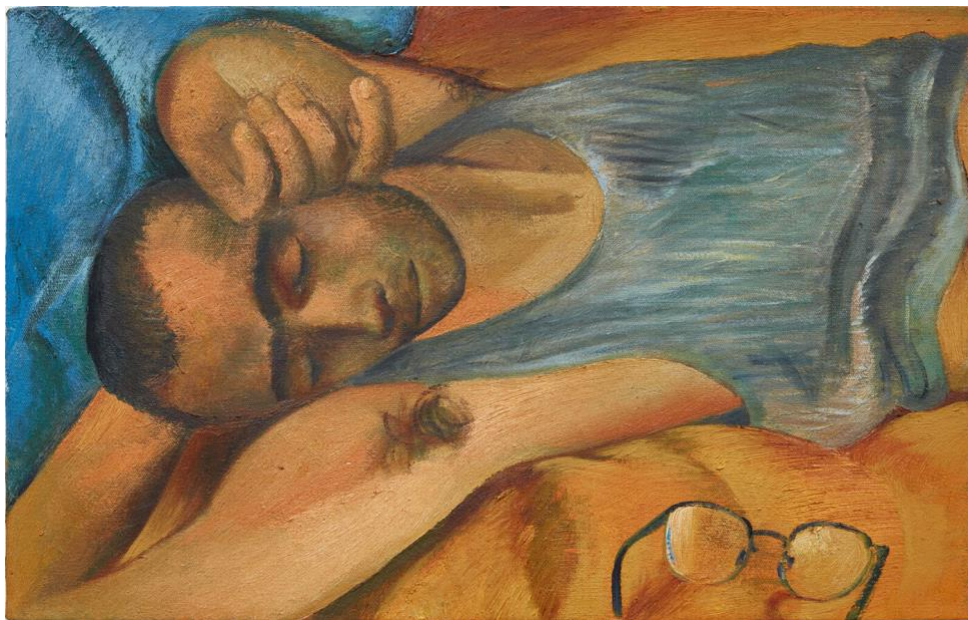


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Louis Fratino by Jo Smail

Art that protects a sense of pleasure and play.



Louis Fratino, *Ochre Alessandro*, 2023, oil on canvas, 14 × 21.75 inches. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art. © Louis Fratino.

In 1982, my husband and I arrived in Baltimore from South Africa. We bought a house across the road from the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA). We had no idea that the BMA had the largest collection of Henri Matisse in the world! I also had no idea that I would be teaching at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), and never in my wildest dreams did I think I would teach Louis Fratino, who one day would show his work side by side with Matisse!

Fratino adapts the visual languages of European and American modernism to contemplate the beauty and queerness of everyday gestures and experiences in nature, in the home, and in one's own self-conception. I taught Louis in his second year as a painting student at MICA. He was struggling a bit to find his own voice. Then, suddenly—or so it seemed to me—he began to paint autobiographical subjects: his family and his love life surrounded by the objects he cared about. I remember, as if it were yesterday, a painting he made for his final critique in his third year. The painting was truly astounding. We were crowded, along with visiting critic Derrick Adams, into a small studio. The painting moved us to silence.

Brilliantly curated by Virginia Anderson and Katy Rothkopf, *Fratino and Matisse: To See This Light Again* features a selection of Fratino's paintings, drawings, prints, and sketchbooks in conversation with works by Matisse from the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Jo Smail

Can you remember when you first saw Matisse's work, and what struck you most?

Louis Fratino

I think that as a very young person I did not yet know how to talk to Matisse in my work. As a teenager, because of the materiality and observation that remained close to perception, I was very moved by painters like John Singer Sargent and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. I wanted to make things look like things, as you well remember from my first year as your pupil. I think you actually cracked things open for me and helped me to start a relationship with Matisse, one that could be encountered much more intimately at the BMA. I remember discussing drawing from memory with you and the strangeness of drawing when it becomes detached from perception. I think learning to love this side of myself opened me up to Matisse's genius in a way I could not fully understand as an adolescent.



Installation view of Fratino and Matisse: To See This Light Again, 2026. Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.
Left: Louis Fratino, Tom, 2019, oil on canvas, 9 × 12 inches. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art. © Louis Fratino. Right: Henri Matisse, Large Reclining Nude, 1935, oil on canvas, 26.25 × 36.75 inches. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art. © Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

JS

I am going to share some quotes from Matisse and ask you to comment on them. Matisse: “Creativity takes courage.” I think you have this in spades. I am thinking of the comment you made in my recent catalogue: “What the hell?”

LF

Well, I was quoting you, Jo! You were the one who told me that I should be starting every painting with “What the hell?” I remember one painting I made for you of a man riding on a horse backward, which was maybe too much “What the hell?” But you encouraged me to be baffled by my own work. And that has been my mantra. I want the viewer to empathize with a kind of vulnerability, but that can only really exist if I am embarrassed and confused. In this world, which is so prescriptive, I think clinging to painting's ability to mean everything and nothing at the same time is more pertinent than ever, and “What the hell?” still seems like the right place to start.

“The moment I feel a rule forming in painting, I want to try to do the contradictory thing, even if I’m bound to be me after all.” — Louis Fratino

JS

Matisse: "Rules have no existence outside of individuals."

LF

I guess Matisse is saying that the constraints we perceive are personal, and that we should push against them if we want to transcend ourselves in our work. I think, like you, that the moment I feel a rule forming in painting, I want to try to do the contradictory thing, even if I'm bound to be me after all.

JS

Matisse: "There are always flowers for those who want to see them." What do you think he meant by this?

LF

Such a lovely thing to say and to think. It reminds me of a passage by the great writer Annie Dillard, who mattered so much to me as a young artist: "The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there." I think this is exactly what Matisse is saying, which is that the role of the artist is really to notice things more than create them. I could not agree more.



Louis Fratino, Large roses, 2022–23, oil on canvas, 64 × 75 inches. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art. © Louis Fratino.

JS

You have a penchant for painting flowers. Would you say something about this?

LF

I find the universe of flowers very moving and almost perfect. Here, you have a very complex, gratuitously beautiful life-form that has actually evolved around the same time as us on this planet. And they represent so much of what we aspire to and fail to be: cooperative, sexually open, beautiful in all stages of living and dying. I think also many artists and poets have used flowers as a way of thinking about beauty, so I take permission from them to consider it a very worthy subject. I think this tension between the superficial daintiness and prettiness of flowers with the reality that they can be monstrous, sexual, rapidly evolving beastly things makes them a perennial subject too.

JS

Matisse: "You must forget all your theories, all your ideas before the subject. What part of these is really your own will be expressed in your expression of the emotion awakened in you by the subject."

LF

I suppose I am not that interested in "my own expression" but rather in my ability to commune with many human expressions by borrowing and consuming heavily from all that I have seen and felt.

JS

Matisse: "Whether we want to or not, we belong to our time and we share in its opinions, its feelings, even its delusions." What do you think?

LF

Yes, thank you, Matisse! I think it's ridiculous to try to be contemporary. As if you could choose! I love that Matisse wisely includes "even its delusions." In a sense, we are doomed to our modernity.

JS

Matisse: "You study, you learn, but you guard the original naïveté."

LF

The naïveté of the embarrassed. I think this relates to our first comments about "What the hell?" painting. One of your great lessons to me was to preciously protect your sense of play. Why be an artist with no pleasure, no play?



Louis Fratino, Richardson Street living room, 2020, oil on canvas, 90 × 70 inches. Courtesy of Baltimore Museum of Art. © Louis Fratino.

JS

Could you name some other influences apart from Matisse?

LF

I love Matisse so much, but sometimes I find his grace and his consummate elegance to be almost chilly. I also love painters who get into the hardscrabble aspects of life, warts and all. Some of these painters might include Bhupen Khakhar, Edward Burra, Otto Dix, or Candido Portinari.

JS

Another quote from Matisse that I think says it all: "Great love is needed to inspire and sustain this continuous striving towards truth, this concurrent generosity and profound laying bare that accompany the birth of any work of art. But isn't love the origin of all creation?"

LF

I agree that here he says it all, so I won't pretend I have the wit to contribute much more to such a pristine sentiment. But I can gesture toward another great modernist whom I love, Virginia Woolf. I quote from *The Waves*: "There can be no doubt, I thought, pushing aside the newspaper, that our mean lives, unsightly as they are, put on splendor and have meaning only under the eyes of love." Thank you, Jo, for helping me open these eyes so many years ago.

Fratino and Matisse: To See This Light Again is on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, until September 6.