

Why Ultra-Contemporary Artists Are So Obsessed With Old Masters

In the age of A.I., young artists are anchoring their work in art history.



Kurt Kauper, "Fantasy #1" (2019). © Kurt Kauper. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar, New York.

Artists have always recycled their era's "Old Masters": Romans quoted the Greeks, Rodin studied Michelangelo, and Picasso returned to Rembrandt, to name just a few. While the prevalence of these relationships has ebbed and flowed over time, it is peaking again this winter. A striking number of gallery, foundation, and museum shows in New York are foregrounding emerging and established contemporary artists' interplay with European art history, from Donatello to Goya, with press materials that underscore this lineage almost as strongly as the work itself.

It's tempting to write off these examples as just more "[reference-baiting](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/what-is-reference-baiting-art-market-2732751)," a form of art historical name-dropping meant to lend gravity and market confidence to lesser-known artists. But conversations with the gallerists, foundation executives, and artists behind this season's shows reveal that several of the citations are much more than a veneer.

Art History in the Age of the Endless Scroll

Another force driving this transhistorical escalation is technological unease. As early as the 1950s, Marshall McLuhan warned that the electronic age would usher in an “age of anxiety,” as easy access to mass media would dull the senses, hamper critical thinking, and produce a kind of collective numbness—one that, in his view, only artists could counter. The winter of 2026 is proving him right inside and outside New York’s galleries.

“We are bombarded in daily life by a sea of disposable imagery,” Harper Levine, owner of Harper’s gallery, told me. “Contemporary artists who anchor work with historical antecedents are mining the viewer’s yearning for recognizable aesthetics in a tumultuous world.”

Asked about the motives behind this surge in practices and shows deeply engaged with art history, Plato founder Elena Platonova similarly identified “the meteoric technological advances and A.I.’s ability to imitate humans,” as well as “access to an unprecedented amount of data about the past.”

“There is comfort in relating to the cultures that have risen and fallen over the centuries, only to be outlasted and immortalized by their art,” she added.



Left: Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pierrot* (1718), detail. Photo: Collection of the Louvre, Paris. Right: Kurt Kauper, *Choices for Men #2* (2025). © Kurt Kauper. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.

This pressure is pushing certain artists to create works that wade into the relevance of foundational concepts like meaning and originality in the endless sea of information. Kurt Kauper, who is showing at Ortuzar (<https://www.ortuzar.com/exhibitions/kurt-kauper2>) through February 28, is presenting paintings shaped by a deliberately broad set of sources. After I reached out for comment, the gallery also sent a reference PDF that expressly paired his paintings with works by Édouard Manet, Jean-Antoine Watteau, Giorgione, Sassetta, Morandi, and more—a bombardment of classic and contemporary images not dissimilar to my own Instagram Feed.

“I’ve always been inspired by traditional Western painting, but I started overtly ‘taking’ from those paintings because I wanted a way to generate an image without concerning myself with meaning as the main driver of the image,” Kauper explained.

Rather than absorb or litigate the historical weight of classical artists, he wanted to “start with pose, attitude, or composition, and then modify them to create a new, indeterminate, emotive experience”—an approach he has been exploring since 2019. The sheer breadth of his quotations weakens the authority of any single citation, reducing these titanic art historical pillars into manageable formal problems. In turn, his paintings test what it means to make connections across time when time itself has begun to collapse beneath the sheer weight of information.