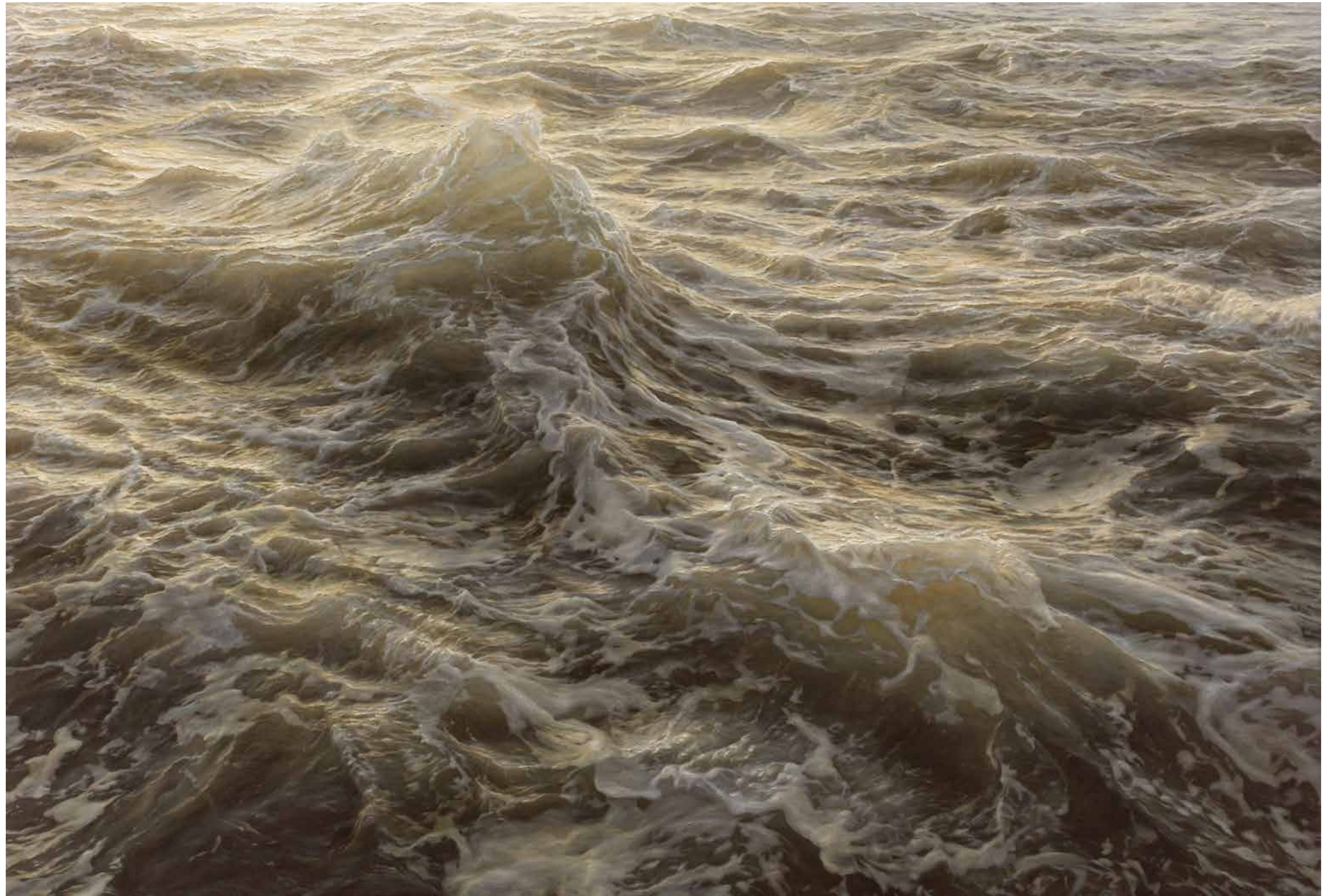
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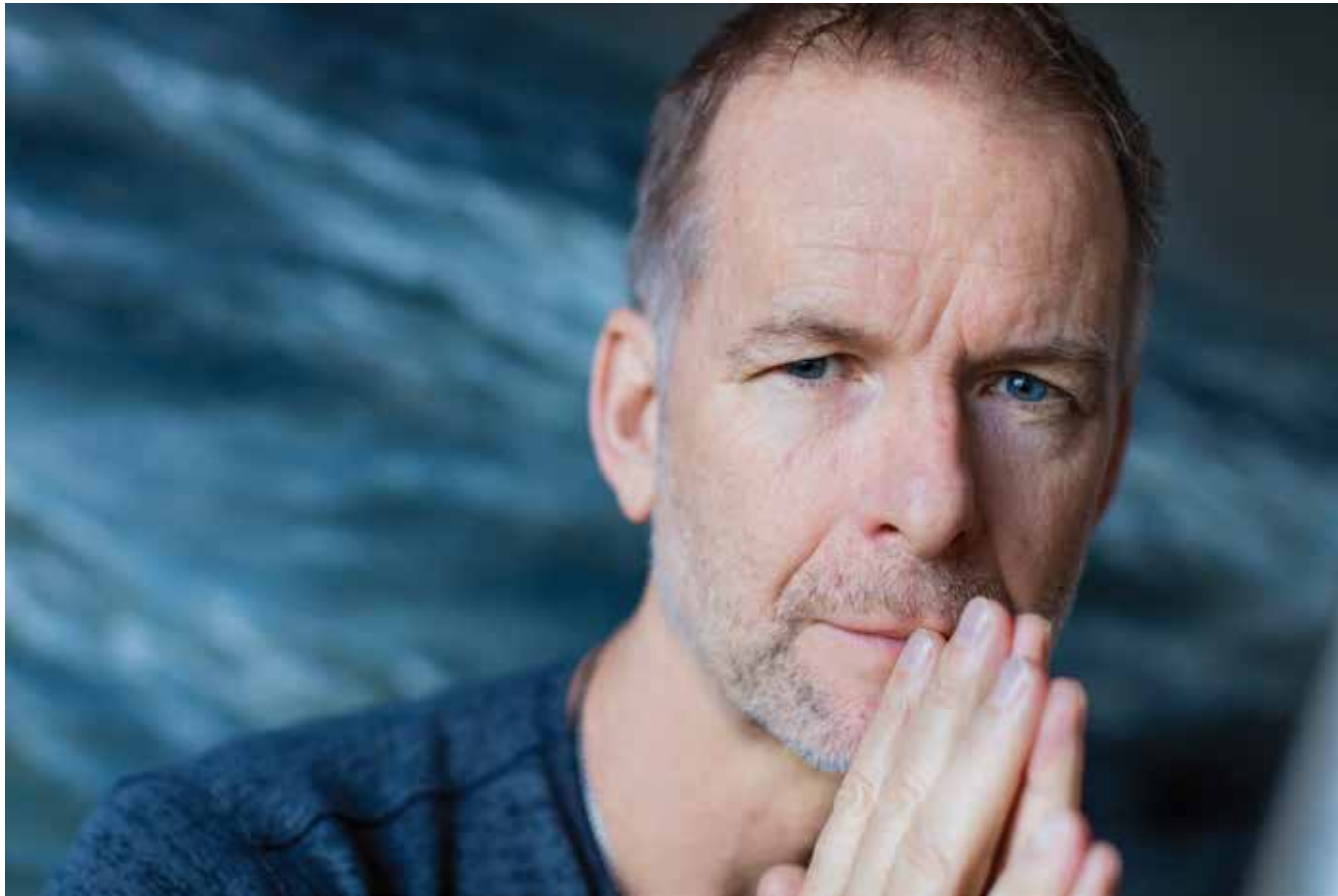


FOUND AT SEA

Primarily known for his marine paintings, contemporary artist **RAN ORTNER** struggled to chart a career in art, but winning a \$250,000 first prize led to a groundswell of commissions. Now, as his first major exhibition opens in Chelsea, the 56-year-old looks back on the trauma, athletic passions, and philosophical self-examination that led him to make massive portraits of the sublime sea. ▸

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN





As a child in Alaska, Ran Ortner planned to make his fame and fortune racing motorcycles, but when he was 20 a knee injury ended his hope for stardom on the Motocross circuit. Instead, while convalescing in California, Ortner taught himself to make pictures that sold mostly at tourist galleries. Longing for the big leagues, he moved to New York and launched into an intense self-education while eking out a living doing construction. During this period he made both abstract and minimalist works, some incorporating sand whose rippled surface reminded him of the ocean. A lifelong surfer, he had spent countless hours among the waves, and he realized that the subject held primal fascination for him. In 2005 he made the first of his ongoing series of large-scale oil paintings that viscerally evoke the roiling sea and its mysterious power.

Ortner remained a starving artist until 2009 when he won the first prize of \$250,000 in the inaugural ArtPrize contest in Grand Rapids, Mich., an award determined by 334,000 votes, which affirmed the appeal of the seascapes. The financial windfall and international media coverage changed his life. He rented a larger studio in Brooklyn, hired a team of assistants, and began turning out majestic canvasses that sell to corporate and private collections worldwide. A vast multipanel work has been the centerpiece of the celebrated seafood restaurant Le Bernardin in New York since 2011, others have been displayed in the lobby of 7 World Trade Center, and in 2013 the Dutch government commissioned a painting for the United Nations World Water Day held in The Hague. Ortner may not be a household name, but his painstakingly realized monumental artworks strike a note with discerning patrons, selling privately for six-figures or more. Earlier this year his first major solo exhibition was held at Robert Miller Gallery in Manhattan’s Chelsea district.

With his career surging and a feature documentary in the works, the artist invited us into his cavernous studio where he took a break from collaborating with half a dozen assistants to discuss his enthusiasm for motorcycle racing and surfing, the trajectory of his art world ascent, and his techniques for embedding his intimate knowledge of the sea in paintings. ▸



Previous: Element No. 34, oil on canvas, 66" x 96", 2016. These pages from left: Ran Ortner; the artist in his studio.

Photos: Boris Rjabov. All images are (c) Ran Ortner, courtesy of the Artist, except where noted.

Why have you made the sea your subject?

There is a quality of lament to the ocean, when you are a little bit bluesy and walk on the seashore you can feel the dissipation and the sorrowfulness, and yet there is endless generosity, always more. The sea moves in the rhythms of the beating of the heart. I think if you look and listen to the ocean on an average day, it is exactly in sync with the breathing of a human being at rest. The sea cannot be enclosed. The sea is a totem of freedom, to the notion of the irrational and the dance of life. The sea is constantly asking what lies beneath the surface of things.

Have you always been drawn to the ocean?

The first five years of my life, before my family moved to Alaska, were in Pacifica, just south of San Francisco, and I was mesmerized by the surfers, the huge gray water, the smell of eucalyptus trees. The ocean, cold water, the brooding Northern California thing was deep in my bones before I moved to Alaska, where I lived from when I was 5 to 17.

What was it like to grow up in Alaska?

My father worked there as an engineer on the roads. He was into small planes, so we ended up flying a lot. We built a log cabin and had a landing strip right near the cabin, and he would fly to work every day and land on the road wherever it was they were working. We had a Cessna 170, a Cessna 185, Mooneys—we would change our plane the way people change their family car. In the winter the plane had skis and we would land in the snow. We had these planes, but there was no running water and only a wood stove for heat. I had a very unusual childhood.

Were you very close to nature?

The last place we were living was Homer, a fishing village on the Kenai Peninsula. It's incredibly beautiful—glaciers and water and mountains coming straight out of the ocean. My relationship with nature was staggering. As a kid I knew that in the winter if I went walking until I was really cold and then turned around to come home, ▸



Deep Water No. 1., oil on canvas, triptych, 72" x 288",
collection of Le Bernardin, New York, 2001.

I wouldn't make it home. I would be dead. So I had a sense of how dispassionate nature is. I think I continue to be influenced by this collision of opposites: incredible beauty, but then this profound harshness at the same time.

Did you ever go out on the water?

A lot. We had a boat, and we lived at the ocean. But then we would travel. We would do these long trips. My father would pack my mother, my brother, my sister, and me in the airplane, we would leave school for three months, and we would go to South America in small planes. He was kind of anti-education, anti-society. The planes were small and slow so the trips would take an enormous amount of time. And we would get lost. When we first went to Alaska we had binoculars and would read road signs to navigate. We would be stopping constantly. We had friends in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Ecuador. Flying with a very young family to South America from Alaska in a very old rickety airplane—it's quite amazing that we survived it.

What was your own idea of fun?

My whole childhood I had motorcycles and I would ride even in the winter. I could ride a bicycle before I turned 3 and my father always had lots of motorcycles. I just loved it, and it was something I happened to be really gifted at. The way a 13-year-old Romanian girl on the uneven parallel bars is just out of her mind in the flow state—

that's what I was like at 12 and 13 on a motorcycle, and by 15 I was a profound force on a motorcycle.

When did you get into racing motorcycles?

Around '76 we had had enough of the cold and moved to Washington State. We ended up living near my uncle in Yakima. I rented an apartment from him and got a job in a motorcycle shop and started racing. In the '80s I moved to California where I could race year-round and it was the hotbed of the industry. I was racing Indian Dunes, Saddleback, established dirt tracks with big jumps, big air. I was in the pro class, the top class of local riders in Southern California where the fastest guys were.

That's a dangerous pastime. Were you injured?

That's how I started as an artist. I was injured many times with broken bones and many concussions, but the last break, when I was 20, left my knee so unstable I knew that I could not perform and be one of the top athletes. I had ambitions of being world champion, but I didn't have the coaching. You really need a whole team behind you. As soon as I could see that was not possible, I realized that I had to find something else I could connect to. That's when I started painting.

The only thing you needed was one arm and one eye and you could paint. And you could be doing your best work in your 80s. Coming out of athletics, where it requires so much of your body, it's really wonderful to move to something that doesn't end in your late 20s.

You must have known that it wouldn't be easy to make a living as a painter.

I was 20 years old, in a cast, and I had eight or nine months I could collect disability, and I thought, "Okay, I've got nine months to learn not only how to be an artist but actually be good enough to make a living." I was naïve.

But how did you learn to paint, especially with such realism?

I didn't go to school. I read a book, then read another one, and another one. I started out doing kitsch paintings. I had a van and some easels and would do these sidewalk shows in Santa Barbara and Santa Monica, like hippies selling beads and scented candles, and kitsch paintings—that would be me. As I got better I started selling in galleries in Maui, on Rodeo Drive, in La Jolla ... tourist places where there is a lot of wealth. I sold paintings in that kind of environment and thought this was the art world.

Contemporary art was never a world I was exposed to. I grew up with a rather naïve idea, a kind of working-class mentality that contemporary art is for snobs, some defensive thing for people who can't really draw or paint, and city sophisticates and their contemporary art and philosophy are crazy. But I realized something was wrong. The artists in these tourist places were supposed to be substantial, but the more I investigated I discovered they weren't in museums. I was just profoundly dissatisfied with the world I was in. I realized I had to stop, just stop everything. And I did.

When did things shift for you?

When I moved to New York in 1990 and started reading in earnest, seeing a therapist, and exploring who I was, I came to discover that art is not about making a beautiful shiny object. It's really an honesty contest. I started looking inside and realized, "If I'm honest, what do I know, what's the truth of me?" And the only thing I could say for sure is that I am profoundly ignorant. So I asked myself, "If ignorance is the only thing you truly know, what does that look like? That's your beginning."

I started with this notion of exteriorizing my ignorance, and the work that I did in that period was not very pretty. I was making assemblages using spoons, metaphorical pieces about how we are nurtured and have no choice about what we are fed as children. The work was a lot about decay. I was looking at Art Brut, and found Anselm Kiefer an absolute revelation. I worked in this way for a 10-year period, then my work became very reductive and minimal. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke makes a comment that the only measure of quality is that it hits you in the body and you go weak in the knees, so I was bending things, like a steel plate 7 feet tall and an inch thick that bends at knee height and leans against the wall. I also started making installations with sand—sand is a solid that behaves as a fluid. I saw the ocean in it, the rhythm of the ocean, and the horizon line, and I thought I should confront the ocean again, >



Clockwise from top left: Ortner at work; an overhead view of his expansive studio; his paint palette.

how it would be fascinating to try to paint it. I thought it was a bad idea, but maybe I could bring enough immediacy and muscularity to it to take it outside of the pastoral, the decorative, or the kitsch and make it break through and become almost a shocking surprise in its immediacy and its physicality.

How did you earn a living in the big city?

Manhattan was too expensive, so I looked in Brooklyn and found an old coffin factory and rented it. I would find a construction job and work for a week and make enough money to pay my rent, and make art for three weeks, and I cobbled together a living. I had met this guy in California named Steven Paul, and someone told me his parents were in the art world. I assumed that his mother probably painted Christmas cards, or something. I said, "I heard your parents are involved in art, but the name Paul doesn't ring a bell." And he says, "I don't go by my family name because it's kind of charged. It's Scull." And I looked at him and I said, "You're telling me Robert and Ethel Scull are your mom and dad?" And he said, "Yeah, Jasper Johns gave me a piece for my bar mitzvah."

Photo: (Bottom left) Jason Edward Kaufman; (top left) Xavier Guardans; (top right) Marcus Andersson.

The Sculls were New York City taxi magnates and huge collectors. Andy Warhol painted *Ethel 36 Times* on her 36th birthday. Steven was intrigued by my work and he said, "I'm in my 40s and I have never introduced my mother to a single artist until now. I want you to meet my mom." So I came to New York not knowing anybody except Ethel, and she became a kind of mentor to me. She would share stories about her time at The White House with the Kennedys, about making curtains for de Kooning's loft, and her relationship with all those guys. I would go see her every couple of weeks, she came to my studio in Brooklyn, and soon my work was hanging with Basquiat, de Kooning, and Rauschenberg in her house on 72nd Street.

She said, "You're going to make it. I see it in your work and I feel it in your personality. But I want you to know that I saw it the whole time. Everyone always saw my husband as having New York's largest cab company. He did not. It was given to me by my father, it was my company. And it was my art collection and my eye. And to prove it, you're going to make it and you can tell them I saw it the whole time." Having that kind of affirmation could support you through years of lean.

Had you already decided your subject was going to be the sea?

No, I was doing this minimalist work. Eventually the sea appeared for me because I was seeing the ocean motifs with the movement of the sand. I was reading Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, who spent a tremendous amount of time in solitude. The desert fathers and early Christian hermits had this tradition of solitude. That was a big part of my life for decades. In my 30s and 40s I lived very much in solitude in my process as an artist.

When did you start painting the sea, and when did your career take off?

In 2005 I began painting the sea. Then in 2009 I won ArtPrize and had a half page in *The New York Times* and that changed everything. The prize was \$250,000, sponsored by Rick DeVos [the Amway co-founder]. Plus I sold the winning triptych, *Open Water No. 24*, for \$100,000, and sold another painting as well. Half went on taxes and I had all this debt to pay off because I never had any money. Then I basically spent every penny ▷

From left: *Drift*, 1,000 lbs of sand, bag, and fan, 2000; *Invert*, back wall, mirror, platform, and 1,000 lbs of sand, 2002.



sheetrocking this studio and I was broke. Then Eric Ripert, the chef of Le Bernardin, was introduced to my work, and he made my 24-foot-wide *Deep Water No. 1* the feature piece in his restaurant, which got another half a page in the paper. So in a couple-year period I had two half pages in the *Times* and that started a whole other cascade of attention around the work.

There have been so many images made of the sea. What distinguishes your approach?

I paint the surface of near-shore seas. There is no horizon, no land, no boats, no people. I edit out the kelp and the birds for very conscious reasons. Surfing is not about crossing the ocean but a local experience. So I've disappeared the horizon because it's not about "out there," it's about immersion. As a surfer you're going under waves, you dive deep and punch out through waves to get out into the lineup. That's very different from sailing, where you go out across and reach for the horizon line. I see the quality of immersion as really significant and that's why I paint the sea the way I do. What's common in my work is my intoxication with the sublime. It has to have both the magisterial quality of the

terror and the utter exuberance and delicacy of those seductive elements of beauty.

Is it fair to call you a realist painter?

I don't see myself as a realist, and surely not a photorealist because I am not interested in paintings that are like photography. If you look, the photos I take and base my work off of, you can see water drops, every piece of foam has bubbles, and each bubble has highlights. I don't paint water drops. They are abbreviated images, the stuff of painting, and the mark making is very physical. I am confronting the ocean as an artist. So I think realism is a word that doesn't work very well.

Describe your process...

Choosing an image is probably the single most important decision I make. I take tens of thousands of photographs of the ocean, mainly the Pacific where I surf in California. I have water housings for my cameras and shoot from my surfboard, on top of rocks, on top of bluffs, in boats. I'm always thinking, "How can I take the most painterly photographs? In this photograph what features will paint



take and run with?" Like certain cinematographers I have a painterly eye, and as a photographer I find images that have those qualities. Over 10 days I'll take 10,000 photographs and out of them I'll find four that knock my socks off. I then work from a single photograph and I am looking to solve as many of the painterly problems as possible with that reference material.

I think you have to have been a surfer to have painted my paintings. I don't think that a nonsurfer could have painted them.

What kind of technology plays a role in your work?

My paintings could not have happened before digital photography. Technology has always driven art. It wasn't until the paint tube allowed artists to take paint outside that impressionism happened. I have painted outdoors, but the light and my subject matter are moving so fast. The camera and digital photography facilitate my being able to import my subject matter into the studio. Turner did not have that luxury. I love photography, but it's not the driving passion of what I'm looking to explore.

Once you choose the photograph how do you transfer the complex image to the giant canvas?

My crew does that. It's labor, the work of building that graphic. We square them up, we project them. Before I had assistants I'd square them up and do it myself, or I didn't use any reference materials. Now I have as many as nine assistants. They are graduates of art school, artists who need some work. My oldest assistant, Eisaku, worked for Sol LeWitt and Joe Watanabe and a number of other studios. He is incredibly precise and makes sure the graphic is taken care of properly. I'm not interested in the billboard quality of contemporary objects, that kind of slick veneer that can result from meticulously controlled group fabrication. But Old Masters like Rubens and Rembrandt worked with crews, and I was really interested in how they were achieving a profoundly personal aesthetic with a team. I've researched how conductors drive the orchestra to their personal vision. The idea is that if you hold the bird too firmly you'll crush it, and if you don't hold it firmly enough it flies away. It's the same with a film director or a chef. My assistants and I wrestle with the paintings together until I get to what I am looking for. ▷



This page: Ortner's works on view at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 2016. *Opposite: Element No. 32*, oil on canvas, 72" x 165", 2016.

With your career on the rise, are you still taking up the brush yourself?

I've got the brush in my hand all day long. I put the brushes down when you knocked on the door! I don't think I would ever just direct others making a painting and add final touches. I feel like I am just getting the skills where perhaps I can make something profound. That's where the excitement is, always living in that moment of possibility. I can't do that if I'm not present. I have to show up.

One of your paintings is 8 feet tall and 32 feet wide. Why do you work on such an enormous scale?

Scale is always in relation to the body. To have something very expansive that overwhelms you speaks to Rilke's notion of the bending of the knee, of really being diminished and moved by something. The vertical can be quite compelling in its towering nature, and vertical latticework is a motif that comes up for me again and again, the idea of ascension and climbing. But I also love scale that is very compressed, the scale to be held, the size of a book. There is a tiny van Eyck painting of Saint Francis in Philadelphia that is unbelievable. Through the compression of this small painting, it's like you're looking through a keyhole into a vast world.

Why do you often divide your seascapes into multiple panels?

A lot of them are diptychs with a seam right down the center to let people know, even in an online image or print, that it's a painting. And I like the idea that there is more than one frame and like film it can continue endlessly. With three or four it feels symphonic. If you analyze them individually they have their own harmonic accord, then a larger melodic structure that holds the entire painting together. With the diptychs there is also an aspect that is like a book. I read a lot, and the center spine in the diptychs is a kind of literary nod: the book of the ocean.

Do you make installations or sculptures anymore?

It's been a while since I made them, but some of my best work is installation. One piece from 2002 is a tall, vertical mirror about 5 feet wide with a couple thousand pounds of sand at the bottom. I sculpt it with my hands, then blow it with a fan to take my hand marks away, then vacuum the edges. The light comes over your shoulder and bleaches it out, but the shadow side reflects in the mirror, causing the reflection to be more immediate than the physical object itself. I haven't shown these works, so I will continue to find opportunities to extend this vocabulary. ▷



Element No. 24., oil on canvas, diptych, 48" x 104", 2016.

Can you imagine yourself painting another subject?

I could see myself painting large abstract paintings. No one is more a realist than an abstract painter. He is making the most realist images of abstract painting that anyone could ever make! They are the thing itself, they're that real.

How do your paintings work in different environments?

Context plays a big role. When you are very close to the paintings, the brushwork is vigorous and they deconstruct in a really engaging way—it is very clearly direct painting. But then because they have so much physicality and texture, it is nice to be well back and feel how they bite into space and really carry space. And at an angle everything foreshortens, and you can see the energy compressed and stacked in the folds of paint. The best setting for an installation is one where you can see all of these aspects. But really strong painting can live in a massive range of environments and take on a discourse

with that environment. If it's purely an art experience I love the shocking sterility of the white cube, where a painting that feels so organic and natural can be almost shocking, especially in an urban environment. To come into a big white room and feel the richness of painting within that vacuum is just extraordinary.

None of your paintings has been sold at auction, but what are private sales like?

For a long time, I have been selling out of my studio, unrepresented directly. That's kind of an anomaly to sell things at this price point like that, but collectors come in and when they think about what else is out there, they make their decision: They want this.

When I was penniless my big paintings were priced at \$100,000, and people would say, "You haven't sold one for more than \$30,000. How is this priced at a hundred grand?" I would say that with the amount of time I have in it, even for \$90,000 I would prefer to keep the painting. And that if you have \$100,000 and

are shopping for a painting, if there's one that you feel much more committed to, then get that one, for sure. The only people who buy my work do so because they feel personally committed to it.

Do you spend a lot of time in galleries and museums?

My education is in museums, in books and friends who are artists, and traveling. I don't travel as much as I'd like because the studio requires so much of my time. But my girlfriend Rebecca is based in London, and I've spent a fair amount of time there. The National Gallery, the Tate—England in general is very special, but for me there is no museum for painting that touches the Prado.

What do you think of the contemporary art world in general?

I love it. I am constantly exposed to contemporary artists who are doing exhilarating work. And I love the discourse, but like anything it can become a little drunk on its own

Kool-Aid. There is constantly a need for readdressing and confronting who we are culturally.

I think the passions are underrepresented. I see my work as profoundly romantic, very passionate and emotive. My goal is to be part of the larger conversation of contemporary art.

The idea of a masterpiece can be seen as passé, but what I feel in the Old Master pieces has not been exhausted. When you're in front of them you don't think, "That was pretty great back in Breughel's day." You realize that it is a devastation that tears your heart out, and you are brought to your knees right there in the moment. We don't decide we are going to make something extraordinary. But I think of who I am as a human being who wants to bring everything I've got to bear. I don't want to leave anything in the tank. I want to spend my life and exhaust myself utterly reaching for as much as I can possibly reach for. ♦