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PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Jane Swavely

Chance elements

By Noelani Kirschner | March 9, 2026



Supernatural, 2024, oil on canvas, 90 x 90 inches. (Photo courtesy of Nic Massey.)

New York artist Jane Swavely has been painting for more than 50 years, which is perhaps why she now finds it “second nature” to rough up her works to let the “objectness of the painting” show through. “I don’t want to have any [real-life] reference whatsoever,” she says. “I want to pare it down, make it reductive — still painterly, but reductive.” Swavely attended Boston University’s studio art program, which focused heavily on figural art like nudes and portraits, then worked for many years painting humans in landscape settings before eventually focusing solely on depicting nature. Over time, even those paintings became abstracted (such as in *Neon Forest*, which I wrote about in 2018), and six years ago, Swavely ditched form and content altogether, choosing instead to create color field paintings—typically characterized by large swaths of two or three hues of paint—that are so “barely there,” she says, “you could blow on them and they would disappear.” In March, two of these works will be on display at the Currier Museum in Manchester, New Hampshire, as part of a retrospective on Jules Olitski, a midcentury color field master. At the same time, several of Swavely’s other paintings will be on view at Kaufmann Repetto Art Gallery in Milan.



Corrected Painting #9, 2025, oil on canvas, 73 x 61 inches. (Photo courtesy of Dario Lasagni.)



Silver OID #6, 2022, oil on canvas, 38 x 25 inches. (Photo courtesy of Dario Lasagni.)



Untitled, 2025, oil on canvas, 56 x 44 inches. (Photo courtesy of Dario Lasagni.)

Each of these paintings is “very physical,” Swavely says. “I walk onto the painting with my feet, like on the stretcher bars so that I can reach the center of the painting. I have a pair of old Prada boots from, like, 15 years ago that are just completely deformed and covered in paint.” She mixes her pigments herself, then uses a large brush to drop paint around the sides of the canvas. She then wipes much of the color away with a white rag or a dishwashing sponge, and the residue becomes the final painting.. “Sometimes, it almost looks unfinished,” she says, “but I want it to look so fresh, and with a certain sort of glow from behind.” To achieve this luminosity, Swavely mixes silver paint into the underpainting, a technique inspired by Dan Flavin, who creates room-size fluorescent light installation pieces. Swavely says that the process of each work is its subject matter, but viewers have occasionally seen hints of the human form hiding in the abstracted mist, or even evidence of a handprint (or two) that Swavely has left behind in her process. “I enjoy those chance elements,” she says. “I’m looking at a painting now that’s going to be in the show, and there’s a handprint I hadn’t even noticed before. I must have picked up the painting. But it is not going to be removed.” Titling the works is “a torture,” since she doesn’t want to influence the viewer’s interpretation of any of her pieces. “I’m really happy with whatever,” she says. “I don’t judge how people want to look at the paintings.”

