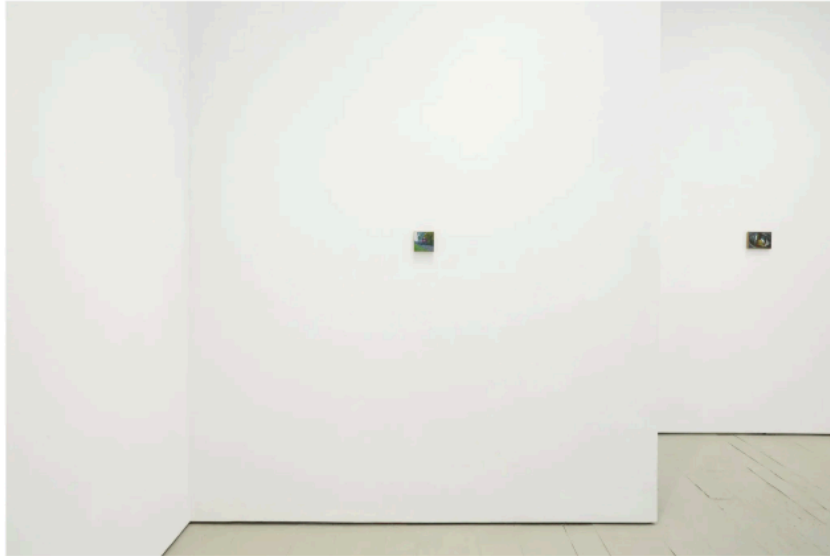


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An installation view of Jennifer J. Lee's 2023 "Square Dance" exhibition at the Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery in New York. Heidi Bohnenkamp Photography

By Julia Halperin  
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## The Art World's Next Big Thing: Tiny Paintings

Works the size of postcards and bathroom tiles are challenging the market's appetite for grand scales.

In 2016, Jennifer J. Lee, 47, was one of 10 artists assisting the abstract painter Julie Mehretu on a large-scale commission for the lobby of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that would lead to the creation of one of the bigger paintings of the 21st century so far. Called "[Howl, Eon \(I, II\)](#)," it's a history painting of epic proportions, composed of two 27-by-32-foot canvases covered in ink markings that conjure the grandeur and violence of American westward expansion. To help silk-screen shapes directly onto the canvases, Lee had to use a scissor lift inside Mehretu's New York studio. The final product is larger than Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment."

In both ambition and scale, Lee's own work is far more modest. She paints in her Brooklyn apartment, where she and her husband, also an artist, sleep in the living room and use their two bedrooms as studios. On jute canvases ranging in size from smaller than a postcard to larger than a sheet of printer paper, she reproduces cropped versions of images that she finds on shopping sites and internet forums: a pair of blue jeans, a club sandwich, a children's playroom. The jute's texture makes each panel look pixelated, highlighting the fact that it's an image of an image. The scale echoes that of the source, squinted at on an iPad screen or laptop. Some of Lee's most evocative works are around the size of a shower tile. She compares looking at one of her paintings in a gallery to peeking through a keyhole: "I love being able to beckon someone to look at something."

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Lee's 4-by-4-inch painting "Untitled (Train)" (2023). Courtesy of the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery

In an art world with a seemingly endless appetite for bigness, Lee, whose [most recent solo show](#) opened at New York's Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery in January, is one of a growing number of contemporary painters working small. Also among them are the Lisbon-based [Mia Middleton](#), 36, who makes photorealist Hitchcockian freeze frames; the New York- and Portland, Ore.-based [Chris Oh](#), 42, who paints fragments of Renaissance paintings on the insides of shells and geodes; and [Somaya Critchlow](#), 31, of London, who has made her name with paperback-size portraits of Black women.

Some artists are drawn to small paintings for practical reasons; when materials, studio space and shipping have never been more expensive, they're relatively cheap to make and easy to store and transport. During the pandemic, many artists had no choice but to work on a scale allowed by their kitchen tables. Small paintings are also intimate, seductive and unpretentious. As Middleton puts it, they "creep up on you." While the artists who make them vary in style and approach, they seem to share a somewhat old-fashioned view of what art is for: individual communion rather than collective spectacle — only one viewer can stand in front of each of these pieces at a time.

There are "artists who work from the shoulder down, the elbow down, the wrist down and from the first two fingers," says Jonathan Rider, 41, the artist and Flag Art Foundation director, who makes geometric paper collages that are roughly the dimensions of large index cards. Yet over the past 15 years, as money poured into the art market, more of the most visible contemporary artists went beyond what even their own bodies could achieve, directing small armies of studio assistants to fill cavernous galleries and museums.

Today, some artists and dealers are looking to cultivate sustainability by staying small. "Why can't we have a middle-class existence? Why do we have to make hundreds of thousands of dollars?" asks Lee. "All I've ever wanted is to keep going."

The tradition of miniature painting stretches back at least to the 16th century, when court painters created minutely detailed portraits that could be easily kept in a locket or small box. Those who worked on a modest scale in the 20th century were more often outsiders and mavericks, rarely associated with a broader artistic movement. [Giorgio Morandi](#) (1890-1964), the Italian painter of tender still lifes, stuck close to Bologna and an apartment that he shared with his three sisters throughout his career. [Forrest Bess](#) (1911-77) created abstractions the size of record sleeves or smaller inside a small tin cabin in Texas, where he also worked as a fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico. On the heels of the monumentally proportioned movements of Abstract Expressionism and minimalism, [Thomas Nozkowski](#) (1944-2019) created paintings of overlapping organic forms that he once described as "scaled to my friends' apartments" in the East Village.

Few of those figures are household names today. As the critic and artist Mira Schor wrote in her 2001 essay "[Modest Painting](#)," artists in this lineage often prize "rigor or ambition for painting itself" over their own careers. This notion resonates with artists who are uncomfortable with art world decadence, like the Indiana-based Peter Shear, 44. A self-taught abstract painter who worked as an elementary school custodian for years, Shear, who will have a solo show at Mendes Wood DM gallery in Brussels next January, rarely paints on canvases longer than 20 inches. "Now more than ever," he says, "it doesn't seem like a good time to be ostentatious."