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Artists

Can a Painter Eschew Style? A Look at Tristan Unrau's Big Swing

The artist, who is presenting works at Art Basel Miami Beach, will have a major solo show with Kordansky Gallery in March 2026.



Tristan Unrau portrait. Thomas McDonell, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

by **Devorah Lauter** | December 1, 2025

When most people walk into an art gallery or museum, they go through certain motions: they read the wall label, get a sense of the artist's style, and whether it's to their taste.

Tristan Unrau's artwork, however, doesn't allow us to do that so readily. The 36-year-old Los Angeles-based painter, originally from Canada, makes paintings that have no style, or equally, have every kind of style. He recuperates or copies everything—from Old Masters to Modernists, from playful cartoon illustration to photographic hyperrealism.

When exhibited side-by-side, this pluralistic approach invites us into an immersive journey through a kind of warped, often playful vision of art history, which is as enjoyable as it is puzzling. Unrau raises questions on authorship and what painting is allowed to be—pertinent quieries in our age of filters and A.I. image slop, and the always-proclaimed death of painting.



Tristan Unrau *Blackweather*, (2025). oil on linen. 88 3/4 x 70 inches. (225.4 x 177.8 cm). framed: 91 1/2 x 72 3/4 x 2 3/4 inches. (232.4 x 184.8 x 7 cm). Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

In an art world trained to analyze artists through their signature styles, while often allergic to art deemed unoriginal or sentimental, it is a position that has built him a dedicated following. David Kordansky Gallery counts among them, and announced representation of the artist this fall—the gallery plans a major solo exhibition for Unrau in March 2026 in Los Angeles. In the midst of preparation for that, Unrau remains focused, drawn by an artistic wanderlust for the boundless and curious universe of painting. "Aesthetics can be a space outside moral judgment, a kind of garden of attention where everything is astonishing because everything is so intrinsically strange to begin with," Unrau wrote to me in an email.

Pluralism

As Unrau walked around his spacious, high-ceilinged studio in East Hollywood during a recent Zoom call, he showed me the large paintings he is working on ahead of the show.



Tristan Unrau *Revelation*, (2025) oil on linen 36 x 30 1/4 x 1 inches (91.4 x 76.8 x 2.5 cm) Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

After an undergrad at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver—he described as a very “conceptual-leaning” school, he started painting across different styles—it was his MFA at UCLA that led him to California. There, he was surrounded by teachers like Silke Otto-Knapp, Lari Pittman, and Mary Kelly. He’s been based in LA every since.

In his studio, there was a vibrant, blown-up scene copied from a Bruegel masterpiece; a photorealist painting of a Jean-Luc Godard film still; another excruciatingly detailed snowy landscape at large scale. Other paintings “channel” Czech painter and Orphism pioneer František Kupka, or the Die Brücke artist Emil Nolde, or French-Swiss painter Felix Vallotton. You will see in his oeuvre rehashes of Willem De Kooning, there is a Rembrandt, a suprematist-style geometric composition; but also a *New Yorker* genre cartoon skyscraper slumped on the bed in their apartment; a romantic sunset over a valley; and a cartoon of a cat, full of angst as it stares at its reflection in a mirror.

Unrau is not up to cynical tricks with his deliberately derivative paintings. Rather, he is indulging in what he loves. Artworks magically take on different voices, like a writer or actor changing into characters that perform on Unrau’s canvas-stretched stage. For his much-noticed 2024 New York exhibition with Sebastian Gladstone gallery, which also represents the artist, titled “Re-enactment,” Unrau wrote that, “a painting with no overriding central motivations is what I want.” But that is wanting a lot. And here we get into Unrau’s inherently ambitious and singular practice: By ridding his paintings of a signature formal quality or a reliable narrator, he questions the nature of both.

Painting as Roleplay

When looking at Unrau’s paintings, part of the fun is also figuring out his historical references. Sources can come from movies, museums, his iPad drawings, friends’ photos, illustration magazines, or even an ad. The paintings seem to revel in a kind of sentimental romanticism that feels earnest.

Asked about sources of inspiration, Unrau pointed to Francis Picabia, with his refusal to adopt a specific style, and Lee Lozano, for her attitude toward Modernism, which Unrau loves. He also worked as a studio assistant to Friedrich Kunath, with whom he shares a “sensibility towards what a painting can do today, especially in the comedic sense,” he said. “He was very encouraging of experimentation.”

The wider questions proposed by Unrau’s work are the stuff that art writers like myself spend heavily caffeinated hours unraveling. But that is not necessarily Unrau’s driving intention, either. This is especially apparent in the suspended moment of looking, when we are faced with his uncanny



Tristan Unrau *Re-Enactment*, (2024) 73 x 64, Oil on Linen. Courtesy of Sebastian Gladstone and the artist

paintings that can artfully shake off the impulse to theorize about their broader implications, and allow us to save it ... for later. It is not unlike the experience of watching a good play or film that draws us in, allowing us to willingly suspend our disbelief. We know Unrau's paintings are not the originals, but are more like masked actors who deliver a masterful performance.

"I want to bring a viewer simply into a space of noticing," he wrote to me in an email. "Notice one painting, notice the next, sense a kind of magnetic field that each painting has, and if that field is repelling or attracting the other paintings in its proximity." Yet as much as Unrau emphasizes the importance of awakening to what happens when confronted with his paintings, he grants that his practice brings up other questions, too.

One of these is why and how we look and what we gravitate to; the works allow us to free ourselves from rote responses to our own established tastes in art. Can you like his entire body of work if it is formally incongruous? As Unrau paints in

so many styles, by some argument, the chances of coming across a painting one might not like is as likely as coming across one you will love.

But viewing pleasure is certainly a pursuit, across styles. "I also don't generally set out to make something that I personally don't find beautiful or interesting or seductive or compelling. The pluralism comes more from a *love* of many different genres of painting than a gambit for forcing viewers to confront their own taste."



Tristan Unrau *Little Dreamer*, (2025) oil on linen 57 x 45 inches (144.8 x 114.3 cm) framed: 59 1/4 x 46 3/4 x 2 1/4 inches (150.5 x 118.7 x 5.7 cm) Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

Unrau sent a list of "painting notes" full of questions and a few hypotheses, where he quotes thinkers like Rainer Maria Rilke, or Fernando Pessoa, the latter of whom wrote about losing one's personality. "If a painter is nothing, does nothing, and has nothing to say, what can he paint about? Not the emptiness of a void but of a stage..." Unrau wrote in his notes, while referencing Pessoa.

When asked about this, Unrau says his main impulsion is not to entirely disap-

pear as a painter behind other authors. Not all his paintings are copies, and over time, some viewers may sense a shared sensibility in them—which he described as “some valence that is recognizable.”



Tristan Unrau *Chimera*, (2025) oil on linen. 48 3/8 x 37 inches (122.8 x 94 cm)
framed: 50 1/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches (127.6 x 99.7 x 5.7 cm). Photo: Elon Schoenholz, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

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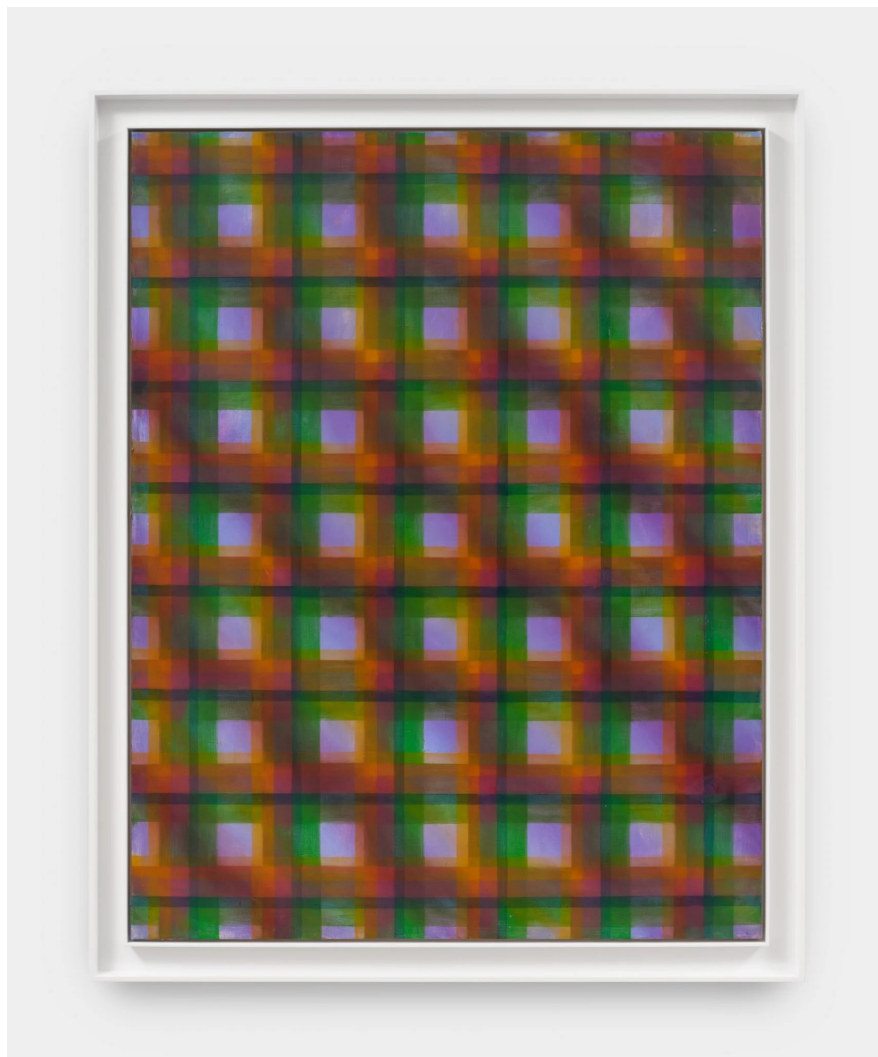
As for the art world, it is recognizing his fresh approach: Sebastian Gladstone sold out their last three shows together. He said that last year's New York exhibition was when people “started to really grasp what Tristan has been doing for years, and the ambition of his practice... There isn't a single collector I work with, or speak to, who isn't interested in Tristan's work.”

His other dealer, David Kordansky, remembers seeing Unrau's New York show last year on a gallery visit with artist Rashid Johnson. Both “were very impressed

with the boldness and almost this free willingness to really push the edges and the possibility of painting," he said.

"It's the act of juxtaposing multiple styles within a single exhibition space that flips our understanding of art history on its head," said Kordansky. Calling Unrau's work "brilliant and visionary," the dealer is dedicating his North and South galleries, plus a gallery that connects these two spaces to Unrau's March show, where paintings will be priced between \$25,000 and \$70,000.

One of the urgencies in his work may lie in the fact that Unrau is something of a human foil to an A.I. image-maker. The stark differences become obvious in a crucial way: the physical act of painting drives Unrau's practice, the joy of feeling the different weight of a brush, a tube of paint, or passing from a meditative state of copying a photograph, to something more abstract expressionist. This shifting is like time travel.



Tristan Unrau *Paulina*, (2024) 55 x 43, 2024, Oil in Linen. Courtesy of the artist and Sebastian Gladstone

Looking at Unrau's artworks now, we're also left to ponder the old claim: Is painting dead? Is there nothing new? Instead of chasing the new, Unrau demonstrates that a painter might have better luck saying something that feels true; a subtle truth, about our strange circumstances of being, of looking. And in that pursuit, Unrau's paintings do come very much alive.