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FLAUNT

TRISTAN UNRAU | WITHIN, OR IN SPITE OF, BOUNDARY

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Written by Emma Schartz

Tristan Unrau. “Antiphon” (2026). Oil on linen 40” x 50 1/4” x 1”. Framed: 41 3/4” x 51 3/4” x 1 3/4”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Subjects in Tristan Unrau’s paintings appear caught in moments of hesitation, on the brink of an uncommunicated emotional turning. Their eyes focus on ceiling corners, mirrors, and the viewers themselves, hovering between apathy, pain, and reflection. Imagery communicates agency in strange ways. Like an anthropomorphized building slumping like a tired commuter, or a cartoon cat studying its reflection.

While subjects grapple with their agency, Unrau jumps between painting styles and techniques with unusual freedom. Northern Renaissance dancers appear in the same exhibition as a luminous abstract work and a photorealistic aircraft. “I’ve been kind of trying to get away from my authorship or voice, because it’s scary to say anything,” says Unrau.

On March 19th, David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles will open Unrau’s widest ranging solo show to date. Viewers move between tentative fears and bounding optimism in exhibition *Hopes and Fears*, which features 21 paintings in Unrau’s signature style, or famously, lack thereof. The title acts as an emotional structure for the exhibition that spans across three rooms in the gallery, as well as the experience of creating art. Or the broader cultural grappling with an influx of imagery, at fingertips with internet access.

For Unrau, doubt is an essential part of the process. “Each painting has this roller coaster of feeling quite hopeful that it will work,” the artist shares. “And then there’s always a moment where you feel like

you’re an idiot.” In “Condition,” a cartoon-like cat stares at itself in the mirror, shades of dusty blue and violet surrounding the feline figure with an uncertain expression, not sure of the image reflected back.

Tristan Unrau. “Chorister” (2026). Oil on linen 64” x 51” x 1 ¼”. Framed: 66 1/”4 x 53 ¼” x 2 ¼”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Other works move through quieter registers. In “Chorister,” a young man gazes slightly past the viewer with a solemn, almost withdrawn expression, his dark eyes heavy with contemplation with Hopper-esque coloring. In “Marie,” a woman lies on a bed in underwear and a T-shirt, her body angled toward the corner of the room as if suspended between waking and dreaming, drawn from a Jean Luc-Godard film still from 1985’s “Hail Mary.” The stillness in these paintings feels meditative, moments of pause amid the more exaggerated or playful imagery elsewhere in the show.

“Each painting has a magnetic field around it, and that sort of attracts or repels the other paintings in the room,” Unrau says. Unrau’s paintings elicit reactions as they stand alone, but more curiously as they hang together. The contrast between dreamy intimacy and humorous anxiety unlock new questions as the viewer moves from painting to painting. The emotional pressure from each piece creates a common thread for viewers to move between the different styles of work.
Unrau’s creative process makes use of artificial intelligence, using the generative tools to meld styles and subjects into reference images before he picks up the brush. Hopes and Fears is an apt title for the cultural reaction to the rise of A.I., yet Unrau’s desire to play with the tool for compositional prompts suggests fascinating potential for the relationship between digital systems and physical creation. “You’re communicating with a very parochial God that has vast and incredible depth of image

knowledge,” Unrau says. “You can pray to this God for inspiration, and it will just answer your prayers with a fire hose of imagery and then you’re still stuck with your own agency.”

Hopes and Fears presents contradictions such as sincerity and artifice, humor and melancholy, reverence and play, not as problems to resolve, but the conditions under which painting still feels alive.

Tristan Unrau. “Atonement” (2026). Oil on linen. 41” x 35” x 1”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

What kind of conversation do you imagine the paintings in your show having with each other, if there even is one? And generally, how are you feeling about this new show?`

I’m feeling hopeful and fearful. There’s a few different ways in which you could read that title. One is personal to me. It’s kind of my first big, first solo show at a gallery of this size which is a dream come true, and, you know, comes with all of its attenuating circumstances and pressure, whatnot.

But also, a lot of the works are made using generative models, artificial intelligence. And there’s this prevailing cultural uneasiness with that. There’s a lot of hope and there’s a lot of fear that comes with that. And then the show kind of tracks the history of painting and the history of modernism, and I think that that’s really a history of hope and fear and trying to navigate that duality. Each painting has this roller coaster—you’re feeling quite hopeful that it will work, but there’s always a moment where you feel like you’re an idiot. It’s kind of embarrassing to make paintings in the first place. Like, why even do it?

There’s two different emotional valences that we can look at in these paintings. All of them can be interpreted both ways. And because the Kordansky [gallery] has these two big rooms, the works are kind of separated into one room that is more tentative and fearful and sort of self-doubting, and the

other room is more aspirational and hopeful. And hopefully that creates a kind of dynamic movement throughout the show.`

How often do you feel like in creating a painting, or even creating a set of paintings that you know will be in a show together, that you go back and forth between doubt and strength in that?`

Every single painting, there’s a point in which I feel like: *This is the last. I’m never gonna make a good painting again.* If I’m working on something and I don’t have this, like, sort of pathetic moment of despair now, because I’ve done it so many times, I feel like that’s a bad sign. And the most interesting paintings are the most tortured at some point during their creation. I don’t know exactly what that is. My other artists friends or creative friends have had similar experiences. Somehow, self doubt is an important ingredient in the process. And if you don’t have it, I think that’s a red flag.`

Tristan Unrau. “Atonement” (2026). Oil on linen. 41” x 35” x 1”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

I think everyone has that moment. What allows you to push through that? Is it a faith in that there will be a final product waiting at the end of the line? `

Process is important. And just like relaxing into the material quality of the thing, the smell of oil paint and the problem solving inherent to what medium you’re going to use, like linseed or Megilp or Galkyd. Just focusing on the technical aspects of it, you can kind of relax back into creating and not worry about your own agency as a pathetic creator. And that maybe speaks to why I paint all these different styles. Because I’ve been kind of trying to get away from my authorship or voice, because it’s scary to say anything.

Before this interview, I was listening to a podcast that you were on, Nota Bene. And in that, you also brought up this question of agency and the fear of like, do we have any control over fate. How do you see that playing out in this show, in some of these new works? `

I think that question of control and agency is paradox, obviously, for a painter, because I’m making all the choices, but then I also feel distant from it, like I’m just kind of observing myself working in the studio. I love that paradox. To me, it strikes me as really funny, the idea that no one is really in control, but we’re trying to grasp onto it…I think that stems from what we all innately feel, is that we’re not in control. And there’s a lot of humor there. What else can I say about it?`

What kind of reactions do you see from people at that juxtaposition between having the quiet woman next to the anthropomorphized building—are you ever surprised by them?`

Sometimes, yeah. I mean, a lot of people are like, “What are you thinking? Why are you doing this?” People that are nerdy about painting will just relax into how it’s made and what it looks like, and what the different techniques are and what the historical references are. I try to encourage people to just experience the painting. There’s no right or wrong answer. You don’t have to provide an intelligent summary of what’s going on here. Although I do feel like people sometimes feel compelled to do that, because when you see two contrasting things next to each other, the first natural question is to say, “Why are these here together”? And I have my own private reasons, but I try to let people come up with their own narrative before I tell them mine. And yeah, sometimes it’s surprising, but that’s part of the fun of the combinatorial nature of this practice.`

Tristan Unrau. “Clerestory” (2026). Oil on linen. 64” x 51” x 1”. Framed: 66” x 53’ x 2”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Do you have any thoughts on if that’s impacted by the fact that people are talking about your work *with* you? I could see almost some impact on people, wanting to expose it to the artists themselves, maybe more so than if [one] was just at the Met and looking at a random Monet painting.`

I wonder if that’s relative to this thing? And there’s no pressure to make something smart. I have that with friends. I want to signal to them that I’m doing the work of figuring it out. And they’re like, “Relax, dude. You don’t have to figure anything out.”

It depends how you get into painting, but if you get into it through a sort of institutional avenue, like through art school, it takes a while to re-remember that painting is an experiential medium. And for a lot of time you think it has to be like an intelligent, sort of sophisticated, conceptual medium. And really, that should come later. And I think some people have this idea that painting is something to be read and understood. And I think, really, we should be saying that painting is something to be experienced. And you know, when you’re eating a good meal or looking at a great view, no one’s really asking you, “But what does it *mean*?” How does this make you feel? Or this sunset is so gorgeous. That should be our first entry into looking at painting.`

Do you feel less pressure to perform intelligence as you get older or as you continue building this career?`

Definitely. I think the older you get, the more you realize, like, Don’t overthink things as much as the general directionality of making and being involved with the creative process. So don’t forget to not overthink it. And maybe I just am literally getting dumber as I get older. So there’s no other choice.`

I like that as a potential option. One or the other or both.`

Ignorance is bliss. You know, I’m just getting happier and happier as I lose brain cells.`

Tristan Unrau. “Consolation” (2026). Oil on linen 41” x 35” x 1”. Photo: Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

I heard you kind of talking about learning how to talk with AI, speak with AI, use it to get the types of images that you wanted to create these big troves. How was it, learning to use different language for a generative model?

It’s such a powerful tool that that keeps updating and becoming more powerful—almost monthly now. So when I first started using it, it’s way more advanced now, and then there’s different aesthetic qualities to earlier versions of it, and that’s something you kind of have to be nimble with and understand that like this, this is a changing tool, and the reason you liked it for its moments of failure, you’re gonna have to relearn how to get those moments of failure back, because it gets better.

That’s one kind of interesting thing about generative models. It’s fascinating in that I kind of have a metaphor for it, in which you’re communing with a very parochial God that knows, that has vast and incredible depth of image knowledge, almost the entire canon. It’s available to the generative models. It has depth, but, but not a lot of creative breadth. But you can pray to this God for inspiration, and it will just answer your prayers with a fire hose of imagery, and then you’re still stuck with your own agency, and you still have to make decisions based on what it gives you. And it will give you an image where one side of it is great, or one aspect of it is great, not the other. There’s this sort of collage dance that you enter into with this odd form of intelligence.`

I think it’s going to be an interesting tool for creatives and for people that want to make visual things, because I think it’s going to displace how we think of style and we’re going to have to develop a different relationship to individuality and style but we should. We should try hard to, because otherwise we’ll get just really boring, bad taste, AI slop imagery, which is everywhere, and which I think is the reason why people feel so much hatred toward this new tool—it really is deadening the diversity of imagery that we see. But it doesn’t have to if you use it, if you use it with some attitude of exploration, you can make really interesting things with it that are still human and don’t have this sort of disturbing uncanny AI slop.`

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Tristan Unrau, Art, Issue 203, Foragers, David Kordansky