The first time I saw a painting by Albert Gray, I was mesmerized, and I didn't know why.

Named Another Day in Paradise, the sparse piece depicts a suburban backyard at night with four chairs arranged in a loose circle. There are no people present, and nothing else in frame, except a rough sidewalk and wooden fence. But in spite of its sparseness, or more likely because of it, something about the painting seemed to whisper back. It seemed like a strange new world quietly opened before my eyes.

This scene is typical of the Columbus artist's work, which depicts real and often overlooked scenes we see daily and don't consider worthwhile: odd-ball suburban homes, softly distorted Midwestern landscapes, or a pair of porch-dwelling pumpkins cropped just a bit too closely.

And the country is taking note. Gray, a Connecticut native who received a bachelors in printmaking from Montserrat College in 2009 and relocated from New York City to Columbus in 2011, has been shown widely in the Columbus area, including a solo exhibition last year at No Place Gallery. Interest in the painter has also included recent shows throughout the US, from Massachusetts to Los Angeles.

(614) sat down with Gray to ask the up-and-coming artist about his work, process, and success.

(614): Why does so much of your painting focus on these very small and ordinary scenes, like single houses, parked cars, or the contents of a bathroom countertop?

AG: I think for a while when I was coming out of school, I was still working in this mode of high density. I was doing a lot of layering, and taking a lot of images and building up these sort of nebulous, cloudy compositions, and I didn't really place much importance on how it made me feel. In relation to my studio practice, I had this concept I was going for and I needed to finish it each time. I did that for a few years, and it wasn't until I moved to New York that I was suddenly much more densely populated—so much movement and so many things happening at once, that I started to scale back a little bit to kind of give myself room to breathe. It was like an unconscious reaction to that. I was sourcing material from photographs I was taking and magazines I would find, but the work started to pare down a lot. It became just about a few things interacting on the canvas. I didn't have a phone for years either, and around then I got my first official smartphone (laughs), and so I had a camera on me all the time. And I just started looking at these photos as something to include in a composition, but then I started to realize I liked what was happening with them by themselves. When I got here to Ohio and I had more space to work with, I was actually looking at the photos more. I would start to kind of crop things out in a certain way, it became more about what was there already, and me trying to listen to that a little more.
"There's something that's a little bit off-putting about them and you have to do a double-take. It reflects how I see these situations in the world, I often have to do a double-take. It's the in-between moments."

You seem to gravitate toward small-town Americana. Is that intentional?

I am from a small town originally. Where I grew up, there were probably about 3,000 to 5,000 people. And so when we moved to Chihi, with some of the photos I took, I think I was unconsciously doing something that was familiar. And there was also something that I appreciate about certain images that maintain something ubiquitous, they seem so commonplace and they seem like such a shared experience, and they're also kind of vague. I think it's actually kind of a way to hide my own personality or my experiences, because it's a way to let anyone in.

What do you want or expect people to take from these paintings, if anything specific at all?

At an extent I like to leave things open so viewers can experience whatever they will, but when I'm making something I don't like to put an unmoving idea first and then make a painting based off that. So much of my work comes in the process of making it. As far as the subject matter goes, what the paintings end up being, I think at as a kind of old but tranquil moment. The subject is always the jumping off point and I sometimes find a way to cycle back around to it. There's something that's a little bit off-putting about them and you have to do a double-take. It reflects how I see these situations in the world, I often have to do a double-take. It's the in-between moments. The way we live our lives, it's like I have to go do this thing, or I have to go do this other thing. And what interests me is what happens in between.

Can you name a piece or series you've done recently that you think is particularly successful?

I have this group I've been working on, these dusky ones here that depict houses right before dark. I really like them; they're playing with color and luminosity a bit more, and I just love what's going on in the source photos. They're not always full on just night scenes; it's always late in the day. It's winter; you go outside and there are these really quiet moments where everyone is in their houses and you see those glowing little units everywhere in this cold, muted, darker environment. They're in this kind of in-between space where it's dark but not fully night. I think that's pretty on point, it is kind of like the in-between or something. I'm always looking for something vague, something in the middle.