

"Tala Madani with Andrew Paul Woolbright," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2026, pp. 26-31, cover

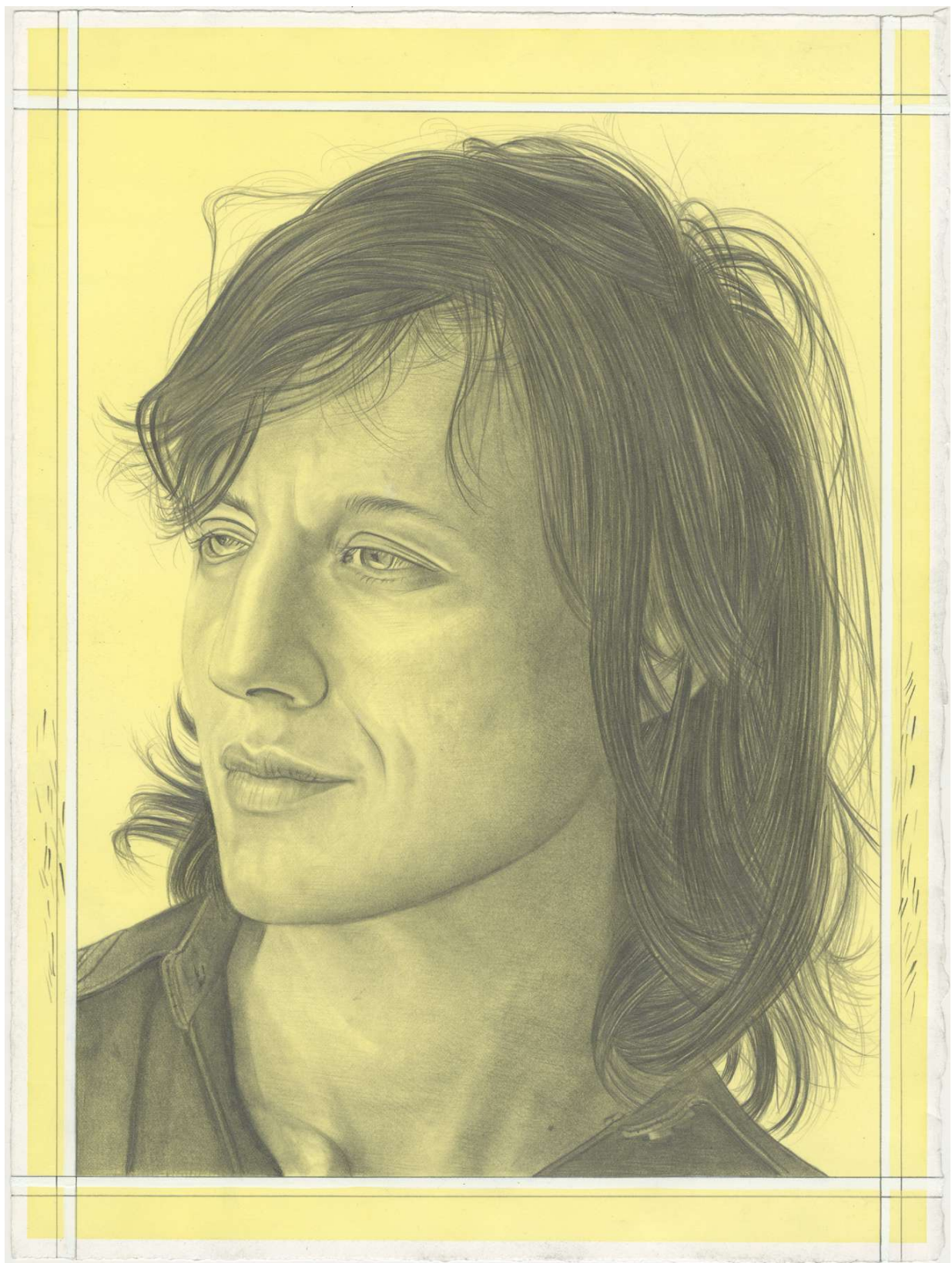
BROOKLYN RAIL

SEPT 2026

• CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

• INDEPENDENT AND FREE





Portrait of Tala Madani, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

TALA MADANI with Andrew Paul Woolbright

According to the artist Riichiro Kawashima, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse both said the same thing of the other, a simple compliment that conveyed their mutual respect: that the other "understood things." Amongst painters, Tala Madani's name often arises when conversations turn to discussions of who has this understanding, and with it, the belief that she is in a small category of painters' painters—the rarely bestowed honorific of the medium. Her smoldering humor glows with alluring irreverence, somehow finds comedic use of what Julia Kristeva referred to as the "black sun," and turns the bottomless depths of melancholy into something that ridicules, unveils, and ultimately destabilizes power. Leading up to *Control X*, her current exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, we spoke about the nature of shame, the failure of portraiture to truly represent the subject, the politics and affinities within caricature and painting, and what keeps painting alive.

Control X
David Kordansky Gallery
September 18–October 24, 2026
Los Angeles

Tala Madani (T.M.): I mean it's within education structures that we get to brush against changes in each generation's interests—the different questions they ask—and I'm fascinated to look at artists that are alive and have worked for many decades, to think if the questions they asked themselves two decades ago are still relevant given different changes in technology, circumstances, culture. I like work that's always engaged with the present, whether through politics or choice of mediums or both.

RAIL Completely. That reminds me of this concept by Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger, this idea of "bad painting" they were defining. They wanted to know what would happen if you made a painting that was responding to phenomena that is so immediate and quick that you couldn't possibly know what would happen to its

meaning, how it might be interpreted. Painting the advertisement that passes by on the bus is a kind of anti-classical mode of painting, which is like: something happens, we wait a few years, we sit back from it, we remark on it, and then we make the *Raft of the Medusa*. It makes me think of how wobbly painting is because of this. There was some sense to it once, maybe as this visual distance between the painter and the subject that produced a space for the viewer—an excess of what was intended and what isn't from trying to comprehend a subject through history painting—and that's different from the demands of making something contemporary. This instantaneous painting is maybe trying to catch the libidinal drive out in the open, but it does it at the expense of critique. But I also feel like your ambivalence is what connects your paintings and animations to the contemporary.

T.M. Ambivalence connects to what you were saying as well—giving up agency. But ambivalence is a great word, because it's sort of both deeply

caring and almost traumatized by that deep care, and then becomes completely unattached.

RAIL We jumped right in, but you said that you're thinking about how painting can both speak to now, and then how that will then relate in a number of years or decades. I'm really interested in the way each painting that you take on seems to address its own questions, and you're always looking for new ones to ask. What are some of the textures that you're working with now? And by textures, I don't just mean visual or tactile, but psychic and social; cultural and personal.

T.M. One of the lines in the show is the idea of portraiture. I became interested in doing a portrait of someone I cared deeply about, but some people are just too big to become portraits. They're huge, like mountains. I started making some paintings where I'm investigating this idea of a mountain portrait, and it's sort of attached to this idea of a convulsive beauty: something that is almost demonic because it's so wonderful. If you were to paint that, it would make you want to throw up. You'd be so convulsed by it that you'd have to turn it into something else.

Another line in the show is an idea of monuments to kids: paintings of bronze and marble sculptures of kids which have been graffitied and pissed on. They are ruminations on the tensions of wanting to be a monumental star in an iconoclastic moment. The feeling of satisfaction in graffitiing anything is always there for me. I graffiti my own paintings. I mean, Shit Mom is graffiti embodied.

RAIL Collectively, it seems to be an interest in making these adjacent representations. The idea of self-graffiti or effacement is an interesting paradox. What does it mean to anticipate a work's own transgression of defacement? These are allegories of painting, but also shame, which plays a role within your work—or the ability to efface or deface, to hide from view or cover something. But then destruction also creates. I'm thinking of *Sex Ed by God* (2017), where the girl in the projector eventually wipes the whole video away. It ends with her clearing everything away; destroying the images and undoing herself as an image.

T.M. I think shame is definitely there, because shame is in society. So my work deals with a shaming exterior, shamelessly. We are all taught shame in order to be socialized. So for me, because she is Shit Mom, if she put a little cover over her face and dressed up, then she would in fact be presenting shame. The fact that she is adamantly fine being Shit Mom is really rejecting shame.

RAIL When I think of shame and its rejection or its acceptance, I think of Silvan Tomkins and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—this idea that shame starts as a negative affect that then is actually an important mechanism for us to individuate. Tomkins noticed that at seven months, children start to hide their face, which led him to believe that shame comes before conditioning, which means it must be our way of reshaping or restructuring our identity in different ways. Shame is protean. We find who we are through shame, and we find community through shame.

T.M. If you're lucky. If you're lucky, you can grow into a sense of being an individual through that. There are some shame blocks that never let you rise out of it. I would argue with Tomkins that maybe—for a seven-month-old child—it's not to



Tala Madani, *Formalising Shitmom*, 2026. Oil on linen, 60 x 54 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Brice Wilcox.

cover up themselves, but to make the other person disappear. They might entirely be trying to, because their world is very much in their perception; by covering their face, they might entirely be trying to make others go away, not themselves.

RAIL Completely. Which is interesting, because that's an issue of representation: the need to try to control and make things disappear. It's that too. What got me on this track with your work was that something I feel like you're taking on within your painting is that painting is this complicated act of looking and being looked at, and there is this power in being the one who looks, which a lot of your figures are refusing in different ways. This is really apparent in *Eye Stabber* (2013), where the main figure is literally made up of eyes that they're then stabbing. Obviously that's Oedipal, but their awareness of being looked at and their desire to look without being looked at gives them

a kind of chaotic quirkiness that is sometimes self-destructive, or they engage in these kind of bizarre but ineffable actions that often stray into the erotic. And, obviously, humor and the erotic are closely intertwined.

T.M. Again, being looked at and modern mediums of communication—Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—reduce much activism into gesture. I really wonder about the potency of gesture. It's hard when you're buying into the idea that social media has any power against vertical power that includes the ownership of social media.

RAIL I want to hear more about gesture, and I totally agree about representation being handled too lightly. But this leads me into wanting to talk to you about how caricature uses this gesture and can upset some of these problematic power relations. I've always suspected that your work

maybe has a connection to someone like Ardeshtir Mohassess, but then there's a painterly lineage that you are synthesizing and very aware of—painters like Robert Motherwell.

T.M. I appreciate the context of Iranian political satire very much. Also, I'm strongly responding to Western traditions of painting, which are predominantly male.

RAIL Yeah.

T.M. But in terms of my attitude—for instance, the inclusion of "the joke", satire, punching up, the history of caricature—this all comes from the social weave of Iranian culture. Painting is thinking, and the way I think is very Iranian. But to open up our net of what is caricature: when you look at Francisco de Goya's "Black Paintings" in the Museo del Prado, because he painted those for

himself, faster or with more of an attempt at a kind of an immediate intensity or whatever, they could be caricatures if they were not thick paintings of a certain size.

RAIL Of course. Fascinating. The two aren't really that separate. And humor is political. I always enjoy how a joke can relax the rules. Oftentimes, when I'm dealing with an administrator or a guard or someone who is currently in a role of enforcing rules, I get a pleasure in seeing if a joke can get them to relax back into who they are when they aren't on the clock. The joke can loosen things. And the loosening goes both ways. I'm reminded of how Mannerism might have a relationship to this too. The first Mannerists came at the moment the Renaissance was breaking apart, and the dissolution of the societies it formed created a dissolution of figures. In Arnold Hauser's amazing book on the topic, he writes this huge chapter on the history of alienation and how important it is to understanding Mannerism. I feel like your work feels of this moment as well, because these mounds of flesh or excrement might be a political dissolution. That lump or squish of form has a history of alienation attached to it maybe.

T.M. That's an interesting one. I've never taken Mannerism that seriously (with certain exceptions, like El Greco) because it's always felt like a kind of stylization. I wonder which societies experienced a moment when they didn't feel some kind of dissolution was coming. It feels like some kind of inherently human anxiety.

RAIL It's interesting to think that a style comes out of the feeling of dissolution. There's this rhythm within your painting that is similar to Goya, which comes from your animation, and that speed produces caricature. I think there are very few people that know how to spend a long time on a painting. I feel like you change so many times over the course of the process, and the question becomes how do you do it in a way that's not just decorating or rendering more. Your speed produces these wonderful, lumpy, shifting forms, and this sense of stumbling that embodies the kind of wayward and libidinal reactivity your subjects often have.

T.M. It's so funny, because I did try to really make myself uncomfortable by not speeding. When you think about something, it just has its own speed.

RAIL Fascinating. It does.

T.M. I realized why I like speed. I want events in paintings. I'm looking for events—and not just in my own work, by the way—when I'm driven to another painting, too. And the event again could be the way the paint is absorbed on the canvas, you know, in a different way. The event could be very material. But it's that energy—like the energy of an event. I mean, I think of David Hockney talking about how slow his splash is, and then about Francis Bacon's *Jet of Water* (1979). I think I'm very antithetical to Hockney. And not to suggest that I think Bacon was necessarily a better painter than Hockney per se, but I love that they bickered. Hockney is the world I want to live in, but it doesn't solve my problems. You know what I mean? It's actually quite interesting to think about whether the artwork that you see is the medicine or if it's the cure. Is it just going to ease the pain of your disease, or is it going to cure you?

RAIL Events remind me of that incredible Barthes essay on Twombly. He related the events in Twombly's paintings to the five events of literature that were established in classical Greek poetics. One of the events is coincidence, another is outcome, and another comes about through action. Those seem to have particular relevance for the events you make within painting. There's that Gilles Deleuze book *On Painting* that just came out.

T.M. Oh yeah, I love that one.

RAIL There's the story of Bacon telling David Sylvester that a painting isn't done until there's something uncontrollable in it; then he scrapes off and throws a big glob of paint from his palette at the canvas and it sticks, and that finishes it. For him it's that actual uncontrolled thing that's the last note, unlike the simulated expression of Hockney. I feel like that had to drive Bacon crazy: believing that you actually have to do a thing, and you have to have zero control over it to make something. It can't be simulated. Susan Rothenberg also talked about searching for events within painting—how green or the material itself could present an event. But I'm just wondering if you could describe some of those events you're looking for in your work.

T.M. I set up a cause and effect logic in the paintings. For instance, there is a fan in the paintings that affects what's in front of it, or a condition in

the painting that suggests the possibility of flux, like condensation.

RAIL I guess I'm really asking about satisfaction, because I'm wondering if, looking back, there's a moment where you really appreciated an event that was able to happen.

T.M. Some of the "Corner Paintings." I don't know if you've seen the "Corner Paintings," but there were some that I wanted to have a sense of water or light—some disruption on that light. Your question is so interesting because it asks what stays with you. The *Window cleaner* (2024) or "Squeegee Men" paintings play with painting versus drawing. It has this certain kind of realism, because anybody could draw on condensation or on dust. I like sitting next to a certain kind of familiarity or realism.

RAIL Sitting next to realism. I love that. That explains so much—a caricatured or cartoony world that has its own internal sense of realism, maybe.

T.M. A kind of pictorial logic that can embrace or eat up caricatures, or any mark really. Paintings that suggest they could go away. Their weightlessness or their thinness is satisfying because it also feels like action. I mean, actually, putting that layer and drawing into it is a very fast thing that I have to do. Because if it dries too much, I can't draw into it.



Tala Madani, *Silver Lining*, 2025. Oil on linen, 98 x 80 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Flying Studio.

Tala Madani, *Spirit Orgy*, 2026. Oil on linen, 17 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Jeff McLane.



RAIL Right. But yeah, it seems to be this search for forcing yourself to be totally present within the act of painting, and the search for what artifice or prompt lets you set the stage for that, and once it's built, you have to be totally in it, undistracted, to find the event. You don't give yourself a lot of time to solve the new problem.

T.M. I love the work that feels as in flux in front of everybody else as it does in front of me. It still has that sense of potentiality when someone else is in front of it.

RAIL Yes. I feel like that gives language to one of the things that it takes some time to realize as a painter. If a painting feels too concluded or contrived—if it feels like at a certain point it's just sort of filling in the blanks—you end up with something that is dead on arrival, or decorative. A painting needs to have that sense that it could have gone a number of different ways, and it's best when it still feels like it can.

T.M. Works which achieve or aim for a certain kind of resolution can feel closed and lack mystery—you look at them from the outside.

RAIL Well, as a viewer, when I'm not painting, I similarly enjoy when you can see the painter's attention. There are some painters that I will

see at the Met that just can't be bothered to finish the bottom of the painting on some of those big history paintings. And for some of those big, twelve-foot-tall paintings, you can see the artist go "Ugh, that's way down there," or "I don't want to get back up on the ladder again." And it's the eye thinking and at work with a physical body that is always finding its limits.

T.M. This reminds me of my enjoyment at seeing Leonardo da Vinci's big commissions that were never finished. It seems he only had the interest to go as far as he did; the rest didn't matter for him. He couldn't be bothered "filling in," as you say, those half-finished works, which also conditioned our eye to further modernism. You know, I think that's where I disagreed also with Deleuze's suggestion that Michelangelo is the beginning of modern painters, because da Vinci simply not finishing the commissions suggests as much autonomy of choice.

RAIL So true. That's so true. And that's Henry James: art as a vehicle for rendering consciousness, which is unrepresentable. We convey what it is that we were trying to figure out, and equally what doesn't matter. At the last big Kippenberger show at Skarstedt Gallery, you could see all of these textures from paintings underneath the paintings. You could see like a tree in texture or the beginning of a representational shape, and it

has nothing to do with the final painting, but he wouldn't sand those early decisions down. Every painting reminds you of all of its forking paths. But again, that's the erotics or poetics that painting can create. There's the famous Donna Haraway thing that humor is always serious, and Lauren Berlant talking about how comedy is a way of kind of revealing who's in, who's out, and all those things. And it's an erotics of opposition, of finding the boundary line—finding what can and can't be transgressed.

I feel like you use painting in a similar way, and it's also in how you use humor, whether it's the crying monuments or the Shit Mom, or working through subjects of opposition towards a kind of sympathy. Is there something oppositional that you're working against within painting right now? Going back to Bacon hating Hockney for what Hockney represented—is there a type of painting or subject that you see yourself working against?

T.M. So many things: pushing against convention, taste, trends, misogyny, rigid self-definitions, cancel culture, depression, certainty. I don't know if this answers any of your questions, but I've been reading *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, and the book has a great foreword by Adam Phillips. The very first page of his foreword talks about Barthes's idea of becoming a personality when you write

an autobiography, and the possibility of shifting that personality—the permission that is given for redefining it over and over.

RAIL Well, since you brought up Adam Phillips, it's also that heterodoxy that you allow yourself in your work. It makes me think of some of the psychoanalysis that reconsiders Sigmund Freud. As opposed to thinking of things as phases, stages, phobias, and types, which are very fixed structural things, you have someone like Melanie Klein talking about how the ego takes positions against different objects, so it's like we can kind of adopt the positionality of a paranoid in this object, but then cast that position aside when confronting a different topic.

T.M. By the way, I have to admit: no one has described Melanie Klein versus Freud as distinctly different positions this well to me. *[Laughter]* She's probably closer to Arthur Schopenhauer in terms of construction of the subject/object relationship. He had a profound effect on my relationship to painting in my twenties.

RAIL How did that take form within the paintings? That's so interesting. Maybe that's what I'm picking up on as a comment on painting as a position of looking.

T.M. I was a student, but it expanded my sense of how a painting can operate, in terms of both one's intentions making it and an audience experiencing it.

RAIL Along with opposition, I wonder if there are rules you have for yourself as a painter.

T.M. Yeah, the painting has to be alive. It has to excite me. Dead paintings are okay, too—they could still be a step toward something.

RAIL Could you describe a dead painting?

T.M. Yeah, the very first "Shit" paintings. They were all dead. But they were promising something that I'm getting closer to. They might not seem that way, but they were so shy. I mean, the very first one is actually before San Antonio, and this guy was sitting on a chair, and he's opening up his belly button and it's an inverse anus, and this piece of poo is coming out of his belly button, and it's not even brown. I was so shy to paint it. It's the same color as the figure. It's barely a poo, you know, but it was exciting because it's a stepping stone.

RAIL I like how all of your characters go through these scenarios of self too. They're never one-dimensional. They'll go from expressing boredom and pacing around to then experiencing these violent episodes, and then feeling some kind of shame or shyness again. They often get into repetitive cycles. There's an elasticity that you're also interested in, or a scenario of self that I think is unfortunately kind of rare. There seems to be more of an interest in a singular idea of self in a lot of the work being made right now.

T.M. A kind of conservatism comes in when you want to adamantly defend yourself or your position in society. Many artists are wanting to do work that is about, let's say, empathy or identity or elevating the social position of a group that they represent. With that comes the fear of taking a wrong step—the burden of sincerity. All this takes away from the state of mind that can play without gravity.

RAIL I like that. "Playing without gravity." I think that's one of our current regimes of truth, to reference Michel Foucault: looking for good and bad, or replacing ambivalence and irony and difficulty and complexity with confessionals. I feel like it's important to try to impart an awareness that events shape us, context shapes us, crowds shape us, our environment shapes us, and the desire to look for things that are inherently good or inherently bad is too easy. It's looking to offload the challenge of sitting with all of the issues we are facing. The art world in some ways has arrived back at an almost Hays Code-era Hollywood.

T.M. This is interesting, because why this is happening is because of the psychological state of the world: apprehension. There is, as you say, a reason for things, right? And the need for a simplified set of facts is because of the sense of bombardment or the risk of getting it wrong. So there is no avant-garde; we don't have an appetite, or an appetite to risk it. We are in the rerun section. We want to know what we're going to see. We don't want any surprises. Let's watch episodes of *Friends* over and over and over because we're afraid.

And I'm much more interested to see why, and then what? It's always good to check in and see what is motivating you toward an action. It's a good place to start.

RAIL This is the tricky thing. Pierre Bourdieu referred to what we would call the avant-garde as "bourgeois art," because the majority of people oftentimes won't have the time for complexity,

abstraction, poetics. It's like the art that reaches the masses is Netflix. It is the mural. It is the meme, the quick and legible and compressed thing.

T.M. That mural look is now all over the art world. Go to a community center and see the kind of paintings that a person who wants to start painting paints, and then go to Frieze New York: you could take some photos, and nobody would know the difference.

RAIL Yes, and I think this draws the public out of the public and into the private institution, which tries to perform as a new kind of public space. Museums and institutions have shifted to a role of mimicking and reflecting our desires and utopias back to us, and with it the tolerable forms of critique that we are allowed to engage in. The institution is always alluring because it's always promising that it can adapt to what we dream it to be. There's some connection to AI and language models with that, of returning our language and our dreams and our images back to us, but now with the mystifying power of the empire condoning it. There's something always sadistic to mimicry. Its guise takes the form of joke, but there's violence just behind it.

Andrew Paul Woolbright is an artist, gallerist, and Editor-at-Large at the *Brooklyn Rail*, living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Woolbright is an MFA graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design in painting and is the director of the Lower East Side gallery Below Grand. He currently teaches at Pratt and School of Visual Arts in New York.



Tala Madani, *Two Squeezed Men*, 2025. Oil on linen, 31 × 25 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photography: Flying Studio.