

SWING SHIFT

Matt Dillon's Lesser-Known Life as a Visual Artist

The actor's large scale, Neo-Expressionist-inspired paintings are now on view in New York.



Matt Dillon, photographed in the Upper West Side studio where he makes his paintings on March 26, 2026. He's holding "Untitled (Red King)" (2026), which was inspired by his travels in Benin and references Voodoo culture. Both this piece and "Douk Pon" (2025, at right) are currently on view in a solo show of his work at New York's Journal Gallery. David Chow

By Max Lakin

May 13, 2026, 5:00 a.m. ET

Matt Dillon's painting studio — in a modest apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side — is remarkably neat, the floors freshly papered and his paints and palettes organized in a small closet. This, he says, is only because he's been in Berlin: "I make a mess. I accept that about myself." Fixed to a wall is a jagged piece of Masonite slathered in black paint onto which he's scrawled "Porto Novo" along the top and "Abomey" at the bottom — the names of Benin's modern capital and the city that was once the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey, respectively, both of which Dillon visited after filming Claire Denis's "The Fence" (2025) in West Africa.

Dillon, 62, first became famous playing angsty adolescents in a run of 1980s films — "The Outsiders," "Rumble Fish" (both 1983) and "Drugstore Cowboy" (1989). His art takes cues from the Neo-Expressionism of that time as well. He paints in a brushy, textural style, nodding to [Julian Schnabel's](#) gnomonic marks, Martin Kippenberger's deadpan distortion and A.R. Penck's and Jean-Michel Basquiat's faux-naïf primitivism.

Dillon's solo show at the Journal Gallery in New York, 2026



The actor and artist discusses Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning Drawing" (1953). Joshua Charow

Growing up in Mamaroneck, N.Y., Dillon had no formal art training, but he did have early exposure. His great-uncle created the 1930s-era comic strip Flash Gordon, and his father, a sales manager, moonlighted as a portrait painter. As a young actor, Dillon formed a softball team with Futura and other graffiti artists, with one game memorialized by Andy Warhol in a 1985 diary entry ("Matt Dillon struck out with three people on base, but he was cute"). He learned more about art once he got to the West Coast, where he shared an apartment with the dealer Patrick Painter, becoming familiar with many of the Los Angeles conceptual artists Painter showed, like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. "I loved it," Dillon says of their work, "but it's not the way I am."



"They used to call them trip books in the '60s. They're just sketchbooks," he says. "Sometimes I will take them on trips with me, and sometimes the things I do in there become ideas for larger works." David Chow



A study in progress. David Chow

For most of his adult life, Dillon painted during the lulls on set, and in hotel rooms. He didn't make large-scale pieces until a little over a decade ago, when he rented his first studio. Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that he's never had gallery representation, his work has earned the admiration of his artist peers. In 2021, the painter John Newsom included his work in a group show at the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Vermont alongside that of Donald Baechler and Wendy White; he currently has a painting up [at the Watermill Center](#) on Long Island, in an exhibition co-curated by Brian Belott and Noah Khoshbin that also features pieces by [Carroll Dunham](#) and [Katherine Bernhardt](#). "He's an emerging and midcareer artist at the same time, which is an anomaly," says Michael Nevin, who, along with Julia Dippelhofer, runs the Journal Gallery, where Dillon's [first New York solo exhibition](#) is now on view.



The artist says he's traveled with sketchbooks for 30 years. David Chow

Does he think about being perceived as a celebrity painter? "I like doing different things," he says. "I guess that can work for you or against you."

"[Some] people are always going to say, 'You go over here in this little corner,'" he adds. "The big struggles for me, and probably for a lot of artists, are control and freedom and discipline. The joy is when you accept the thing after you've wrestled with it for a long time."