DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Tristan Unrau
Hopes and Fears
March 19 – April 25, 2026
Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Hopes and Fears*, an exhibition of new paintings by Tristan Unrau, on view from March 19 through April 25, 2026. Occupying three spaces at the Los Angeles location, this is Unrau's first show with the gallery and the artist's most ambitious presentation to date. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, March 19 from 6 to 8 PM at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl.

Drawing widely and freely from the modes, subjects, and moods that have preoccupied painters for centuries, Unrau assimilates a formidable range of references across canvases both self-contained and in dialogue with one another. The plurality of styles that make up *Hopes and Fears* functions like a selective, idiosyncratic revision of the history of visual culture, as if the entire Western canon were the work of a single, virtuosic author—or as if there were no locatable authors at all.

Unrau's polystylism has a dual purpose. On one level, a variety of aesthetic approaches is a way to produce a variety of experiences of looking. On another, his visual enactments interrogate the very idea of style—as a signature means of identifying authorship, determining authenticity, and assigning value. The artist writes, "Style has become synonymous with 'filter,' a kind of gloss that can be mindlessly applied." In critiquing the notion that a work's validity resides in this gloss, Unrau destabilizes our most closely-held expectations of recognizability and consistency, paring painting down to its most essential communicative elements, then building it back up intuitively.

Many of the artworks on view are the composite outcomes of multiple artists' approaches, hybridized to entirely new ends. Unrau's influences include artworks both canonized and forgotten, of both popular and private significance. He explains, "I try to cultivate a non-intentional attitude of noticing what piques my attention. After this comes more purposeful decision-making, revision, and curation." The result is a rhizomatic take on visual culture, one in which Rembrandt's brushwork coexists beside Willem de Kooning's, and the language of cartoonism conveys as much poignancy as that of modernist portraiture. A photo taken by the artist's friend might serve as the seed of a painting, but through the process of translation into paint, the work becomes a composite, yoking together a genealogy of influences, as in the monumental *Skazki* (2026). Here, the expansive landscapes of Ansel Adams meet the immersive surfaces of Gerhard Richter and Franz Gertsch, resulting in a winter scene whose hyperrealism pushes the eye past its usual optical limits into a wilderness nearly psychedelic and almost abstract.

Other paintings respond to a single, self-determined challenge, and function more like homage. *While You Bring Light In* (2026) is recognizable as a recreation of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Wedding Dance* (1566), Unrau deviates from the source painting in significant ways. By selecting and framing only a segment of the original, altering the dancers' faces, and pitching up the palette, the artist belies his own private perception of *The*

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Wedding Dance, one that becomes analogous to the intimacy and unpredictability of all viewing experiences. Despite the proliferation of references on view in *Hopes and Fears*, Unrau writes that, "in the moment, in front of the canvas, I want looking at my paintings to feel ahistorical, even if just for the first few seconds of apprehension. Michel de Certeau says, 'An art of combination cannot be dissociated from an art of using.' My hope for this show is that the audience feels they can use it to play with what it means to feel something in front of a painting: to identify what is resonant in one image and not another, and to experience the energies of attraction or negation across the works."

Embedded in the artist's project is a central question: What do we want from painting today? *Hopes and Fears* presents itself as both a manifestation of painting's dilemma, and a proliferation of possible answers. In one of the most provocative (albeit invisible) processes undergirding these works, Unrau employed diffusion models to sift, sort, and generate new source imagery based on art historical prompts—a way of further troubling staid presumptions of how—and from where—art emerges. "Generative AIs force us to confront what we mean by creativity and authorship," Unrau writes, "and what our relationship to style is when it's no longer localized in a single hand or studio. If we think carefully about how to use these tools, [they're capable of shifting] our expectations for how pictures are made while retaining what is beautiful and human about the image."

To arrive at the painting *Immaculate Conception* (2026), for example, Unrau fed an assortment of desires regarding composition, color, and style into a diffusion model—then culled through hundreds of results to create his own collage-like composition before rendering a version in paint. He explains, "While working on *Marie* (2026), which is a film still taken from [Jean-Luc] Godard's *Hail Mary* (1985), I thought of inverting the classic subject matter of the immaculate conception in the style of an [Emil] Nolde or [Edvard] Munch painting. Rather than exalted, I depicted Saint Anne cowering, while the red and white stripes of her underwear create a formal connection to *Marie*. As a foundational story, immaculate conception becomes a metaphor for how we wish artworks might come into being." Freed from the labor and emotional weight that shape human making, artificial intelligence extends the fantasy of divine creation to its outer limit. At the same time, by translating the diffusion model's output back into paint, Unrau's practice suggests a cyclical return to art's hand-hewn origins, in which the physical, psychic, and imprecise practice of applying material to canvas remains integral to painting's power.

As a title, *Hopes and Fears* suggests the crosscurrents of faith and doubt that course through our contemporary moment, and the many nuanced sensations, atmospheres, and affective subtleties the works on view emit. Unrau writes, "I once heard someone define hope as the absence of information, which can also be true of fear. This illusionary duality has always struck me as the generative force behind all our creative endeavours and the way we make sense of our own agency in the world—our possibilities correlated with everyone else's possibilities. It's a world made of forces, after all, not surfaces."

Unrau has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Sebastian Gladstone, Los Angeles, CA (2023); 56 Henry, New York, NY (2022); Unit 17, Vancouver, Canada (2021 and 2018); and Towards, Toronto, Canada (2020), among others. Recent group exhibitions include *50 Paintings*, Milwaukee Art Museum, WI (2023); *Drawings*, Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto, Canada (2018); and *Cynthia Daignault: There is nothing I could say that I haven't thought before*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY (2017), among others. Unrau lives and works in Los Angeles.