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Art

Contemporary Painters Are Using a Hazy Aesthetic as a Window to the Past

Josie Thaddeus-Johns

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Craig Cameron-Mackintosh

Fresco, 2023

EBONY/CURATED

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When [Leonardo da Vinci](#) was painting the *Mona Lisa*, he was in the midst of his research on the nature of perception—the way that the eye detects the properties of the world around it. The style Leonardo developed, known as *sfumato* (derived from the Italian word for “smoke”), became a defining characteristic of the artist’s work: a blurry glow around objects in his work that somehow makes them appear more tangible, or real.

It’s a style that has endured, and contemporary painters are still using Leonardo’s technique to give their works a transcendent blur, which in many artists’ work also gestures to the past. While softening the edges can create a more realistic canvas, it can also offer a nostalgic distance for the viewer, a way for artists to pull up resonant images from their memories.

Sayre Gomez, *The Whole Wide World is a Haunted House*, 2022. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery.

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These blurred boundaries can also be found in early 19th-century American Tonalists, like Charles Melville Dewey and George Inness, who painted landscapes in a fuzzy style that allowed trees, for example, to blend into their surroundings. This soft-focus blur allows the sublime elements of their nature-based subjects to shine.

Contemporary painters, too, have found similar inspiration in portraying the nuances of the atmosphere. For example, we see a similar transcendent fuzz in Sayre Gomez's paintings, particularly in his 2022 show "Halloween City," at François Ghebaly's Los Angeles space, that depicts a blurry "necroscape" of Southern California, as the exhibition text explains. For example, in *The Whole Wide World is a Haunted House* (2022), Los Angeles's skies blend into a smoggy haze, a pastel malaise settling over the canvas, with a strange, deserted parking lot in the foreground.

This strategy is in fact common among various artists based in L.A. Jessica Taylor Bellamy's sort-of portrait *Prophetess of the Region* (2023), for instance, deploys whirling oranges and grays to create a skyscape that her subjects, a photorealistically portrayed woman with closed eyes and a bouquet of flowers, seem to disappear into. Perhaps it's not surprising, given California's experience of smoke-logged atmospheres caused by pollution and frequent wildfires.

Jessica Taylor Bellamy
Prophetess of the Region, 2023
Moosey

Aryo Toh Djojo
Leaving Babylon, 2023
Perrotin

Price on request

In [Perrotin's](#) booth at [Tokyo Gendai](#) a few months ago, this haze was also on display, in the work of another Los Angeles-based artist, [Aryo Toh Djojo](#). Using an airbrush technique to represent images he finds in advertising and magazines, Toh Djojo takes a fuzzy approach not only to his backgrounds but the entire canvas. "When I started making the work, it wasn't intentional that I wanted it to be hazy, it was just the airbrush," he said in an interview with Artsy.

For Toh Djojo, who had been making abstract paintings before he moved into this style of figurative work, the airbrush was a new tool that allowed him to recall the styles of the past. "I wanted to just figure out how to use the airbrush without using masking tape and stencils. It was to figure out if I can paint like an [Old Master](#) but with an airbrush." He also cited his interest in spirituality and his experiences meditating: "seeing thoughts pass by as if they were clouds."

At the same time, like the Old Masters he wanted to emulate, the fuzzy outlines of his subjects seems to add a realism to Toh Djojo's works. "The closer you get to the image, it gets even more blurry...you have to go further out," he said.



Gerhard Richter
MV.58, 2011
Marian Goodman Gallery

Price on request

Just like Leonardo, contemporary artists are finding ways to portray their subjects with more realism, by, confusingly, inserting a layer of haze between the sharp definition of their subjects. This king, perhaps, of the blur, and its importance in painting, is [Gerhard Richter](#). "I blur to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant," the artist [said](#) in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2011. "You do not see less by looking at a field out of focus through a magnifying glass," he wrote in *Gerhard Richter: Atlas*.

Craig Cameron-Mackintosh, like many artists cited here, mentioned Richter as an inspiration. The artist's work *Fresco* (2023), included in a recent exhibition at EBONY/CURATED, features an out-of-focus landscape, along with several portraits in this same hazy style. In an interview, the artist explained that he was used to working with a more photorealistic style, but suddenly began finding inspiration in a freer, fuzzier technique when a deadline meant he had to put his perfectionism aside. "I started using oil stick, which lends itself to this kind of smudgy, dragging technique," he said. "I'm leaving a little bit up to the viewer to fill in the gaps."



Craig Cameron-Mackintosh

Out of Body, 2023

EBONY/CURATED

US\$2,000



Craig Cameron-Mackintosh

De Goede Hoop, 2023

EBONY/CURATED

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For Cameron-Mackintosh, this style recalls a cinematic blur that feels familiar to him from his film studies, he said, citing the influence of films like *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999). But his new soft-focus style is also a reference to the artists' own memories, transferred through the murky pane of memory. "It's looking back and just allowing someone to also experience that moment without it being like a photographic snapshot," he said.

Haze, therefore, can become a way to create space between the viewer and the subject of the painting, portraying the feeling of looking back: in other words, nostalgia. With the pandemic in society's rearview mirror, there is a strong sense of time being divided: the before, and the after. Looking back on these prior experiences can become, therefore, like looking through a fogged-up glass, something familiar and yet incomprehensible at the same time.

For Japanese painter Hiroka Yamashita, who has presented solo shows of her paintings at Kiang Malingue and Tanya Leighton, nostalgia also plays a key role in the blurring of her images. "I want [my works] to be something that each person living in the present can feel connected to in some way, and that hints at a future or parallel worlds (more

peaceful ones)," she said in an interview with Artsy.



Hiroka Yamashita

Field (Body) (), 2022

Kiang Malingue

Sold

Nostalgia, after all, often gestures to things that never even happened: we can long for a fantasy that appears linked to the past without knowing exactly what the memory is linked to. Similarly, Yamashita's work conjures up fairy tales both contemporary and old: "The things that have influenced me since I was little are the works of Hayao Miyazaki and the stories my grandmother told me."

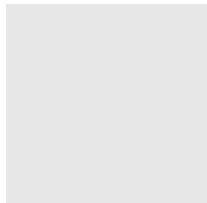
Contemporary paintings that embrace this style are a new challenge for the viewer. Their hazy nostalgia reminds us that sometimes, a blurry suggestion can be more evocative than a crystal-clear depiction. As with dreams or distant memories, some things become more clarified only with distance.

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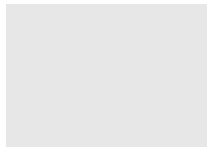
Josie Thaddeus-Johns

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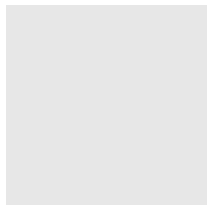
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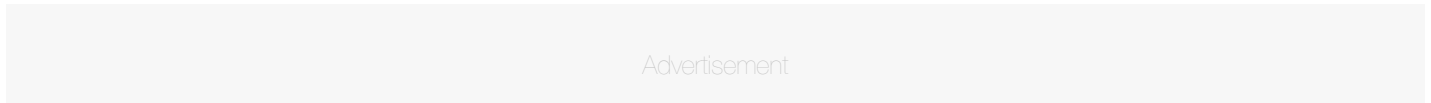
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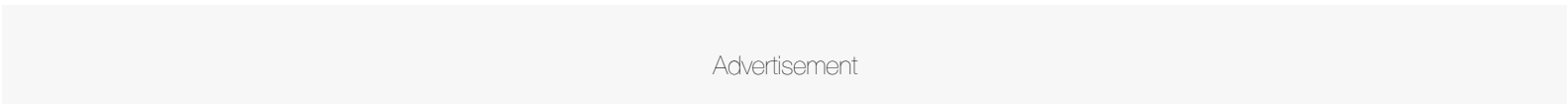
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