

White Columns

Eli Ruhala

November 8 – December 20, 2025

Reception: Saturday, November 8, 2025, 6-8pm

White Columns is pleased to present an exhibition by Eli Ruhala (b. 2000, Dallas, TX.)

A recent graduate of Texas Christian University, Ruhala makes large-scale site-specific paintings that incorporate architectural components and building materials as a means of excavating his experience growing up queer in the rural South. Writing about his practice, Ruhala has said, “As an artist drawing from an array of personal and collective experiences, my practice finds catharsis in repetitive gestures of love. (...) I’m interested in the ability to carve out a new sphere where the mutual action of keeping our hands busy persists.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a new conversation between Ruhala and the Dallas-based art historian and curator Abby Bryant.

Abby Bryant: I’ve had the privilege of watching your work evolve for over a decade. You were trained conventionally as a painter, but your practice has expanded to include materials that are more likely to be found on a construction site than in a studio. What compelled this shift, and what possibilities do you find in these surfaces?

Eli Ruhala: At first, I didn’t use these materials as a means of commentary about painting; they were simply a combination of materials that were available and easily accessible within the rural town where I lived. I worked on construction job sites with my stepdad, listening to stories and watching how materials were handled. I realized my relationship to those materials and their context was different. There’s a “get-it-done” attitude in construction that overlooks the beauty in what’s already there. I’d spend days making little carvings from scraps of drywall for no reason other than curiosity. I didn’t fit in with the pace or the banter, but those memories stayed with me.

Studying oil painting and its history felt like the right next step. Many painters treat oil painting as a tool to pursue a form or storytelling, but I see the medium as something with its own identity. I want to free materials from the roles they’re assigned and expand painting to include other forms.

Early on, I was told I applied too little paint by thinning it out into glazes. Now, I see that restraint as respect for the material, a way of making it last longer, and honoring it. Mixing joint compound with pigment gave me a medium that could stretch further than oil. Beyond that, it let me bring my own history and background into the work, the perspective of someone who never quite fit on the job site.

AB: What prompted you to make your work immersive? Was that driven by your own artistic needs or by a consideration for the audience?

ER: Making the work immersive is, from my perspective, a generous act.

AB: The word “generous” is interesting to me. Generous to whom and in what way?

ER: Generosity, to me, means not positioning my story above the viewer’s experience. I want the space to remain open, allowing the viewer to step into it and relate their own experiences. I also don’t think it’s necessarily a comforting thing, making art that is so physical. Many nights, I’ve fallen asleep on a cot next to my paintings because I just can’t solve it. The work envelops me, and I dedicate myself to it. If it were just for me, wouldn’t I take logical steps to finish it and move on?

AB: In your earlier works, you often explored the intimacy of your personal relationships. Here, you shift to a more ambiguous, aquatic setting. What drew you to water as a subject or environment for this work?

ER: I wanted to work *from* my life instead of just producing work *about* it. Some of my earlier work sought attention or validation, which in a way positioned me as a kind of narrator. Now, I’m more interested in exploring the things we slip into unconsciously, trusting that lived experience will surface in subtle traces.

I switched to the swimmers, at first, as a kind of metaphor. Each swimmer was expressing something different, reflecting the lack of control I felt in navigating both my romantic and professional life. I eventually pivoted to prioritize the formal relationship between figure and ground to make the work more complex. The body became increasingly abstracted by water, exploring the push and pull of a subject in its environment.

I drew from so many different relationships and experiences to make this work from memory, like the imprint of a hand that rested on a thigh, the back scratches my Dad gave me when I was little, or the nurse tending to my arm after bloodwork. It brought up moments of touch that feed into the mark-making. I found myself drawing these swimming figures and adjusting the composition over and over again obsessively. For me, this act allows for a range of forms to be inserted into the “water.” The figures are all implicated in something together, being pulled on by a similar force.

AB: Can you talk about the relationship between the front and back of this installation?

ER: When I started this installation, there were only three figures on the front. I was at a juncture in a personal relationship. I expanded the composition to acknowledge some of what came before and after, as if the expansion itself suggests the scene is still evolving and the paintings aren't stagnant. Each area is realized through different processes that yield the unique identity of the materials. Rather than swimming within one continuous body of water, the varied colors, materials, and applications suggest multiple figures and bodies of water coexisting within the same frame.

The back is only visible through the gaps between the lumber studs that support the painting. Certain figurative elements are revealed through their absence. Several areas have been cut out and patched, their surfaces oozing with pigment from the painting's front, like wounds flooding the basin formed by the studs. From the front, you'd never guess what the material has endured. The prismatic colors from the facade bleed into this darker, cave-like space, exposing the structure that holds it all together. A viewer can never see both sides at once but might glimpse another viewer through the openings cut into the surface. The facade entices you to move alongside the painting, following the current of the rushing water, while the back disrupts the fluidity and ease of that first encounter. I hope this back-and-forth movement encourages viewers to traverse the work repeatedly, to find where openings in the surface connect the depiction of a vast body of water with the history behind it.

AB: What about the fragments along the gallery's perimeter? What role do they play?

ER: The holes I cut into the drywall left me with pieces that are transformed into a constellation of fragments on the wall. They refer to earlier stages in the development of the composition, times when I was thinking of letting my past dictate more of the form than what the work called for. Rather than discarding them, I wanted to use the bones and abstract their shapes through more additive and subtractive processes. I am trying to respect my materials but let them transform too.

AB: Historically, painting and sculpture have been treated as isolated fields with their own defining attributes. To me, your practice complicates that, blurring the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture. Would you define yourself as a painter or something else?

ER: I think that division is similar to the kinds of roles the materials find themselves in. I've learned so much from researching contributions from those disciplines you mentioned and others, too. I define myself as an artist who examines the ways painting relates to the broader field of art.

AB: How would you situate your practice in the lineage of figurative painting? Do you feel aligned with that legacy, or are you working against it in some way?

ER: For so long, figurative painting carried a responsibility of creating an illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane. As a result, its formal qualities were often limited by carrying out a job. During my undergraduate studies, there was a resurgence in figurative painting because of a lack of representation in the canon. I feel like this gave a lot of artists an

entry point into the field. It made it so that those without a voice could have a platform where we could see each other. I do recall how important it was for me to find representations of queerness in art, and I want to be mindful of those early convictions that inspired me in my pursuits.

Several evolutions since then, my practice has landed in a space between figuration and abstraction. The figure remains non-negotiable in my practice. Reflecting on past works, I've realized that representation often loses its intensity once removed from the specific moment or space of making. Rather than strictly reproducing what I see, I arrive at a form by questioning what it might become when suspended between memory and reality. Working from my own subjective memories allows me to pivot and react to the painting rather than executing a pre-determined composition. I want to avoid spoon-feeding content to the viewer in a way that allows them to move on too easily. Instead, I want the work to challenge them to linger and question.

Eli Ruhala received a BFA in painting at The Maryland Institute College of Art and received his MFA at Texas Christian University. He is the recipient of grants from The National Endowment for the Arts and The Dallas Museum of Art, among others. He has exhibited at Dallas Contemporary, The Center for Contemporary Arts (Abilene, Texas), Art League Houston, and Arts Fort Worth His work has been featured in *New American Paintings*, *Southwest Contemporary*, and other publications. He is now represented by Talley Dunn Gallery in Dallas, Texas.

Eli Ruhala and Abby Bryant first met curator Matthew Higgs in the fall of 2024, when he was invited to serve as the inaugural curator for Dallas Contemporary's North Texas Graduate Program. The initiative supports emerging artists educated in the Dallas region by fostering connections with leading curators and offering firsthand experience in museum exhibition-making. For the program's first exhibition, *Open University*, Higgs selected thirteen artists, including Ruhala. Bryant served as curatorial fellow for the project.

For further information about this exhibition contact: violet@whitecolumns.org
Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11am to 6pm.