

# GOT TO HAVE IT

From ancient myths and chivalric code to the exhibition that just opened down the street, desire has been a catalytic force in the world of art since the first human thought to draw on a rock with red ochre.

Late in the year 1767, the French painter Gabriel François Doyen received a commission from an unrecorded courtly gentleman. The ask was to paint a scene in which he, the gentleman, admires the legs of his young mistress on a swing. The subject sat uneasily with Doyen, a religious history painter, who instead recommended Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The resultant image, known as “The Swing”, became not only Fragonard’s most famous work but also came to epitomise the lush and sensual period of art known as Rococo (c.1730–1780), which languors dreamily at the rough midpoint of the canonical art history of desire.

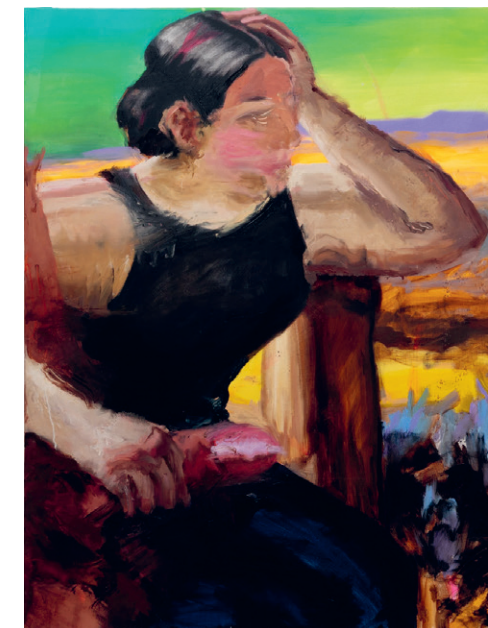
The meaning of desire is something humans tend to know innately. We have all experienced want, craving, attraction, appetite, wish, *that magnetic pull*. We are familiar with the typical associations: beauty, virtue, sexuality, eroticism, love, possession, objectification. We can feel our way forward (though the philosophical and psychoanalytic works of Aristotle, Deleuze, Lacan and Freud have much to say). But what does desire mean specifically for art and artists?



[1] Jean-Honoré Fragonard, “Les Hasards Heureux de l’Escarpolette (The Swing)”, c. 1767–1768. Courtesy of The Wallace Collection

In “The Swing”, desire is at play three-fold: in the commissioning-slash-consumption of the piece, as the subject of the story it depicts and as the motivator of Fragonard’s career painting works for courtly aristocrats. This image and its story elucidate that even when not the explicit subject of the work (though in this case it is), desire is implied simply in the act of creation – from the big sense of creation myths to the act of the artist putting hand to clay or brush to canvas.

At every touchpoint in human culture, the intrinsic connection of desire to the human condition has shown up in our cultural material, in this case art. During the Greco-Roman classical age (8th century BCE–5th century CE), art was composed to bring into multiple dimensions the stories of mythology – often rife with sexual exploits and folly – that were conveyed orally. Hundreds of years later, the doyen of the Renaissance (14th–15th centuries), Leonardo da Vinci, observed in his notebooks that sexual desire was “the most important thing among the living”. Centuries later again, the author of Surrealism’s manifesto (1924), André Breton, claimed desire as “the sole motivating principle of the world” and “the only master humans must recognise”. And there are myriad examples from every period in between, from the illuminations of the courtly romances of the Middle Ages (5th century–15th century) and the literary subjects of the Pre-Raphaelites (1848–early 1900s), to the Impressionists (1867–1886), who foregrounded the beauty and transience of daily life and set a precedent directly affecting the art of today – that desire is implicit in the everyday affairs of humanity. Every artist has had their own relationship with the concept.



“Desire is a deep craving for something within myself that is almost perpetually out of reach, mystic,” says contemporary painter Marion Abraham. “I am painting and painting to get close to it somehow, brush against it. A picture can contain the most incredible energy when it hits right, and still be a static relic in time. That is very exciting to me.” The Tasmania-based artist’s work is bucolic and composed with urgency, infused with humming eroticism, clever innuendo and nature as metaphor for freedom – not unlike Fragonard and his peers.

[2] Marion Abraham, “Summer”, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

New-York based Renée Estée understands her practice in a similar way: “I’m interested in how love letters and epitaphs are both rooted in expression, and my paintings often live in a space that intersects these two. I’m drawn to the emotional tension between them both: how one speaks to presence, the other to absence; two forms of expression bound by emotion, memory and longing.” She adds: “Through my work, I try to weave together these forms of communication, to articulate what sometimes feels unsayable, to give voice to both desire and grief. Painting becomes an act of reverence and veneration, a way of reaching out to people and places I can no longer access, yet still feel connected to.”



Desire is at play, too, in the work of nine-time Archibald finalist Jun Chen. Born in Guangzhou in 1960 and migrating to Australia in 1990, his Impressionistic landscapes are rendered with impasto and palette knives, with his training in the skill of traditional Chinese brush painting influencing his now instantly recognisable style. “Desire as a motivator in art often reflects longing for beauty, memory or connection,” says Sophie Gannon, the director of Chen’s Melbourne representation. “Through his art, Jun Chen embeds desire in atmosphere, evoking a sense of serenity, harmony and presence in his landscapes.”



[3] Jun Chen, “Blooms in Bush II”, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery

From Chen’s luscious interpretation of the natural world to the hyperreal, Thai-Australian photographic artist Lilli Waters synthesises ancient mythologies, Eastern identity and modern-era still-life painting – allegorising mortality and the vanity of earthly desires – in her striking visual language. Her work also reminds us of the Western canon’s obsession with the desirous, male, Euro-centric ‘gaze’, particularly in its treatment of Eastern themes as fetishisations of the ‘exotic’. Since 2012, her work has been exhibited across Australia, Italy, Germany, Japan, the UK and the US; next is a solo show in January 2026 at Sydney’s Curatorial+Co. Speaking of her work “Flooded”, she poses: “Submerged within a dramatic watery cloud-scape, the female figure recalls Ophelia, not as Shakespeare’s tragic casualty of unfulfilled desire, but reimagined as a goddess of longing, power and transformation... Desire here is not passive; it is mythic and embodied, a force that entangles and empowers.”

The artist creates out of desire to tell a story, to make themselves known or understood, to express or relieve emotions they cannot contain within them, to represent their heritage or history, simply to unravel the mysteries and contribute to the lineage of depictions of desire itself – or to bring to life someone else’s. In the end, whether explicit or not, it is, in some manifestation, and always has been, why humans make art – and so, too, why we consume it.

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Lilli Waters, “Flooded”, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Curatorial+Co

