

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Painter and sculptor Joe Fig on the importance of seeing

The artist's exhibition, "Contemplating Compositions," is open until October 21 at the Cristin Tierney Gallery on the Bowery.



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On the morning of his exhibition opening, artist Joe Fig told me that "Seeing is like a superpower." Fig and I sat in the middle of the light and airy main gallery space and discussed his many paintings. His works depict a diverse range of attendees studying popular artworks displayed in different galleries and museums. The pieces are layered,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

showing spectators in the foreground and well-known pieces of art in the background. Our conversation felt very meta, and showed me a mirror into the heart of an art lover.

'Contemplating Compositions' is an extension of Fig's 2020 exhibition, 'Contemplation,' which featured at the same gallery in 2020. Both shows depict images that many New Yorkers have seen before — people entranced by the art on the walls of galleries and museums. 'Alex Katz: Gathering' at the Guggenheim Museum and 'Edward Hopper's New York' at the Whitney Museum of American Art are among many other iconic New York Art collections and shows that are depicted in Fig's art.

Fig began the collection a few years ago, and said he found inspiration while "watching people in museums... appreciating other works of art." Fig explained to me that this show was something he needed to do. "As an artist, you want people to actually take their time and really appreciate the work," he said.

Fig also emphasized his love for color throughout the interview and said that the colors in his work are more vibrant than they are in reality, because as an artist, he has that agency.

The paintings shown in the exhibition are bright, fun and engaging. In "Alex Katz: Gathering/Guggenheim (The Great Katzby)," 2022-23, spectators look at Katz's work on three different floors of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic rotunda. Placed in front of the Katz paintings, viewers can observe the different ways in which people engage with art. There is immense respect for detail in Fig's work. Each spectator has a unique posture and outfit; one little boy, clad in a white T-shirt, even slings his arm over the barrier of the rotunda into the atrium.

Furthermore, Fig's paintings shine a spotlight on those interested in art.

By being a voyeur to people deeply engaged in the art in front of them, we get to people-watch alongside Fig. In "Andy Warhol: 2 Self Portraits (1964, 1966)/ Art Institute of Chicago," 2023, two individuals are examining two of Warhol's portraits. The pair is fashionably clad in hats, boots, animal prints and denim, but the RuPaul crossbody bag slung over one of their shoulders is the most notable.

Fig said he chose to depict those people specifically because the RuPaul bag "seemed very Warhol-y." Every choice that Fig made in this series was intentional, adding harmony to the collection.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

The art world is immensely accessible to NYU students, and they can easily take the place of one of Fig's characters. Whether it is through the Museum Gateway for Students, which offers discounted prices to art institutions around the city, or the countless free New York City gallery shows, it is important — and easy — to contemplate art.

When asked about what contemplation means to him, Fig said “the first thing that popped into [his] head was joy.” Anybody who has become lost in a painting can probably concur with what he had to say: “It’s like listening to music but you’re using your eyes instead of your ears.”

Even though it can be a little intimidating to explore the numerous and sometimes overwhelming visual arts scenes in New York City, we shouldn't run away from them.

Fig offered up advice for those who feel disengaged: “Go to things that are accessible at first and then get a deeper dive. Just see what kind of grabs you. Don't feel like you have to see everything or understand everything... It's a language you need to learn.”