

Painter Known for Meticulous Studies of the Male Figure and Objects in Nature on View at Wrightwood 659

***Ellen Altfest: Forever***  
October 3 – December 20, 2025

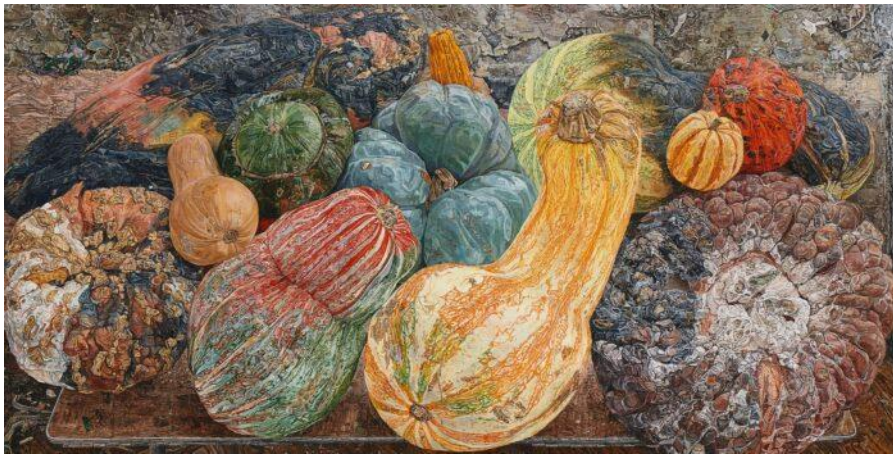
CHICAGO, IL, August 7, 2025—*Ellen Altfest: Forever*, a selection of 15 oil paintings by the American representational painter Ellen Altfest, joins a suite of exhibitions—including *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* and *The Joffrey + Ballet in the U.S.*—at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago this fall. Installed in Wrightwood’s second floor gallery, *Forever* is on view from October 3 to December 20, 2025.

*Ellen Altfest: Forever* is organized by the Frist Art Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, where it premiered earlier this year, and is curated by Mark Scala, Chief Curator, Frist Art Museum. *Ellen Altfest: Forever* is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Halsted A&A Foundation.

Ellen Altfest is a highly regarded painter known for her painstakingly labor-intensive canvases and her observation of things in the world often overlooked in art. From roughly tactile rocks, tangled branches, and tree bark, to the smoothness of houseplants, fabric, and men’s skin—she condenses everyday

essences into expressions of absolute clarity and intensity. Her paintings are characterized by surprising juxtapositions of subjects, unorthodox cropping, and, perhaps most notably, scrupulously rendered naturally occurring textures and intricate surface features. Working directly from observation without photographic sources or references, she often spends months—and sometimes more than a year—on a single painting.

Featuring works created over the last two decades, the exhibition draws its title from Emily Dickinson’s line “Forever – is composed of Nows,” an encouragement to live mindfully in the present. By connecting nature and the human figure, Altfest generates her own distilled poetry. In the spirit of Dickinson’s verse, she is a witness to the overlooked. “In painting slowly and with utmost care, Ellen Altfest turns inward, away from the noise, distractions, and inattentiveness of the contemporary world,” writes Frist Art Museum Chief Curator Mark Scala. “The attention she pays to every square millimeter of the canvas encourages our own close looking.”



In *Gourds* (2006–7), the mold present on the surface of the vegetables introduces the element of decay, a central theme in many of Altfest’s works. The slow deterioration is also a reminder of the changes which occur over the many months it takes Altfest to complete a

painting. Altfest sees humanlike qualities in the gourds depicted, pointing to their bodily forms and their suggestion of a crowd of beings jostling within a tight space.

Making a connection between still life and figure painting, the artwork was created about the same time as her first exhibition of paintings showing partial views of male anatomy, images that range from humorous to clinical, and even subtly erotic in tone as seen in her work *The Back* (2008-09). Yet unlike many figure painters, she makes little distinction between the sections of the male body and things like still life objects or trees. Her approach is concerned as much with form as with subject. .



Seeking the openness of landscape after the forced isolation of the early COVID-19 pandemic, Altfest recently painted a series of scenes from a mountain ridge in North Georgia. One work in the series, *Billy Goat Point* (2022), depicts two pine cones in the foreground framing an opening onto a faraway valley, a suggestion of the deep space, open sky, and natural light associated with traditional landscape painting. While her studio views are compressed

to the point of confinement, these compact and densely painted landscapes appear to be more outwardly focused. Yet, like her still life and figure paintings, they introduce the viewer to a subjective reality that is present within otherwise unremarkable scenes.

“Altfest’s subject choices might seem of little consequence in our age of high drama,” writes Scala. “Yet her intentional focus on natural and human surfaces—and cropping of everything that might distract from the subject’s essence—encourages sharpened observation and appreciation of the poetry of everyday life.”

### **About the Artist**

Ellen Altfest lives and works in New York City and Rising Fawn, Georgia. She received an MFA from Yale University and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine. She has completed residencies at SAGA House, Japan; the Zabludowicz Collection, Finland; the Bogliasco Foundation, Italy; and the Chinati Foundation, Texas. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at the Mori Art Museum, Japan, and the New Museum, New York. She has been included in group exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts; the 55th Venice Biennale; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; and the National Academy Museum, New York. Altfest is represented by White Cube, where she has had several exhibitions.

### **Also on View at Wrightwood 659**

*Scott Burton: Shape Shift* examines the legacy of Scott Burton (1939–1989), an American original whose wide-ranging practice anticipated many of the strategies of today’s art. Hailed as a landmark exhibition when it premiered at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, MO, *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* is the most comprehensive exhibition of Burton’s work ever mounted in the United States. Featuring works from the 1960s to 80s, the exhibition underscores the breadth of the artist’s vision. By the time of his death at the age of 50 from an AIDS-related illness, Burton had functioned as sculptor, public artist, performance artist, choreographer, art critic, and exhibition curator. The survey spans Burton’s career, featuring nearly 40 sculptures, more than 70 photographs and ephemera, and the only known extant video of the artist’s performance work. In conjunction with *Scott Burton: Shape Shift*, Wrightwood 659 will host several public programs. These include a performative-meditation on Burton’s practice, care, and passing time by artist Gordon Hall, the founder of the Center for Experimental Lectures; and a lecture jointly hosted with the Art Institute of Chicago by David J. Getsy, author of *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* and preeminent scholar on Burton’s artistic practice. *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* is organized by the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, and curated by Jess Wilcox, independent curator, and Heather A. Smith, Assistant Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation. The exhibition is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Alphawood Exhibitions.

*The Joffrey + Ballet in the U.S.* is a large-scale exhibition celebrating the rich history of The Joffrey Ballet and the life of Robert Joffrey. The exhibition premiered at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in 2024, marking the first major retrospective of the company. Drawing from the Joffrey archive, acquired by the Jerome Robbins Dance Division in 2017 as the Library’s largest acquisition in a decade, the exhibition offers an in-depth look at the Joffrey’s contributions to ballet in the U.S. Highlights include rare film from the original performance of the groundbreaking ballet *Astarte* and Anna Sokolow’s *Opus 65*, as well as costumes, props, pointe shoes, posters, correspondence, and other ephemera from the company and Robert Joffrey’s life. *The Joffrey + Ballet in the U.S.* is

organized by The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and curated by Dr. Julia Foulkes with assistance from Nicole Duffy. It is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Alphawood Exhibitions.

### **About Wrightwood 659**

Wrightwood 659 hosts exhibitions on socially engaged art and architecture, on issues facing LGBTQ+ communities, and on Asian art and architecture. Located in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood in a building transformed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, Wrightwood 659 encourages visitors to engage with pressing issues of our time in an intimate and beautiful space. For additional information, please visit [wrightwood659.org](http://wrightwood659.org).

### **Hours of Operation and Tickets**

Wrightwood 659 is open Thursdays 12 noon-7 pm; Fridays 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays 10 am-5 pm. Tickets for the trio of exhibitions opening October 3 go on sale Thursday, September 4. Admission is \$20 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

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### PHOTO CREDITS:

1. Ellen Altfest, *Rock, Foot, Plant*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 9 x 14 in. Photographer: Todd-White Art Photography, courtesy White Cube.
2. Ellen Altfest. *Gourds*, 2006–07. Oil on canvas, 19 x 38 in. © Ellen Altfest. Photo © Bill Orcutt, New York. Courtesy White Cube
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