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Nicola Florimbi's Paintings Are Unsettling and Necessary

Her depictions of individuals in settings that seem both out of time and of this moment represent one of many engaging paradoxes.

by John Yau | May 29, 2026



Nicola Florimbi, "Art Class" (2026), acrylic on canvas (all photos courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey)

CHICAGO — In our media-saturated world, in which everything has been seen and done, leaving us in a perpetual déjà vu state of witty citations, exhumed tropes, or dazzling fabrications, it's rare to be surprised by an artist's debut exhibition. There are many reasons why I was instantly taken by the acrylic paintings in Nicola Florimbi's Rooms at Corbett vs. Dempsey. The first was the absence of irony in her subject matter — depictions of individuals interacting in settings that seem both out of time and of this moment. This is one of the many engaging paradoxes of Florimbi's work.

There are 10 paintings, all of them singular, which is already an accomplishment. Their settings are constructed of multiple rooms that establish a receding space. They can go straight back or at an angle, with a window and door seen at the far end. The tension between the bright outside and the darker interior setting is integral to the drama we see taking place before us — figures in a silent play. As in a play, every action and object contributes to the narrative. She recreates well-known works hanging on the walls, further complicating her dramas with allusions to other artists, including Balthus, Giorgio Morandi, Edward Hopper, Gustave Courbet, Georgia O'Keeffe, Mary Heilmann, and JMW Turner.

The result is a complex visual dialogue that invites the viewer to unravel a narrative and piece it back together. However, in contrast to the closed-room mysteries of Agatha Christie, where everything is

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revealed in the end, the viewer never gets to the bottom of Florimbi's paintings. If there is a painting that Florimbi aspires to, it is "Las Meninas" (1656) by Diego Velázquez. I see the impossibility of this goal of endless possibility as a measure of Florimbi's pictorial ambition. She is not trying to make work that fits into any of the trends, legacies, or academic theories the art world currently celebrates. Total independence of this sort is rare.



Nicola Florimbi, "Room" (2026), acrylic on canvas

Florimbi is not afraid to recall Old Masters or align herself with the interior dramas of Paula Rego and Balthus, knowing viewers might be satisfied by naming their presence before beginning to see her work. Her figures include both grown men and women and boys and girls interacting, but often without looking directly at each other. Everything in her paintings feels askew, unsettling, and necessary. That they cannot be completely taken apart and parsed is their beauty and strength.

The arrangement of children and adults establishes a rhythm of connections and disconnections, bonds and ruptures. Seen frontally and in the lower center of the painting "Stephen and Bobby Go Frog Hunting" (2025), a preadolescent child whose gender is ambiguous lifts a frog by its hind leg out of a white plastic bucket. The child's mother is on the left, holding the other hand. On the right, in an open door, there are two young men, one on one knee, holding the bucket. The other man is leaning against the doorway. Behind them, we see skyscrapers and rooftops, suggesting the house is on a promontory. To the left of the mother, child, and two men, and behind them spatially, we see two adolescent boys. One is standing holding a large, clear trash bag full of frogs. The other boy, on one knee, a position visually echoing the young boy with the bucket, is either dropping a frog into the bag or retrieving it.

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Nicola Florimbi, "Stephen and Bobby Go Frog Hunting" (2025), acrylic on canvas

The scene is unlikely but believable. The drama is what holds our attention, inducing us to suspend our moment of disbelief. This is where Florimbi is in a league of her own. Everything is calculated, but the scene never comes across as contrived. Artificial, yes, as in a play. But here's the rub. What story are they telling? Is only one narrative unfolding before us? The longer I looked, the more I saw. Florimbi's paintings are both direct and opaque. They are like the tips of icebergs, visible, but hinting at a vast unseen world. They made me want to look again, and again.