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‘The Rise (and Rise) of the Ultra-Vertical Painting’

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Danielle Fretwell, Between Need and Gift, 2025

We are exposed to thousands of images daily. On social media and within galleries, the 3-by-4 rectangle and square formats dominate, allowing us to easily glide past or scroll through masses of images. In this context, a new shape of artwork is proliferating across gallery shows and art fair booths. Today, artists are finding new ways to help their artworks stand out, creating exaggerated long, narrow works that demand attention. These visually intense, “ultra-vertical” paintings are at least twice as tall as they are wide, sometimes more, making an instant impact. They reassert the artist’s authorship and power to command attention, forcing their viewers to break out of a fatigued, passive state induced by endless digital and commercial imagery.

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Other artists play with the format's disarming potential by using its unusual space to show parts of a scene that exist outside the natural eyeline. In Danielle Fretwell's oil painting 'Between Need and Gift' (2025), which was on show at NADA New York 2025 with Alice Amati, a still life setup is elongated to a surreal degree. Its silky tablecloth stretches down the canvas and dwarfs the fruit in the center. Here, the American artist explores the line between painting and digital imagery; this extended work feels artificially stretched and requires the viewer to keep looking.

With their unconventional proportions and unusual use of space, ultra-vertical paintings trigger immediate attention from a visually fatigued audience. Whether they reveal or conceal more than we would usually see on a canvas, these works toy with our expectations and make us take another look. "The paintings frustrate because they refuse full disclosure," said Giovanelli. "This combination—bodily confrontation paired with visual withholding—produces something that is simultaneously frustrating, enchanting, and mysterious."