

Dreaming it real

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THE BACKSIDE OF THE MOON

It all started with moons. After changing careers and moving from New York City to Pound Ridge, a small town in New York, to adjust to a post-Covid reality, Cooper Cox '97 was participating in an energy healing workshop during the day. Each evening, he returned to his pastoral home to do something he had loved since he was a kid but had never pursued "seriously"—painting. Inspired by the workshop's focus on moons and their power to heal, Cooper started with painting moons. "I was fascinated with how we never see the backside of the moon. I saw a connection between this unknowable place and perspectives we never see."

A series of moon diptychs

resulted. Varied in color and texture, these moons were Cooper's first foray into pursuing art in an intentional, committed fashion. He had always been drawn to art. In fact, he has a framed painting that he made in 6th grade art class. This painting depicts an image you would immediately recognize—a tall, elegantly dressed woman with a parasol standing in a field surrounded by a windswept sky and accompanied by a young boy. Cooper says, "I painted Madam Monet for the first time when I was 10 years old. For the rest of my life up until a few years ago, this painting would be a constant reminder of the route I never took—a dream of becoming a painter and artist that I put aside." Or, in some ways, it's the backside of the moon that he found a way

to explore.

Cooper's other youthful artistic preoccupations centered on trees. Sketches of dead trees to be exact. The go-to scribble of a dyslexic young boy who always saw the world a little differently. Fast-forward 30 years and trees are still a part of the story. "I am still working out that twisted, dead tree that I used to scribble all the time," says Cooper. Now based in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and in his childhood home of Sun Valley, Idaho, Cooper says, "I paint a tree and in my mind, it's a tree from Craters of the Moon (a National Preserve an hour from Sun Valley), wind-blown and twisted. No bark. Silvery grey, absorbing all of the colors around it. The sky and the desolate land reveal so many colors with the play of high desert light." Cooper's tree—in



all of its current iterations—is a sentry watching over the landscape, reveling in the desolation while simultaneously undoing it. The tree is always grounded, strong in its base, and rising—in a dance of twists and turns—skyward. A signal of hope and resilience. Even though there are no traditional signs of life—no leaves, no buds—it’s full of life. Its power is in its solitude, but look deeper and see that the sky is engaged in the dance. The tree has a partner, and they play off of each other. Tree and sky. Sky and tree. And the landscape is at once distant and present. The texture, the colors—there’s a playfulness at work in that landscape that keeps the desolation at bay. The movement in that landscape begs the question: Did the wind shape the landscape or did the landscape shape the wind?

Either way, you want to keep looking at all of the iterations of that tree that Cooper has been dreaming into reality since he was a kid. And me? I want to step into that landscape. Stand amidst the movement.

With all of Cooper’s paintings, I just want to reach out and touch them. Run my fingers across the canvas, take in all of the ridges and ruffles. His work is a study in sculpture as well as brushstrokes. Particularly as you move into his cottage paintings. These are paintings of the house he lived in while seeking refuge in Pound Ridge. He calls them the “House” paintings, but I can’t divorce them from the word “cottage.” Quaint, at first glance, and

then the paintings reveal themselves. A pastoral cottage, from another time but still, somehow, of our time. Maybe it’s a cottage at the end of a lane? Why not, if feels like it must be. There’s a bridge and foliage all around. Flowers, frenetic, surround the cottage. The colors of the cottage scene are sometimes pastel. Reminiscent of something old-fashioned. Sometimes the cottage and its environs take on darker tones, and instead of light and airy, the scene becomes foreboding and dark. Sometimes, it is distorted as if it were shaking or bulging or blurring into the background.

At times, a wind-swept woman crosses the bridge, or a hot-air balloon drops in. A horse has been immortalized near this oft-painted refuge of Cooper’s and then, the horse has been

one-upped, in another cottage painting, by a unicorn. There are often people making their way to or from the cottage. You get a sense that there’s an interplay between the solitude of the artist inside and the desire for community represented by the visitors who people the paintings. The world Cooper painted in these paintings and the majority of his work is at once fanciful but grounded in the real. It’s airy in tone while being thick, entangled, and substantial in form.

As a viewer and an appreciator of his work, I like the way Cooper seems to be working something out in each iteration of the tree or the cottage. He’s able to revisit the same place or same subject and see it from a different time, from a different point of view. To me, it’s a metaphor for

how we live. We’re the same vessels but constantly evolving depending on what we bring to the moment. **For Cooper, it’s that backside of the moon moment.**

FROM THERE TO HERE?

I knew Cooper in his senior year of Upper School, my first year of teaching at Sun Valley Community School. Cooper, a good student-athlete, always seemed poised for something. Ready to launch. Itching for what’s next. As a senior, he was headed to Vanderbilt in the fall. But before finishing his career at SVCS, he embarked on a Senior Project that ended up shaping the first decade of his career. I remember the broad strokes of it—working at *Outside Magazine*, a magazine that seemed like the perfect fit for a kid coming out of

SVCS. Hearing a 17/18-year-old Cooper talk about the work he did, the environment of *Outside*, and the pace of publishing, you could tell that he was hooked.

At Vandy, Cooper studied human organizational development, a field he describes as “a blend of philosophy and sociology.” He also studied art history. Cooper remembers, “At SVCS, I gravitated towards art classes and had teachers telling me art school could be a path. I loved drawing and dabbling in art, but resisted taking that route.” So, art history was art-school adjacent—a field in which he could keep thinking about art, learning about art, while focusing on other things. More “professional” things.

After Vandy, Cooper moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he’d done his Senior Project,



to work with *Outside* again. After a decade and armed with 10 years experience with and insight into advertising, branding, and PR, Cooper left *Outside* and launched his own creative agency in New York City. During his time there, he worked with fashion and luxury brands like Tom Ford, Hermes, and Nike. “I loved my years running that agency. But at some point, it wasn’t what I wanted to be doing. I felt a different itch.”

In the winter of 2023, I ran into Cooper at a holiday party. Paint-spattered Carhartt pants, a perfectly dishevelled look, and a Cheshire grin. Cooper was definitely up to something. In fact, he was getting ready for a solo show at the Ochi Gallery, a gallery run

by another SVCS alum, Pauli Ochi '03. Cooper's move from a professional at the height of the marketing world in NYC to a highly-sought-after painter started during and after the pandemic. "Post-Covid," Cooper says, "I found myself living in Pound Ridge, this picturesque New England town, painting obsessively. There were so many emotions coming out of Covid and I just found painting as the best way to process."

This time, this space, this move allowed him to heal from years of pushing himself professionally, from a Covid nightmare that we all shared but was also somehow so individualized and isolated. It also allowed him to remember



his love of painting. And Madame Monet called to him again. “All of the people who helped me find myself again, heal, and encouraged me to paint again were women,” Cooper says. “In that safe haven in upstate New York, I found the first place where I could be my true self. I needed a symbol to help me rediscover my self-love when I was totally lost, and naturally, my first painting was of a woman who looked like a Madame Monet.”

A self-taught painter, Cooper has a process that is immersive and capitalizes on intuition rather than precision. “I start a painting by sitting in front of a canvas and meditating. I paint experiences that feel more like memories or dreams. It’s an emotional process,” he shares. Cooper also isn’t afraid to make a mess for his art. “My work



is very gesture-heavy. I start a painting by dunking my hand in paint and working it onto the canvas in broad strokes, creating a sky or a background through these gestures. And then I layer. And layer. And layer. I’m painting stories from my childhood, my life, my observations from the now, embedded stories that take shape on the canvas.” And with each gesture is another layer of paint, enough paint that he creates peaks and valleys, ridges, spirals, nooks, and crannies. When you take in a Cooper Cox painting, you might think you’ve stepped into a world where Monet, Van Gogh, and Gauguin are all vying for the lead with Magritte being an echo of a character, in a moment being directed by Dali. Don’t get me wrong. There are no melting clocks. But there is this sense

of being transported to a place where time is suspended, a place where time is measured in swirls or strokes or transitions in color. About his cottage paintings, Cooper says, “We live in a world where everyone is posting about their perfect home, this immaculately decorated, barely lived-in space that has no real signs of the people who live there. The homes I paint—they are twisting, and shaking, and sometimes haunting. They are not perfect at all and that’s ok.” In essence, Cooper’s work removes the sheen of the overly stylized and invites us to look at the beauty of a version of the real.

So, there’s Cooper in quaint Pound Ridge, New York, painting his way through a post-Covid reality. But he’s not thinking of himself as a “painter.” Until people start seeing his work.



TO SEE COOPER'S WORK

on the web:
coopercoxstudio.com

ochigallery.com/
artists/cooper-cox

or on Instagram
@cooper.ramage.cox

Another SVCS alum, Will Ross '97, sees his paintings and immediately says, "I know a guy." Connections are made. Then more connections. And suddenly, Cooper is in the art world, having shows, working with dealers. Solo shows and private collections. I open up an *Architectural Digest* story about amazing apartments in New York City. And those amazing apartments have Cooper Cox paintings on the walls.

His trees were the paintings that first caught my eye. For others it was his cottages. And for you, it may be his moonscapes or cherry blossoms. He texted me an image of his most recent painting and I can't help but be fascinated. There's a timelessness to the painting even though there are some definite temporal markers—ladies—echoes of Madame Monet—in hooped skirts and parasols, one facing

the viewer and one looking away. There are some of his familiar trees, but they aren't the center of the attention—the women or the trees. A train that must be coming into a station somewhere past the edges of the canvas—that's where the eye goes, as if to hop on and see where it's taking us. He texts me, "My hometown (Sun Valley) wouldn't exist except for a train," as if to explain the train's appearance. Then he texts me, "There's a Japanese legend that says, 'If you get on the wrong train, get off at the nearest station, the longer it takes you to get off, the more expensive the return trip will be.'"

It's been a wild ride, Cooper admits. And it's been a way of coming home to himself. In fact, his father helped him see how much being a painter was truly just returning to who he always

should have been. "When I sent my dad—who should have been a painter himself—my first six moons, he said, 'I have something to show you. It's a painting that I bought in 1972 in Greece, and it hung over your crib until I put it in storage when you were 3 or 4. You may not remember it, but I'll send it to you.'" A few days later, Cooper opens a box from his father to reveal a painting of a moon—an image that, Cooper says, "Had the same cropping, shaping, lighting as my moons. I really appreciate how this image was imprinted on me when I was young and I didn't remember it consciously until my dad sent it to me." A time capsule of sorts. "I realized that I was painting something I'd seen in my dreams, trying to paint it real. And now I understood where that need was rooted," he says. **It's a good thing Cooper decided to get off the train at this particular station.**



Q+A with Pauli Ochi '03

Pauli Ochi '03, of Ochi Gallery in Los Angeles and Ketchum, was an early advocate of Cooper Cox's work. She hosted a solo show for him last winter at her Ketchum gallery. Art flowed as freely as oxygen in Pauli's upbringing. Her parents first opened a gallery in Boise in the 1970s and moved it to Ketchum in the 1980s. They were art pioneers in a way—bringing contemporary art to rural Idaho and to a resort town where so much energy and focus revolved around the outdoors and athletics. Pauli grew up in a world where paintings were constantly being created, uncrated, hung, and discussed. It was a world where artists came and went and where her parents approached art as central to building community. Her native language was, in many ways, color, texture, space, and expression. It was not a foregone conclusion that she would continue this familial commitment to art and artists, but she has and in doing so, she has made her own mark on the Ochi efforts. By opening a gallery in LA, Pauli not only carried her parents' vision beyond Idaho, but she also created a space that fit and nurtured the creative environment around her. We caught up with Pauli this fall to talk about her galleries and her work with Cooper.

HERE+THERE: Your first space was in L.A. How did you decide to open a space there?

PAULI OCHI: Los Angeles is filled with creative people who embrace experimentation, believe in community and enjoy the sunshine. I found a lot of crossover in spirit with the people I grew up with in Idaho and knew quickly that it would be my home away from home.

H+T: How did you learn about Cooper's work?

PO: Another SVCS alum, Gigi Kisgen (Welsh) '99, who also works in the art world in Los Angeles, shared Cooper's

work with me, and—nearly simultaneously—one of my collectors in New York reached out to tell me about his work. As an early champion of Cooper's work, this collector had learned that Cooper and I were both from the same town—and had gone to the same school. A few weeks later (in early 2023), Cooper came and introduced himself at my booth during the Frieze Los Angeles art fair. We didn't know each other at SVCS as he graduated before I was in the Upper School, but he mentioned that our classes were K-Pals! Soon after, we did a virtual studio visit and planned

his first solo show at the Idaho gallery. I thought the work was surprising and considered; even though Cooper was relatively new to painting, he had already developed a distinct visual language, which makes sense given his background in design, but this usually takes many years for artists to establish. And he's expanded on his technique even since our first show.

Collaboration at a high level is really important in the artist-dealer relationship and it usually takes a long time to develop. But we were able to pull things together quickly because there was an inherent sense that we could trust each other, having so much in common.

H+T: We hear that you have another Cutthroat in your gallery orbit?

PO: Yes! Katie Feldman '14 has been working at the gallery for almost two years now. When she applied for the job, I thought, "Wait, she's too young to apply for this job" because I remembered her as a little kid from our soccer practices—her mom Kelly, was our soccer coach. After moving on from feeling old, I was totally impressed by her. She already had a successful career as a Nordic ski racer and that focus and determination carries into her work at the gallery. Having her on our team has allowed me

to expand programming in Sun Valley at a much higher level, which will continue to build as we roll out exciting new projects and initiatives in the coming year(s).

Even though we were all years apart and did not interact in school, the three of us, all SVCS alums, working together felt really natural, easy, and uncomplicated. And fun! The shared history of SVCS is such a singular experience to have as a foundation—there's built-in familiarity.

H+T: What's next on the horizon for your work with Cooper?

PO: We are working toward a solo presentation with Cooper in New York. In July 2025, we will be presenting a few of Cooper's works at the Aspen Art Fair. And I'm just throwing this out there, but I'd love to host an alumni event at the Ketchum gallery featuring Cooper's work!

H+T: How has his work been received?

PO: We've had a great reception to Cooper's work. He's already in several prominent private collections and is gaining fast traction in his career, particularly in New York, where he lives and works. So, we're excited to see where his work goes. +