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ART

Meet the Artist Chronicling Disappearing Chain Stores

Jake Longstreth's paintings do far more than capture the forgotten facades of retail chains. They remember a part of suburban life that's drifting into the past

By Timothy Latterner

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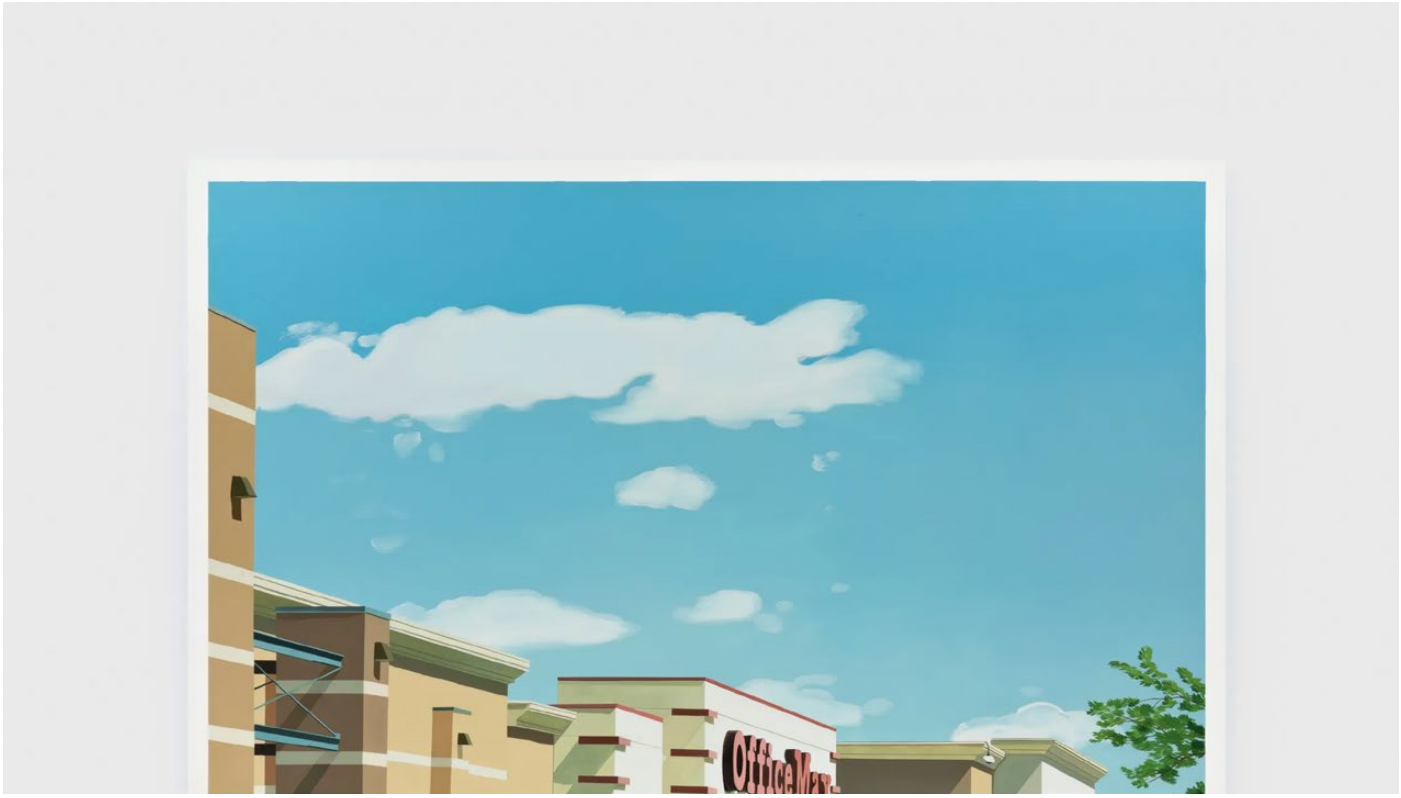

For months now, many of us have been cooped up in our homes. We've seen more Amazon deliveries than we ever thought possible, and even now, with certain parts of the country reopening, it's limited to outdoor dining and curbside pickups. Don't you miss roaming casually around the mall for your nephew's birthday present? Eating *inside* the Del Taco mid–road trip? As more and more commerce shifts to a digital platform and the ongoing pandemic

continues to push brick-and-mortar stores and restaurants out of business, Los Angeles–based artist Jake Longstreth is keeping a record of our past purchase history through an ongoing series of his architecture paintings.

When he's not working on new paintings, Longstreth is also a musician and cohost of the popular radio show Time Crisis, along with Vampire Weekend's Ezra Koenig—where the duo often discuss corporate histories and memories to a loyal fan base. Longstreth's architecture paintings, a large-format series of oil-on-canvas works, offer a look at the not-so-distant past—a time when if you needed a new HDMI cord to connect an Xbox 360 to a new television, it was easier to drive to the Circuit City in the strip mall than to wait who knows how long for one to come in the mail.

"A lot of times you may look at them and think, 'Is that company, like Circuit City, still in business?' I've been engaging with the subject matter for a long time, and started photographing that architecture and making paintings in the early 2000s," says Longstreth. "I've had years where I've done other things, but I always return to architecture as a subject. At the time, those brands were so entrenched because they were so de facto important, just by the nature of their ubiquity."

Nino Mier

For anyone who grew up in the suburbs, each painting feels familiar and identifiable, even if it's not labeled with some familiar brand. Viewers *know* that the storefront depicted used to be a LensCrafters, even though what's shown is really just a vacant store within a strip mall. These are the places that we grew up frequenting, for back-to-school supplies, for pizza party pickups, or to wait in line for Black Friday deals before Amazon Prime was even a concept. Each piece is so easy to connect with—viewers bring their own memories of familiar scenes to fill the vacant space.

"This is sort of a report, you know? It does feel like we're in the waning days. I had a lot of these photographs from years ago and thought that it would be really interesting to paint them now because there's this perverse relationship with nostalgia," says Longstreth. "I don't think anyone has a nostalgia for a Circuit City, but being the recent past, it takes on this patina of that. There's plenty of people who take pictures of a gas station at night or diners on the side of a highway that have this Americana feel. There is a sort of romance to a diner on a desert highway, but there's no real romance to a Circuit City. I wanted to paint these as big and beautifully as I can and they'll take on an emotional quality."

Even in the dreary days of coronavirus, when going to a building like this can feel like a faraway memory, looking through Longstreth's catalog of architectural paintings evokes a certain sense of humor and cheerful remembrance. Through an effective use of lighting and composition, these scenes of vacant stores or defunct brands don't make us think of corporate America falling by the wayside. Instead, they bring about memories of leaving the GameStop with the Game Boy Color that had just come out or picking up your first MacBook before college.

As the pandemic continues to affect plans across the country, Longstreth has postponed his new exhibitions of work for the new year, but his paintings are still on display in his online gallery space.

"In a way, they're still landscapes and there's still sunlight and nature," he adds. "Whether it's falling on a pasture with cows or falling on the side of an OfficeMax, I think that light is the core of my work."