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Why young artists are painting like old masters

A new generation has embraced the exquisite pigments and brushwork of Caravaggio and Rembrandt



Ally Fallon in his studio in Salford © Photographed for the FT by Daniel Murphy

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“How is it that so many young artists today find comfort in producing polite, small-format oil paintings in muted, earthy palettes — a still life of an apple, a bucolic landscape, a portrait of a handsome sitter?” This question, posed by gallerist and dealer Robbie Fitzpatrick on Instagram last year, is one I have also found myself asking of late.

Not only is figurative painting back in a big way, but it is being embraced by a cohort of emerging artists keen to demonstrate their skills in technically accomplished works that appear to draw as much inspiration from the 14th century as from the present day. But is this a reactionary trend, buffered by the west’s “growing embrace of conservative politics”, as Fitzpatrick suggests elsewhere in his post, or is there another explanation entirely?



'If That's All There is Then Let's Keep Dancing' (2026) by Manchester-based artist Ally Fallon

For artist Ally Fallon, it's perhaps an inevitable consequence of the medium. "By picking up a brush and applying oil paint to a surface, you're doing something that people have done for millennia," he says. "I don't think you can ignore that history." His own paintings, currently on view in his first solo exhibition at Hales gallery in London (until July 17), are inspired in large part by his fascination with and study of Old Masters such as Caravaggio and Rembrandt.

Like these painters, Fallon renders his scenes — exquisitely painted depictions of tiled floors paired with more expressive applications of paint — in oils. For artists like him, who seek to create realistic images, there is still no better alternative, despite vast improvements in other media over the years. "It just offers a lot more than acrylic or water-based paint," he says. "The textures, colours and surface quality are, for me and what I'm trying to achieve, unmatched."



Ally Fallon mixing oil paints in his Salford studio © Daniel Murphy for the FT



Oil paints in Fallon's studio: 'It offers more than acrylic or water-based paint: the textures, colours and surface quality are, for what I'm trying to achieve, unmatched' © Daniel Murphy for the FT

In use in Europe since the 12th century, oil paint first flourished in the Netherlands before being adopted by Italian artists in the mid-1400s. “The fact that you had these much richer colours and the ability to build up in glazes opened the door to a much greater naturalism,” explains Christie’s Old Master Paintings specialist Jonquil O’Reilly. “You can use the paint itself to create texture in a way you’d never be able to with egg tempera, which is always going to be flat and matt.”

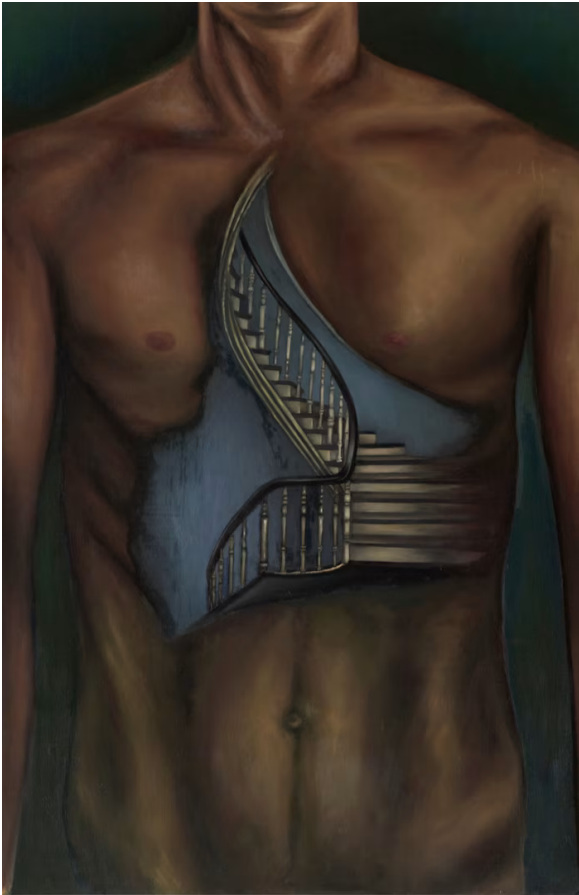
This development was one of the reasons behind the popularity of still lifes among artists in northern Europe who, unlike their Italian counterparts, were no longer focused on painting religious scenes. “Suddenly artists could realistically depict a drop of water on the skin of a peach,” says O’Reilly. “They could revel in depicting all of these different surface textures, showing the way that light falls on a pewter plate versus a glass that’s half full of beer.”



Lewis Hammond in his Berlin studio © Joanna Krawczyk for the FT

It's this versatility that continues to draw artists to oil painting centuries later. "One thing that's been consistent in my practice is a sort of nerdy tunnel vision about the possibilities of the medium," explains Lewis Hammond, whose own dark and moody oil portraits have earned him comparisons to Goya and Velázquez.

Like Fallon, Hammond is a student of the greats, having taught himself to paint through close looking and reading from artists' diaries and books on their techniques. This self-described "nerdery" even extends to his occasional use of toxic pigments — such as genuine Chinese vermilion made from mercuric sulphide — which he admits stems, at least in part, from a romantic desire to work with paints as close as possible to those used by the old masters.



'Double Helix' (2026) by Lewis Hammond © Courtesy the artist, Arcadia Missa, London and 47 Canal, New York. Photo by Michael Pollard



'Untitled (M.)' (2025) by Lewis Hammond © Courtesy the artist, Arcadia Missa, London and 47 Canal, New York. Photo by Joanna Krawczyk

Despite his fidelity to traditional methods, Hammond's exhibition at Hepworth Wakefield, on view until November 1, evokes distinctively contemporary feelings of dread and alienation. The works on display, eerie portraits of people in claustrophobic domestic settings, are technically accomplished — Hammond is known for his masterful use of light and shadow — yet remain distorted and uncanny. "I'm often collaging together material that didn't exist in a single image before," he says of his process. "So there's a lot of space for invention, and that's where weird moments occur — the perspective can shift, skew and pull, making things look a bit flat or strange in a subtle way."

Anna Freeman Bentley has a similarly ambivalent attitude to naturalism within her practice. "It's something I struggle with," she admits. "I sometimes look at some of my earlier work and wonder if it was better because it was a bit more mysterious. Naturally, over the years, I've become more accomplished, and I'm always asking myself how much I want to describe and how much I want to leave unexplained."



Anna Freeman Bentley in her London studio © Bella Galliano-Hale for the FT

It's partly for this reason that she loves working with oil, which due to its slow drying time can be worked back into or even wiped away the next day. "Playing with some of the accidents or the things that surprise me is a big part of the process," she says.

For a several years now, Bentley's paintings have centred on film sets, with her current exhibition at London's Lehmann Maupin focusing on curtains and veils (until August 14). A recurring motif in western painting since the Renaissance, fabric has long been a popular subject because it presents a significant technical challenge. For Bentley, however, it's more interesting to consider how these motifs can conceal and reveal meaning than use them to impress audiences with her handling of paint.

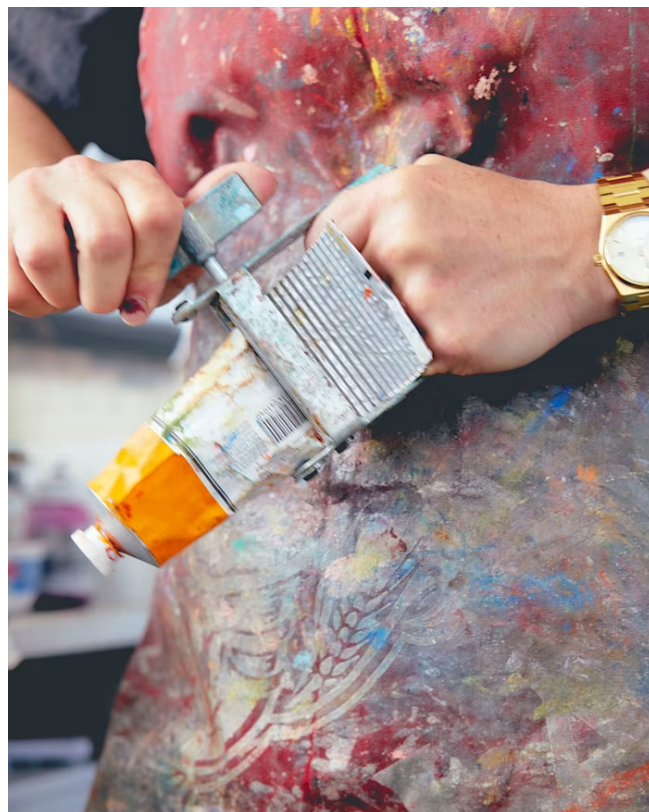


'Video Village' (2023) by Anna Freeman Bentley © Photo by Peter Mallet. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London

Nevertheless, her canvases — as well as those of Hammond, Fallon and countless other artists working in this mode — seem to fly in the face of the prevailing trend of sloppy figuration, a painting style that embraces loose, messy and seemingly careless techniques. While artists associated with this approach, such as Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman, command high prices for their works, it is still often regarded as more rebellious and countercultural than highly finished painting. For this reason, there is a residing feeling among some critics that the more refined style of oil painting is more palatable to collectors.



Anna Freeman Bentley in her studio © Bella Galliano-Hale for the FT



Anna Freeman Bentley working with oils: 'Playing with some of the accidents or the things that surprise me is a big part of the process' © Bella Galliano-Hale for the FT

There is some merit to the argument that in times of geopolitical and financial instability spooked collectors return to what they know, viewing portraiture and still life — the most familiar genres in western art — as lower-risk investments.

Yet there is another side to painting familiar motifs in naturalistic styles that is overlooked in such critiques. For Fallon, his rooms with tiled floors, drawn from real life, offer viewers a tangible point of entry into the painting. “The real elements are really just me trying to offer a way into the work — something that is immediately recognisable,” he explains. “And then once you’re inside, as it were, I can take a little bit more liberty and show more abstract routes through the space.”



'Neither Flesh nor Fleshless' (2026) by Ally Fallon © Photo by Michael Pollard



'Shaded by a Lilac' (2026) by Ally Fallon © Photo by Michael Pollard

It is perhaps worth remembering that Renaissance art was intended to be accessible and easily readable, an aim achieved, among other means, through a kind of emotionally driven realism that everyone could understand. Young artists' embrace of these painting traditions may be less connected to a retrograde nostalgia than to a desire to connect to audiences outside the confines of the art world.

This is certainly the case for Hammond, who credits his working-class background as one reason for his focus on the emotional resonance of his work. "There's no singular narrative, but I think there's enough ambiguity and space for people to engage with it and feel something," he says. "And you don't need to have read this philosopher or that art theory — or have a PhD — for it to resonate."

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