CLEVER, QUICK, MAGNETIC:

The Art of Witty Banter

Cecily Brown
The Art of Witty Banter, 2026

Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center
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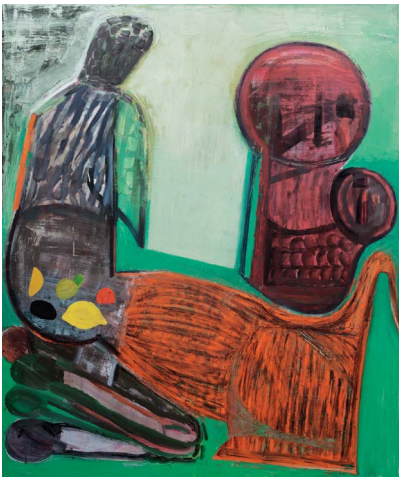
Simple Solutions to Complex Problems

Think of a painting as having a nervous system.

1. The Intentionalist Fallacy



A

The surprising longevity – even popularity – of conceptual art has left us with an odd legacy: the belief that the artist's intention matters more than what something looks like. This Duchampian, 'post-retinal' orientation values art's back-story over its material presence, and it de-emphasizes talent, or even dexterity, as the driver of art. The role of the artist in this worldview is more that of a philosopher manque; in a twist on Descartes, the conceptualist says, "I *intend,* therefore I am (an artist)". Intentionality is like a self-driving car, with the artist just along for the ride. We can see how this stance, with its promise of rigor and its banishment of sentimentality had a certain appeal. But now, more than 50 years on, it turns out to have been an over-correction.

Artistic intention is not a machine that makes the work. It is a point on the horizon, a destination to aim for, but without the benefit of GPS. One learns to navigate the old-fashioned way, observing landmarks and taking the position of the sun, aided by memory and intuition. One's intention determines the outcome of a painting about as much as it describes the contours of one's actual life. Intentions count, but their relationship to the final result is seldom one-to-one.

What matters in painting is the artist's *relationship* to her intention. Is it grasped too tightly, or not tightly enough? Strict adherence to intentionality is like blinders on a cart-horse. Yes, it walks in a straight line, but it must be boring for the horse. Constraints in art can be positive, but it's a matter of some delicacy. Has the intention guided the imagination, allowed it to soar, or has it diminished creativity and made the work less expansive than it might have been?

Amy Sillman [A]

B

Artists of different painterly approaches, different *styles* – may stand in a similar relationship to their intentions. Ultimately, the intention may not mean all that much to our experience of a work of art. It *might* be important, if it is made to be. In other words, if the relationship of intention to craft is in balance. What is the correct relationship? In general, a productive relationship to intention is one that allows the artist to be non-trivial; serious, but not tyrannically so.

This is of course slightly tongue-in-cheek. Some painters do have a theoretical bent, but most tend to think of intentionality, if they think of it at all, as a kind of laundry list, or a reminder to self: *Make an open painting.* Or, *Make a painting using only 3 colors.* George Baselitz, when asked about his intention in inverting the figures on his canvas, answered this way: "I was simply trying to find a position which could give me some breathing space as a painter." That is, his intention was to break from the prevailing conventions of his youth, to make his painting autonomous, and to get these people *off his back.* His intention was simply to make room for himself.

2. Affinity

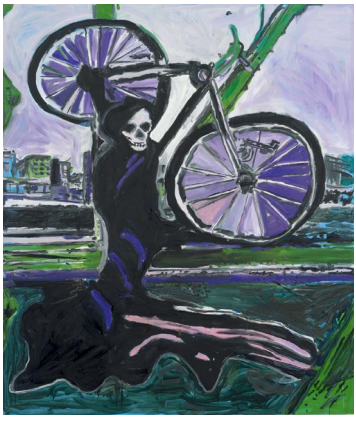
C

I'm interested in how paintings that look quite different from each other can generate feelings of affinity. On what is the affinity based – what are the commonalities? It might be expressed as the ratio of rigor to permission, which are really two different types of self-awareness. A painter needs both. In fact, a painter toggles between them, and the internal mechanism that regulates their interaction is also a kind of talent. The process involves finding the permission inside the rigor, and vice versa, which leads to the kind of breathing room Baselitz was talking about. The painter is graced with an increase of freedom, which manifests itself in painting as a sense of *rightness;* one has the freedom to choose *"rightly"*. One who chooses successfully, i.e., with sufficient internal logic, sufficient autonomy, can afford to be generous. That spirit of generosity, of open-ness, binds these diverse works together from the inside out.

Stanley Whitney [B]
Marina Adams [C]

3. Originality

There are different ways to be original. Paintings may strike us as original, as fresh; surprising; vital; *new* - for a variety of reasons. One type of originality is the visual equivalent of the mixed metaphor; the unlikely yoking together of two or more images, a late-flowering of Lautreamont's famous meet-up of a sewing machine and an umbrella (the juxtaposition from his 1896 novella credited with jump-starting the Surrealist movement.) Today the *mash-up*, or sampling, is practically the lingua-franca of modern life. Examples are everywhere, from the media and advertising landscape to daily life on any urban street. Josh Smith's Grim Reaper riding a bike through the streets of Brooklyn, and Neo Rauch's narrative confabulations are good examples. Both painters make work that has the certitude and internal logic of a vivid dream. And while the tenor of Rauch's work is operatic, allegorical, that of Rosa Loy is fable-like, infused with the spirit of Bruegel. Another case is John Currin, whose paintings disturb in inverse proportion to how closely they hew to pictorial convention. We care not only about what Currin depicts, but how much license and evident pleasure he takes with its depiction. For all these artists, anachronism is the new now.



D

E

F

The sensibility of the mash-up also extends to artists who work abstractly, without recognizable imagery. Tamo Jugeli assembles her paintings out of parts, and the delicate work of plotting their often surprising interconnections is her métier. And what is Amy Sillman's painting but the depiction of a chance encounter? In the right hands, abstraction can also be allegorical.

Josh Smith [D]
Neo Rauch [E]
Rosa Loy [F]

There is the originality of materiality, of surface, exemplified by Julian Schnabel painting on broken dishware, or Sterling Ruby's use of the sewing machine; paintings more stitched than painted. These are not merely affectations; the approach to materiality *is* the painting, part of its core value. Attitude is also material.

G

Some artists work in established genres but with an approach that marks their work as of this moment. The immediacy of Chantal Joffe's realism projects a 'take it or leave it' veracity, leavened by empathy. For Joffe, originality rests with the commitment to paint from observation – from life, without resort to a mediating image. The expressivity of her work emerges from the openness, precision, and conviction of the marks made by her brush. Nicole Wittenberg is another example of this un-fussy, direct, observational painting, a late flowering of the American Sublime. Henry Taylor's paintings appear so forthright, so confident and persuasive, so *natural*, that it's easy to miss how sensitive, and at times eccentric is their construction and point of view.

H

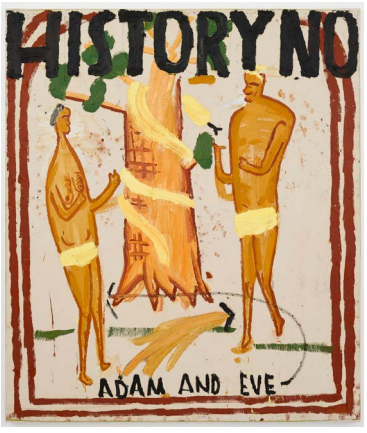
J

I

For Verne Dawson, a similar descriptive *esprit* is joined with haiku-like narrative compression. His pictures are both open-hearted and subversive, sometimes a little wistful. Dawson is a modest standard-bearer. His painting says, "I fought the good fight, and now I'll just be on my way."

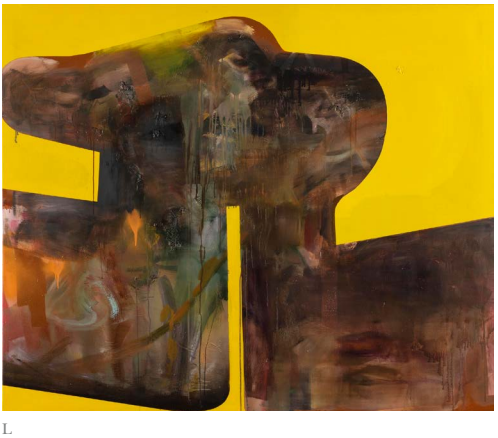
Julian Schnabel G
Sterling Ruby H
Chantal Joffe I
Verne Dawson J

Rose Wylie paints more from culture than from nature; everything in her visual field - ads, TV, sports, movies, her own visual memory and imagination - is treated as if it were a flower in her garden. Everything is real, everything is invented. Her highly confident painting is un-arguable: "This is a picture of Adam and Eve if I say so."



K

There are paintings imbued with a feeling of inevitability, paintings that feel as though they have always been here, that couldn't be other than they are, as if the painter had only to open the right door at the right moment. This type of painting finds its originality within the on-going utility of a certain stylistic universe. It's not nostalgic but rather stems from a lack of ontological doubt. Cecily Brown, Marina Adams, Spencer Sweeney, Tamo Jugeli, Stanley Whitney, and Joe Bradley all use familiar forms, tropes, painting procedures, and make them feel of this moment. They are formidably neo-classicist; the luminous past hovers over their paintings like a guardian angel, escorting it into the present.


L

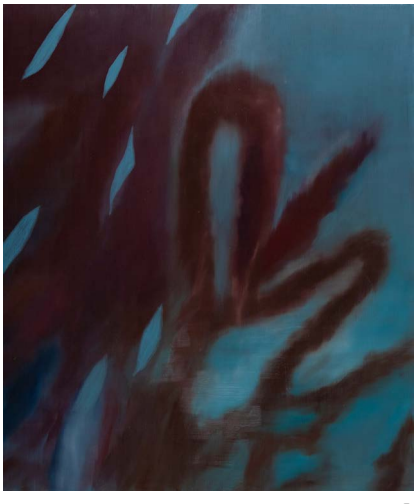
Another type of originality might be called: *simple solutions to complex problems.* Alex Katz, Albert Oehlen, Gary Stephan – their work gives the impression that the thorny problem you despaired of ever being able to solve might be side-stepped entirely. Looking at their paintings is like finding out that the necessary piece of the puzzle was there all along, just waiting to be uncovered. As Balanchine said upon first hearing Stravinsky, 'Look at what he can do *without*.'

M

Rose Wylie K
Albert Oehlen L
Gary Stephan M

Yet another type, a subset of the mash-up, might be called the *blind alley*, or, that which is least expected, even problematic. Charline Von Heyl produces small miracles in this vein. Un-lovely, un-promising material? Call Charline. The question we long to ask of her yellow painting with black outlined, anatomically improbable, white "hands", with blue and black tape marks and a picture-framed letter "C" might be, *How the hell did she get there?* Or even, *What the hell do you think you're doing?* The picture is confounding, a whoopie cushion of a painting. It resists any attempt to figure out how it was painted, or even why. And yet, there it is, manifestly "open" – cool, self-evident, a little wry, and insistent at the same time.

N



O

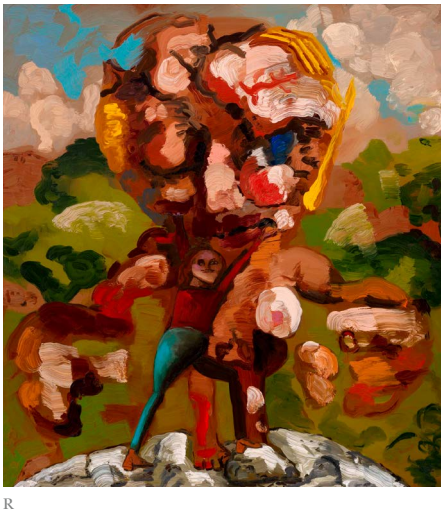
The idea of a journey may be a hackneyed metaphor. However, some artists have taken such a long, digressive path, studded with numerous detours and unexpected scenic destinations that it feels apt. Ross Bleckner began his career as a devotee to certain early modernist, constructivist models – one could see the clear lineage, but now, more than 50 years on, that early allegiance has given way to a luxuriant eccentricity. Bleckner paints forms that appear to be guided only by a vivid internal life. Art is long, and all that. As a boy Spencer Sweeney trained as a traditional figurative artist – but just look at him now. The rigor is still there but has been set free to roam among the recovered memory of early modernism.

P

Charline von Heyl N
Ross Bleckner O
Spencer Sweeney P

Q

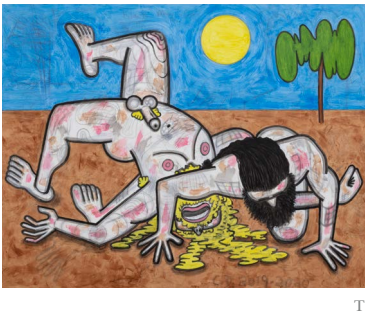
A similar evolution appears to be underway with Walter Price. He might be the great amalgamator of his generation. He has the visual equivalent of perfect pitch, and seems to be able to use just about anything in his work. Price also re-vivifies modernist tropes, chief among them the fragment, and he layers personal imagery into his compositions like sheets of pasta in a pan of lasagna. That's yet another kind of originality – recognizing hidden value in discarded things. Price even makes R.B. Kitaj cool.



R

Like a contemporary Hogarth, Dana Schutz exalts in the grotesque; her dramatic personae reflect the tendency to see ourselves as monstrous. A workmanlike industriousness, an un-flinching gaze at life's follies, and the lack of any a priory idea about what constitutes a painting subject; these form the atmosphere around Schutz, a zone of charm. Something similar could be said about Rose Wylie; the translations made, brush in hand, from something glimpsed in an advert or on TV to an image on a canvas reveal an un-self-conscious painter whose allegiance is solely to the life of the painting. We might say the same thing about Alex Katz's painting of an orange tree, or, for that matter, any of the paintings in this show. Carroll Dunham has been following his own drumbeat for so long it's like he's giving lessons in the *rhumba*. Naked guys wrestling - why not? The ancient Greeks wouldn't have batted an eye. One's allegiance is to the painting, not to an idea. Or rather, the ideas are in the paint.

S



T

Walter Price Q
Dana Schutz R
Alex Katz S
Carroll Dunham T

U

V

W

All the work in this show, regardless of the specifics of style, are expansive, confident, and open. Even the dark ones, the moody ones, are affirming. These artists prioritize invention, and they share a positive view of painting's role in life. In different ways, the impression these painters leave us with is of something irrepressible; these are the ebullient ones.

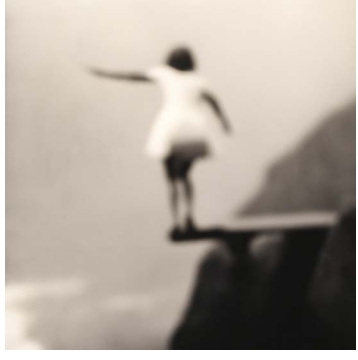
The two photographers present, James Welling and Bennett Miller, provide a counterpoint, another way to think about images, about the life, and after-life, of pure image. Miller does not actually make photographs; no camera or film is involved in the production of his digital images; they are created from within the belly of the machine. He certainly knows his way around cameras; in his other life, Miller is a highly acclaimed film director. His haunting, enigmatic scenes seem to grow almost organically from a combination of algorithms, like a paper flower that blooms when you put it in water. Welling is a New Englander to his core; his high-minded purity turns to eccentricity when exposed to film, his camera the black box of alchemy.

Arlene Shechet, the only sculptor present, is here to keep the painters honest. "See", she says, "I can do what you can do."

What these artists have in common: their relationship to intention is right, and productive. They are all good artists; their work is alive.

— David Salle

X



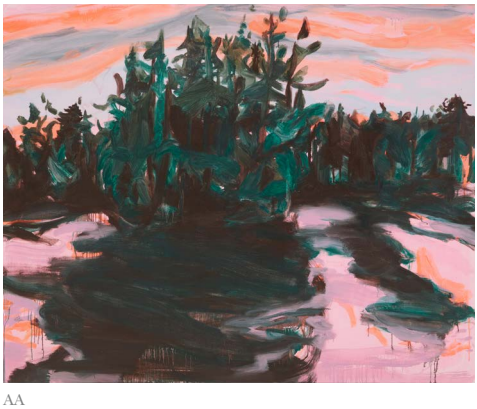
Y

James Welling U V W
Bennett Miller X
Arlene Shechet Y

AB

Z

AC



AA

AD

Joe Bradley Z
Nicole Wittenberg AA

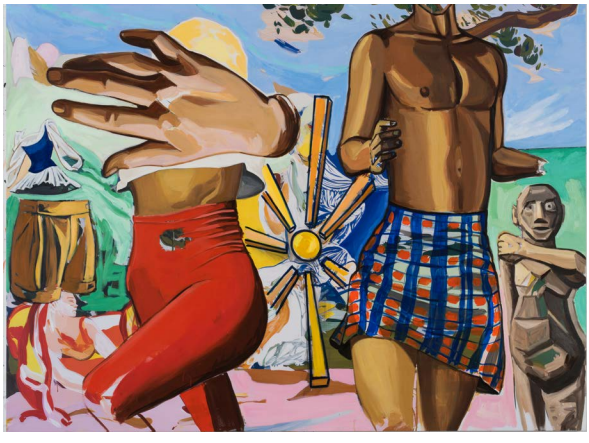
John Currin AB
Henry Taylor AC
Tamo Jugeli AD

About the Curator

David Salle helped define the postmodern sensibility in painting. For more than four decades, his work has been exhibited at museums and galleries worldwide, including the Whitney Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Menil Collection, Houston; Haus der Kunst, Munich; and Guggenheim Bilbao. A prolific writer on art, he is a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*. His essay collection, *HOW TO SEE: Looking, Talking, and Thinking about Art*, was published by W.W. Norton in 2016.

AE

AF



Acknowledgements

Oklahoma Contemporary extends its sincere gratitude to the participating artists for their generosity in making their works available for this exhibition.

We are deeply grateful to the galleries whose partnership, expertise, and commitment made these exceptional loans possible. We wish to acknowledge David Zwirner, Gagosian, Gladstone Gallery, KARMA, Matthew Brown, Michael Kohn Gallery, Morgan Presents Gallery, Pace Gallery, Skarstedt Gallery, Sprüth Magers, and Victoria Miro.

We likewise extend our appreciation to John Currin Studio, Julian Schnabel Studio, and Sterling Ruby Studio for their collaboration and generous support throughout the loan process.

Oklahoma Contemporary is especially grateful to the private collectors whose generosity and willingness to lend these remarkable works have made this exhibition possible. We extend our sincere thanks to the Hort Family Collection; Michael Corman and Kevin Fink; Morgan & Ecaterina Aguiar-Lucander; and Suzi K. and Andrew B. Cohen.

The arts center especially wishes to thank Mary Schwab, Studio Manager, David Salle Studio, and Ashley Fletcher, Archivist, for their invaluable assistance in securing loans and coordinating the movement of works throughout the exhibition. We are likewise grateful to Mark de Wilde for his expertise in constructing the exhibition model and to Max Teicher of 291 Agency for his guidance and support throughout the project.

Finally, Oklahoma Contemporary extends its appreciation to David Salle for his vision, critical insight, and generosity in conceiving this exhibition. His considered selection brings together an unprecedented range of distinguished painters at Oklahoma Contemporary, creating new opportunities for dialogue between artists and audiences.

Portrait of David Salle. Photo by Robert Wright. AE
David Salle AF

Oklahoma Contemporary gratefully acknowledges the following for their generous support:

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Works in the Exhibition

Marina Adams, *My Bright Particular (for Jimmy Schuyler),* 2026, acrylic on linen, 54 × 40 in. © Marina Adams. Courtesy of the Artist.

Ross Bleckner, *The Seaweed in Venice,* 2025, oil on linen, 72 × 60 × 2 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Joe Bradley, *Angel's Trumpet,* 2023–2024, oil on canvas, 101 × 78 in. © Joe Bradley. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

Cecily Brown, *The Art of Witty Banter,* 2026, oil on linen, 41 × 43 in. © Cecily Brown. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

John Currin, *Still Wife,* 2023, oil on panel, 26 × 18 in. © John Currin. Courtesy of John Currin Studio.

Verne Dawson, *U.F.O.,* 2018-25, oil on linen, 12 × 9 × 1 ¼ in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Carroll Dunham, *Big Men (2),* 2019–20. Urethane, acrylic, and pencil on linen. 65 × 84 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Brown Gallery.

Chantal Joffe, *Painter in Bed,* 2024, oil on board, 47 ¼ × 90 ½ in. Photo: Jack Hems. © Chantal Joffe. Courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, New York.

Tamo Jugeli, *Yumeji's Theme,* 2026, oil on linen, 95 × 120 × 1 ½ in. © Tamo Jugeli. Courtesy of the Artist and Karma.

Alex Katz, *Road 25,* 2024, oil on linen, 120 × 96 in. © Alex Katz / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Artist and Gladstone. Photo: David Regen.

Rosa Loy, *Speicher,* 2024, casein on canvas, 59 ¼ × 51 ¼ in. Courtesy of the Artist and Michael Kohn Gallery.

Bennett Miller, *Untitled,* 2023, pigment print of AI-generated image, 33 ¾ × 33 ¾ in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Albert Oehlen, *Ömega Man 1,* 2021, oil and lacquer on canvas, 63 × 74 $^{15}/_{16}$ × 1 $^{3}/_{16}$ in. © Albert Oehlen. Collection of Morgan & Ecaterina Aguiar-Lucander. Photo: Rob McKeever.

Walter Price, *Cracks in legal protection,* 2026, acrylic, gesso, Flashe, and Sharpie on canvas, 55 × 65 in. © Walter Price. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

Neo Rauch, *Leider,* 1999, oil on canvas, 78 ¾ × 59 in. (200 × 149.9 cm). Hort Family Collection. © Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2026.

Sterling Ruby, *TURBINE. Solar Cult.,* 2025, acrylic, oil, and cardboard on canvas, 96 × 126 × 2 in. © Sterling Ruby. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio and Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles.

David Salle, *New Pastoral with Red Tights,* 2024, oil, acrylic, flashe, and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 72 × 98 in. © David Salle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Gladstone, New York. Photo: John Berens.

Julian Schnabel, *Self Portrait (End of the Day in the Engadin Valley),* 2025, oil, plates, and bondo on aluminum, 72 × 60 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio. Courtesy Private Collection. Photo: Tom Powell.

Dana Schutz, *Climber,* 2024, oil on canvas, 66 × 61 in. Collection of Suzi K. and Andrew B. Cohen. © Dana Schutz. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner. Photo by Kerry McFate.

Arlene Shechet, *More May,* 2026, glazed ceramic and powder coated steel, 23 × 19 × 17 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery.

Amy Sillman, *She/They,* 2021, oil on linen, 70 × 60 in. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner. Photo: Evan John.

Josh Smith, *How to Stop Time,* 2025, oil on linen, 84 × 72 $^{1}/_{8}$ in. © Josh Smith. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

Gary Stephan, *LINEAR B,* 2023, acrylic on canvas, 40 × 30 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Spencer Sweeney, *Nocturnal Congress,* 2024, oil, encaustic paint, and charcoal on linen, 65 × 84 × 1 ½ in. © Spencer Sweeney. Courtesy of Gagosian.

Henry Taylor, *Seen a shootin' star tonight. And I thought of you.,* 2019, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 20 × 1 ½ in. © Henry Taylor. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Makenzie Goodman.

Charline von Heyl, *Don't Think It Hasn't Been Lovely Because It Hasn't Been (Bugs Bunny),* 2020, acrylic on linen, 90 × 82 in. © Charline von Heyl. Collection of Michael Corman and Kevin Fink. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.

James Welling, *Venus,* 2020, electrostatic print with oil pigment on polyester, 17 $^{1}/_{8}$ × 11 ¼ in. © James Welling. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

James Welling, *Aphrodite,* 2020, electrostatic print with oil pigment on polyester, 17 $^{1}/_{8}$ × 11 ¼ in. © James Welling. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

James Welling, *Grave Stele with family group,* 2018, electrostatic print with oil pigment on polyester, 18 × 12 in. © James Welling. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner.

Stanley Whitney, *Stay Song 148,* 2026, oil on linen, 40 × 40 in. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy of the Artist and Gagosian.

Nicole Wittenberg, *Dusk (Study 2),* 2020, oil on canvas, 48 × 60 in. © Nicole Wittenberg. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Rose Wylie, *Illuminated Manuscript, Adam and Eve,* 2020, oil on canvas, 72 ½ × 62 ¼ in. © Rose Wylie. Courtesy of the Artist and David Zwirner. Photo: Jack Hems.

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