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MUSE  
BRIAN RUTENBERG

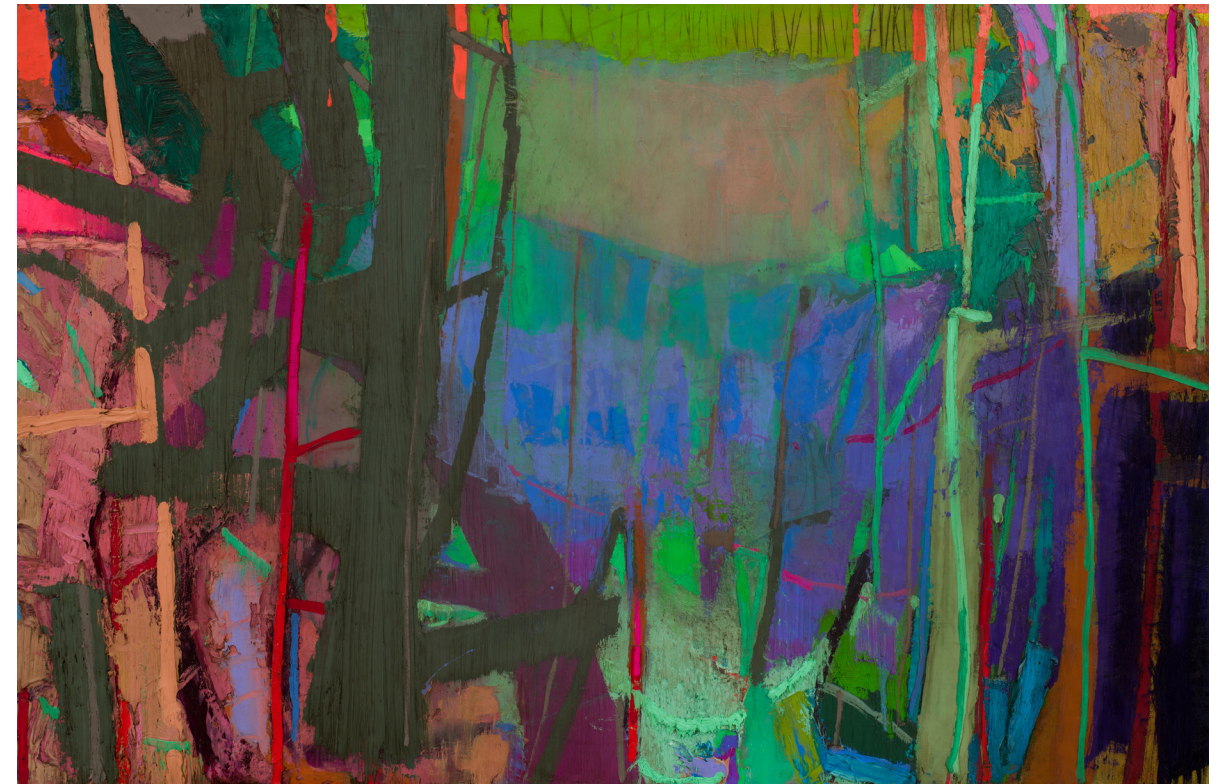
# MAGIC ACT



Photo by Loren Bridger, courtesy of the artist

“I’m a failed magician who paints for a living,” explains South Carolina-born, New York-based artist Brian Rutenberg. While he may have failed at his first career choice, Rutenberg certainly became a conjurer of another kind. His *Banner of the World* paintings, most recently on view at Forum Gallery in New York, sizzle with hocus-pocus.

Intoxicating colors and entrancing abstract landscapes cast a powerful spell



Brian Rutenberg, *Banner of the Coast (Winter Almonds)*, 2021-22, oil on linen, 36 x 55 inches

“They are,” he muses, “a transference of deception. We need deception, lying, to achieve a temporary sense of reverie and lucidity – one flash of clarity, even for a moment.”

Rutenberg grew up in touristy Myrtle Beach, where stunning natural beauty coexists with a carnival, honky-tonk atmosphere of arcades, souvenir shops and casinos. He learned to see literally from the ground by lying on the earth to take in the view. This perspective restricts what we see to foreground and distance; what is in between must be envisioned by the viewer.

The *Banner* paintings – which arose out of his desire for “a closer marriage between blinking, candy-colored neon lights and something more natural” – are, he explains, “a collision between the two worlds that makes a third thing.”

These new environments are lush and rendered in hallucinatory colors, with obvious references to woods, marshes, swamps and rivers that feel primordial. Rutenberg tricks us into the compressed, ground-level view by depicting what is close in thicker applications of paint, while distances consist of diluted, thinly laid pigments that seem to glow with an inner light. The latter conveys an otherworldly, even supernatural.

In this way, the artist’s works recall Renaissance *memento mori* and *vanitas* paintings, which carefully arranged objects that referenced human mortality (a skull, a snuffed-out candle, a spilled goblet of wine) as a way of reminding us of the ephemeral nature of our existence in the face of the Divine and the natural world. At the same time, Rutenberg observes, they were very much about those human pleasures (food, wine, music, literature and so on) that artists depicted with a luscious sensuality.

Rutenberg invokes all this in an abstract modern way. “I place a lot of emphasis on the application of paint,” he describes, “on the deliciousness of paint. South Carolina is just the delivery system,” he adds of the specific locale that inspired them. “It’s really about sustaining that sense of pleasure and reverie, to bring us from the mind to the liquidity.” To that end, his carefully composed works lead the eye to that central light that emanates a trance-inducing state of wonder and magic.

Indeed, they feel ripe, fecund, mysterious and hot. “It’s that seductive wet blanket of humidity that makes you feel like you have to just give up and fall to your knees.” In the presence of these stunning, hypnotic works, that seems to be exactly the right response. [forumgallery.com](http://forumgallery.com) ~ JORGE S. ARANGO