

CRISTIN TIERNEY

HYPERALLERGIC

Painter Immortalizes the Crowds at Rijksmuseum's Sold-Out Vermeer Show

Joe Fig's Vermeer Contemplations series captures museum attendees closely engaging with the Dutch master's work.

By: Rhea Nayyar

November 18, 2024



The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was catapulted into the spotlight early last year when it hosted an exhibition devoted to Dutch Golden Age painter Johannes Vermeer. Incorporating 28 of the artist's 37 attributed paintings held across the world for a once-in-a-lifetime reunion, the crowd-conscious museum found itself unable to meet the international demand for attendance and sold out of tickets within days of *Vermeer's* public debut. This

CRISTIN TIERNEY

predicament opened up a unique ticket resale market on eBay, where single entry passes were marked-up for upwards of \$2,000.

Among the lucky few who attended *Vermeer* at the Rijksmuseum was artist and professor Joe Fig, who made use of eBay resales to visit the show with his 19-year-old son and decided to immortalize the experience through his own practice. Fig's *Vermeer Contemplations* (2024), now on view at the Sarasota Art Museum in Florida through mid-April, is a series of 16 contemplative oil paintings capturing museum attendees engaging with the Dutch master's work.



“The people I’m looking at are not the ones who just take out their phone to take selfies,” Fig said in an interview with *Hyperallergic*, explaining that he was the one with his phone out to capture attendees in action.

“As an artist, when we’re fortunate enough to have work at a museum or a gallery, we just want people to take the time to appreciate the work,” he continued. “So I’m honoring those who were really giving a deep thought and respect to the works, really looking at them.”

Even with the fervor around the exhibition, Fig noted that the museum did a good job with curating for crowd control considering the modest scale of Vermeer’s paintings in comparison to the frenzied response they garnered. He told *Hyperallergic* that he opted to paint his series at a smaller scale to evoke the intimacy elicited from Vermeer’s output, also

CRISTIN TIERNEY

nodding to the meta nature of inviting his own audience to take a closer look at compositions of museum visitors during their own up-close contemplations of the masterpieces before them.



Process-wise, Fig blends all of his snapshots on Photoshop to develop the perfect composition that allows for the Vermeer paintings to remain mostly visible, but also in harmony with the assortment of viewers in the frames. Often, some of the Vermeer works are too minuscule for Fig's painting surfaces measuring 15 inches wide at most, so he paints viewers from the torso up in order to capture some likeness in his renditions of the framed works on the museum's rich, jewel-toned walls.

"In some of these paintings, the heads of the Vermeer figures are smaller than the head of a pencil eraser," Fig explained. "With sorting out the composition on Photoshop, I'm able to have the fun of adding painterly flourishes here and there. Even though they're highly detailed works, this isn't a photorealistic series — especially in that I'm making paintings of paintings."

CRISTIN TIERNEY



In Fig's rendition of people admiring Vermeer's "Woman Holding a Balance" (1662–1663), he included the backs of a "particularly adorable" older couple holding hands while admiring the work.

"I was definitely keeping an eye on them, and then of course the woman had the red jacket with a diagonal red bag strap across her back, which compositionally cuts and leans into the painting and parallels her body language," he said.

Similar interactions between the audience and artwork are celebrated throughout the series, including Fig's rendering of a blonde museum attendee emerging from the bottom corner of the painting to peer at the figure in Vermeer's "The Lacemaker" (1669–1670) as if looking at her through a small window.

And in that, the audience itself becomes the artwork — not unlike Vermeer's own propensity for capturing daily life in his own practice.

In response to *Hyperallergic's* inquiry about a potential contemplation series centering visitors at the Sarasota Art Museum engaging with Fig's *Contemplating Vermeer* exhibition, the artist simply chuckled and said he would have to think about it.

CRISTIN TIERNEY



CRISTIN TIERNEY

