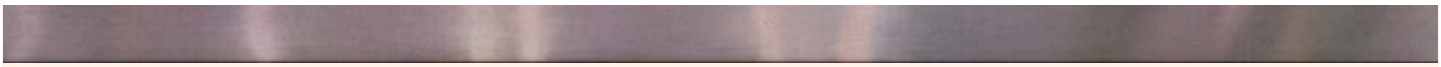


HTSI Visual Arts

Artists are obsessed with curtains. What’s the big draw?

They’re the drape crusaders



Liquid Reflection (Rideau horizontal II), 2026, by Maude Corriveau © The artist/Plato Gallery

Jill Krasny

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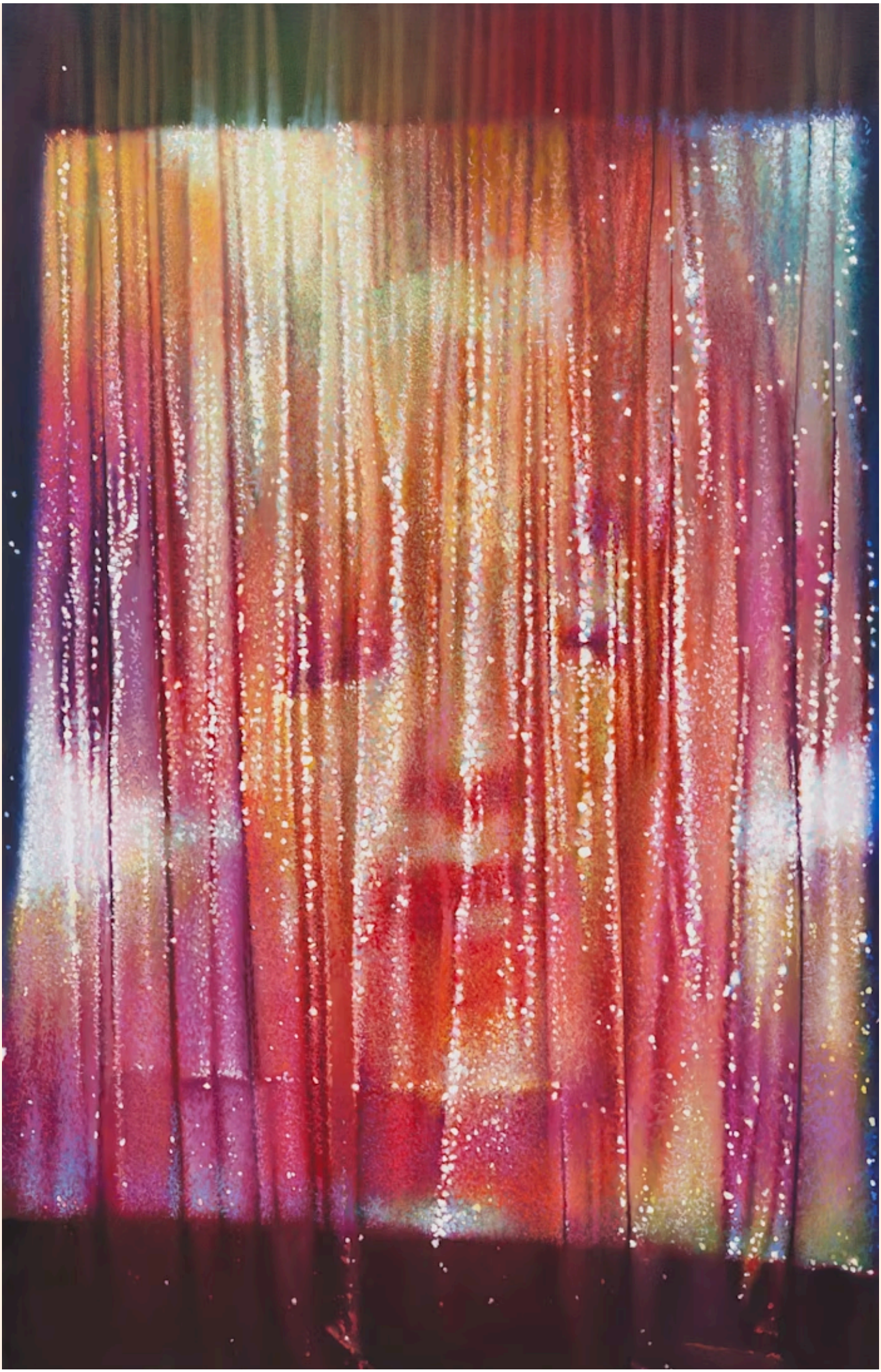
The Old Masters would have puzzled over Aglaé Bassens' curtains. Aggressively chintzy, the Belgian painter's renditions are hardly the stuff of Dutch masterworks. Yet there's something bittersweet about her forlorn drapes; like all new things, they once held promise.

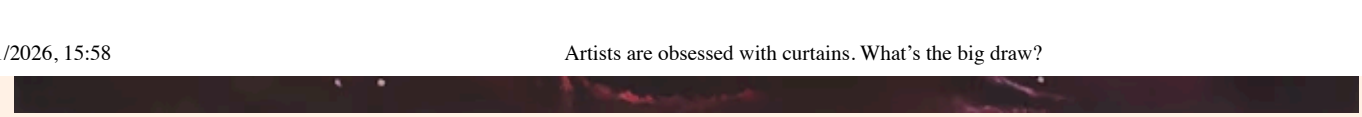
"I've often painted windows because I've always been looking in from the outside," says the London-based artist, who will present *Hello London* at Hesse Flatow gallery in New York in the spring. She often feels a pang of longing when she peers through street windows and sees the family life within. "The curtain is the portal, a gateway," she says, "between the public and the private."



Flopping Curtain, 2026, by Aglaé Bassens

Bassens is just one artist using curtains as a symbol. Maude Corriveau's silk taffeta folds are a tool to explore AI; Louise Giovanelli depicts the curtain as a metaphor for religious ecstasy. New Hampshire-based Shawn Huckins uses them to confront the perils of climate change, and GaHee Park's ravishing, dusk-coloured paintings probe the murky depths of the "deeper unconsciousness that you can imagine through the curtain".





Cathexis, 2026, by Louise Giovanelli © DACS 2026/White Cube/Theo Christelis

"Curtains cross all these different connotations, some of which are very psychologically charged or spiritually significant," says Glenn Adamson, who co-curated a group show, *Drop, Cloth*, last winter in New York. Drapery was an early prototype for abstraction, he says, citing Raphaelle Peale's 1820s painting *Venus Rising from the Sea – A Deception* as an important example. Whereas Venus is typically the main attraction, here a crisply folded towel covering her is all we see.

Cloth also signalled status. "Unless you owned gold or imported porcelain, the most expensive thing you owned was textiles," says Adamson. Clothing, hangings, carpets – "anything requiring intensive craft and tremendous concentration of labour" – became an expression of privilege. "The idea of being threadbare, all those signifiers of class," adds Adamson, "are very much expressed."



Table at Dusk, 2024, by GaHee Park © Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin/Paul Litherland

Curtains have been a career-long obsession for the Manchester-based artist Giovanelli, who has just opened a solo exhibition, *In the Light of False Suns*, at White Cube Mason's Yard. Early in her career, she would challenge herself to copy the Old Masters. Today, "I'm influenced by cinema and pop culture, TV, advertising, things that we encounter day to day", she says. "I'm trying to bridge those things with much older pre-existing ideas, art history and mythology, and those macro-cosmic ideas to do with religion, devotion, worship."

With their celestial titles such as *Ad Astra*, Giovanelli's new lustrous versions are superimposed with cinema stills of women in ecstasy. They convey our unsettling "need for religion, even though we may not call ourselves religious", says the artist. And they're deliberately mysterious: "I never allude to any other pictorial space through or behind the curtains," she points out. "They're preventing the viewer from understanding the full narrative or story."



Ad Astra, 2026, by Louise Gionvanelli © DACS 2026/White Cube/Theo Christelis

"I want the viewer to have this uncertainty," agrees Corriveau, whose *Between Folds* at NY's Plato Gallery featured delicately hand-painted examples. Long captivated by materiality – especially how light plays with matter – she began photographing vases and other objects against reflective fabrics. She sometimes uses Adobe Firefly's AI to make staged hyper-real photos and then paints the result. "Ultimately, it becomes difficult to distinguish which paintings originate from my own photographs and which incorporate AI-generated imagery," she says.

Anna Freeman Bentley began to focus more on painting curtains after visiting a film set in 2023: "I was interested in the invisible boundaries, where the reality of the onscreen world ends and the present-day film set begins," says the east London-based artist. Her mauve-toned renderings of her own studio are now being shown at Nahmad Projects in London until 11 December. "Flowing folds of fabric offer an opportunity to explore the medium of paint in its own right."



Red Drape II, 2026, by Alexandra Barth © Courtesy of the artist and Document

Alexandra Barth grew up amid the "cold and very practical" Communist era-housing of Bratislava, Slovakia, and fell for curtains in 2022 when she moved to northern Italy; she was especially struck by the velvety rose-coloured drapes she saw at the entrance of Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta in Cremona. Recently, she had a show entitled *The Awnings* at Document gallery in Chicago. Painting curtains, she says, "is mostly about trying to grasp chaos. It's trying to organise something evasive, maybe a human essence."



Sunset and Glowing Green Curtain (after Church), 2026, by Shawn Huckins © Shawn Huckins Studio

For Huckins (*Scattered Sun* opens at Richard Heller Gallery in Santa Monica on 9 January), curtains are a way of staging a certain unease about environmental change. "Each scene is flanked by curtains, placing the viewer inside the familiar and protected home while looking at an increasingly unstable natural world," he says.

The motif is used to similar effect by Alec Egan. At first, his paintings of close-up vignettes with a flowery curtain expressed the "staging of desire" that he felt growing up in LA. But they feel heavier now. He lost his home and studio in the Palisades fire in 2025, and now his raucously clashing patterns – '80s tulip-print curtains and Laura Ashley florals – have come to echo something more compulsive and suffocating in the interim. "It's this feeling of longing to be outside, but you're still behind the curtains," says the artist, who will have an exhibition at LA's Eames Foundation next January. "It's a surreal, maybe a little more threatening, still slippery world that I'm trying to get in touch with," he continues. "But still beautiful, I hope."



Morning Air, 2024, by Leif Engström © Jean-Baptiste Béranger

Other times, a curtain just evokes nostalgia. Swedish artist Leif Engström grew up in the rural, artistic town of Arvika, with a father who often stopped the car to photograph what moved him – so documenting the '90s-style curtains he now spots in real estate listings comes naturally. The curtains recall those he knew as a teenager living in his family's 1800s house; his own takes can be seen at Stockholm's Moderna Museet and the Kristinehamns konstmuseum until early 2027. "It's a way for me to preserve these different objects and the memory they hold," he says.

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