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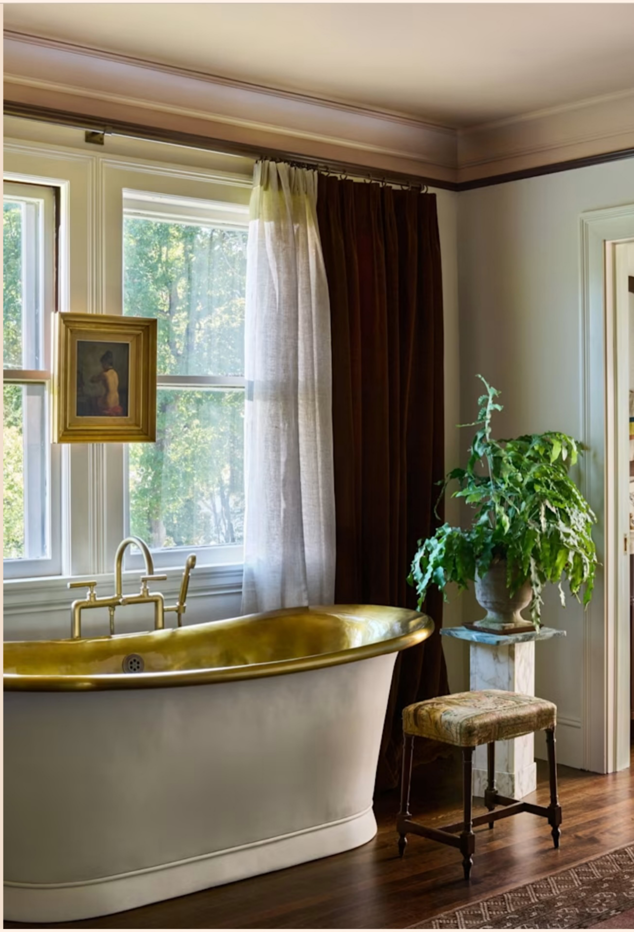
Picture this: weird and wonderful ways to hang art

New, revived and theatrical techniques are being embraced with gusto to surprise and delight



An oil painting floats in front of a window in Jess Cooney's Massachusetts home

Keith Flanagan

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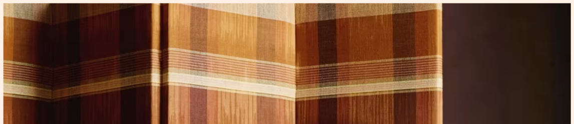
Above a sculptural golden tub in interior designer Jess Cooney's Massachusetts home hangs a petite oil painting of a woman, her naked back to the viewer. It's not a surprising subject for the setting. But the placement — centred over the panes of a window, floating in front of the view — presents the artwork in a new light.

Cooney is just one designer jettisoning the art-hanging rule book, creating visual surprises by placing pictures in unusual locations — against glass, drapery, window frames, mirrors and more.



A tiny nude atop a folding partition upholstered in a checked fabric by Studio Ashby and Yarn Collective © Kensington Leverne

An artwork mounted on a bookcase provides a jolt of cobalt blue in this Chicago project by Summer Thornton © Annie Schlechter

The results range from subtle to surreal: in London, Studio Vero hung a painting below eye level on the end of a kitchen island. Studio Ashby upholstered a folding partition in an autumnal checked fabric, designed in collaboration with Yarn Collective, and topped it with a tiny painting of a nude.

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> **As we see a greater breadth of materiality in the home, we’re seeing more imaginative art displays**
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> **Ed O’Donnell of London’s Angel O’Donnell**

The approach brings back some of the fun of centuries past, when salon-style decorating meant any surface was fair game to hang an artwork. “Bookcases were often built from floor to ceiling and were proportioned in a way that art could be hung from them,” says Cooney of Europe’s 17th and 18th-century libraries. In her own library, a small portrait with a bold turquoise background hangs on a bookcase. In Chicago, interior designer Summer Thornton mounted an abstract painting on a wooden bookcase, giving the room a jolt of cobalt blue.

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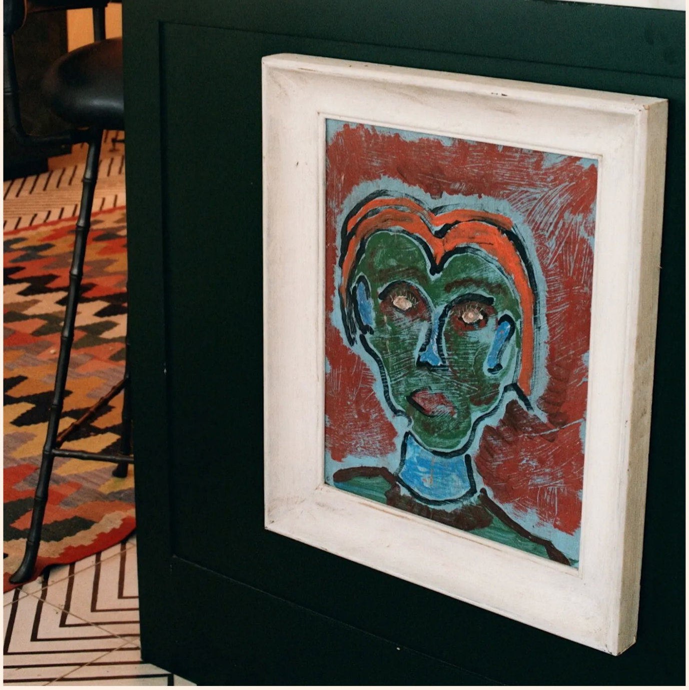
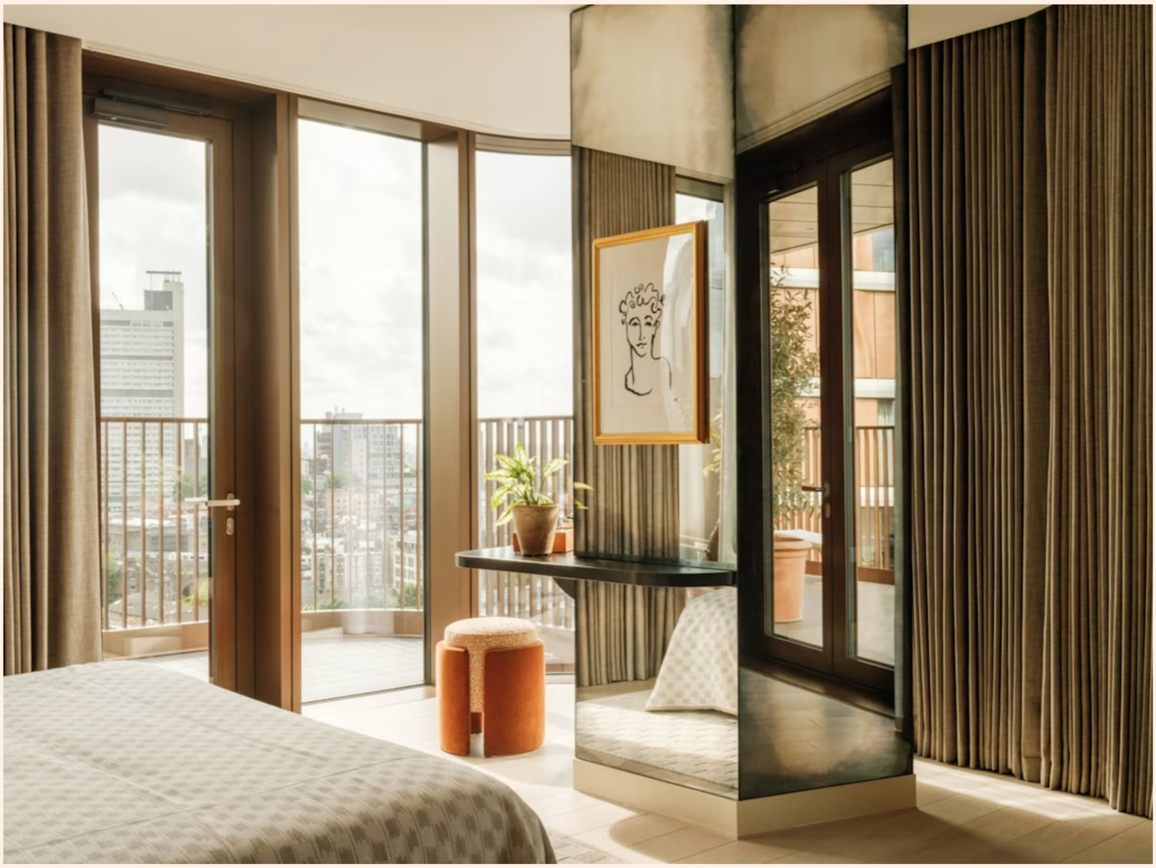


Studio Vero's kitchen island with a painting placed below eye level

Others are playing with less traditional surfaces. Using wires attached to the ceiling, New York's Ries Hayes suspended a moody gestural portrait against a reeded glass shower screen to "soften the room and add depth", he says. Ed O'Donnell of London's Angel O'Donnell clad a structural column in the principal bedroom of one project in hazy, antiqued mirrored glass. "Creating a focal point within a focal point", he hung an ink portrait in a gilt frame on top. It's an extra dimension that keeps the eye guessing. "As we see a greater breadth of materiality in the home, we're seeing more imaginative art displays," says O'Donnell. "It's about layering in pops of interest — tantalising surprise-and-delight moments."



Angel O'Donnell hung an ink portrait on a column clad in antiqued mirrored glass © Taran Wilkhu

For a grander air of theatricality, another technique is gaining traction. Harrison Cawley, a technician at London's Art of Hanging, is just about to install a large canvas suspended in front of curtains. He jokingly admits he'd rather it hadn't become a trend — the process has been a bit of a pain — but many love the drama.

"To place an artwork over a curtained wall seems to defy gravity," says New York designer Darren Jett, who hung a small classical drawing against the folds of bold cobalt blue drapes, where it seems to float. He says it took a "good old-fashioned wish and a prayer" to make it happen (plus fishing wire and hooks).

Ries Hayes used wires from the ceiling to suspend a portrait against a reeded glass shower screen to 'soften and add depth' © Ethan Herrington

Darren Jett hung a drawing against the folds of bold blue drapes, where it seems to float © Ori Harpaz

Thoren Vadala, owner of New York's Make a Frame, recommends the STAS picture hanging system, a "wildly versatile" wire suspension product that can safely float art against a range of backgrounds. UV-blocking glazing and encapsulation in museum-grade films can help protect the piece — to a degree. "Don't put anything too expensive or precious in front of windows," advises Cawley, noting that sunlight fades pigments even through the back of the canvas.

It can be intimidating going off-script. Even the professionals indulge in trial and error, sometimes reaching for a temporary adhesive Command strip to see what — quite literally — sticks. But with the right approach, even a modest piece of art can break the mould.

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