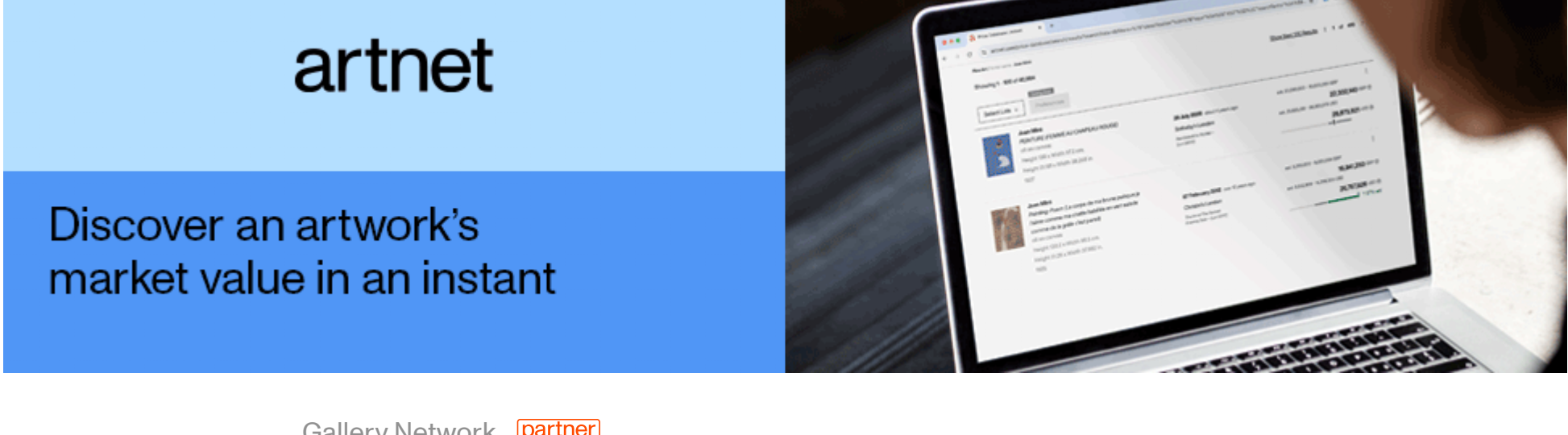
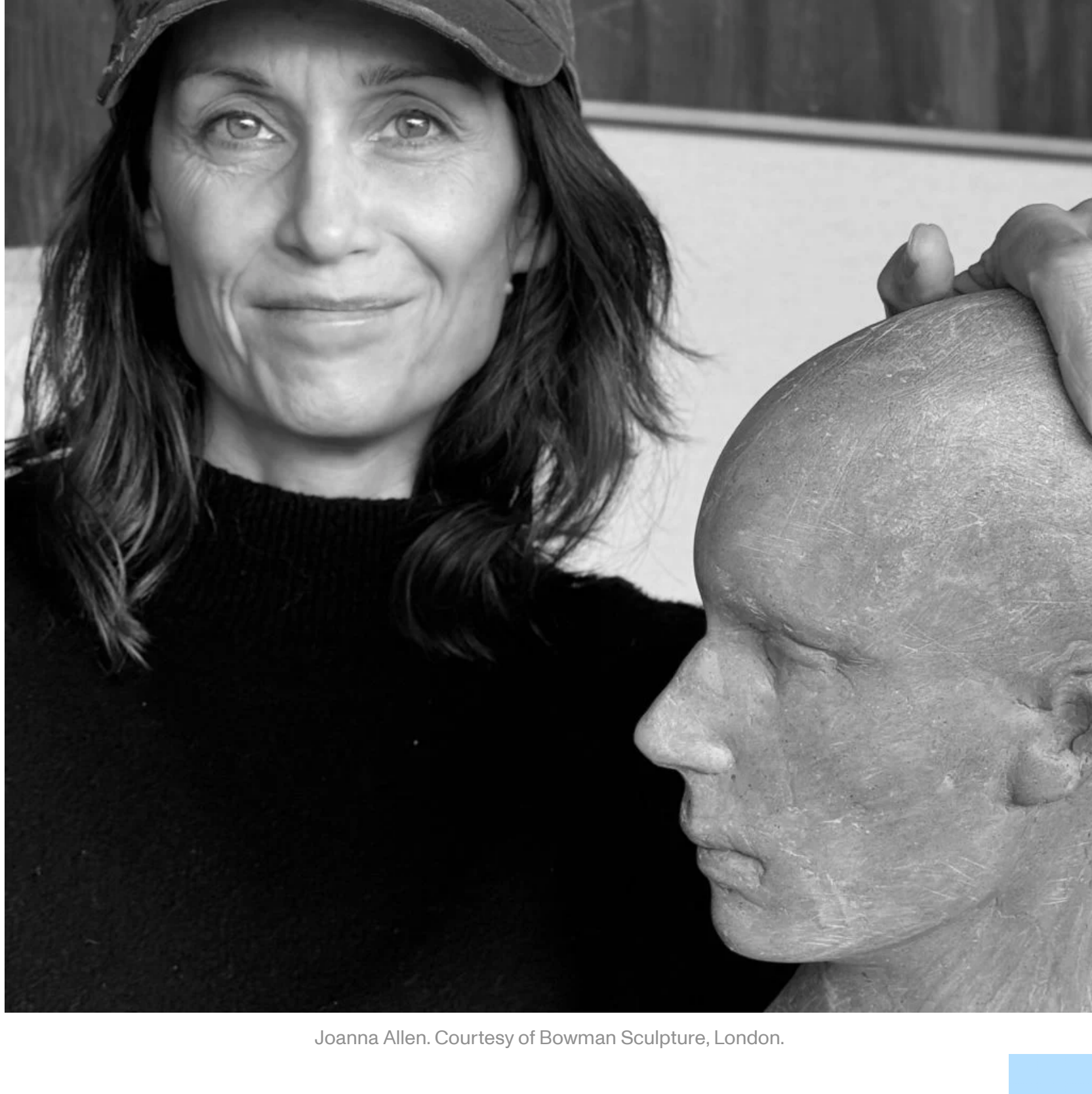




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British Sculptor Joanna Allen Talks Form, Feeling, and Figuration

With the artist Joanna Allen the subject of her debut solo with Bowman Sculpture, she delves into the psychological and experimental nature of her practice.



Joanna Allen. Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

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British sculptor **Joanna Allen** mines not only the expressive potential of her medium—primarily bronze, marble, clay, and plaster—but the breadth of human psychology and perception itself. While formally trained in traditional modes of sculpture, Allen's practice is decidedly experimental, reflecting an ongoing exploration of the boundaries of her work, materially and conceptually.

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On view through May 30, 2025, Allen is the subject of her debut solo exhibition with London-based gallery Bowman Sculpture with “Subconscious Playground.” A testament to the malleability of perceived realities and the malleability of figuration and abstraction, the show taps into many of the same concerns of 20th-century Surrealism, namely those around the conscious and subconscious mind.

Marking the occasion, we talked to Allen to learn more about the show, as well as what inspirations inform her ever-evolving visual language.

In light of your debut solo with Bowman Sculpture, can you tell us a bit about the selection of works and the thematic underpinnings of the show?

The works in “Subconscious Playground” inhabit that unsettled terrain between the conscious and unconscious mind. They explore how both personal experience and inherited psychological patterns quietly sculpt our identities. The show moves between morphed figuration and pure abstraction—some works are more confrontational, others more meditative—but all are tethered to the question of what makes us. I wanted to suggest that our so-called “normal” is often just a brittle surface construct. Once you scratch it, the real terrain—the surreal, the contradictory, the deeply personal—begins to show.

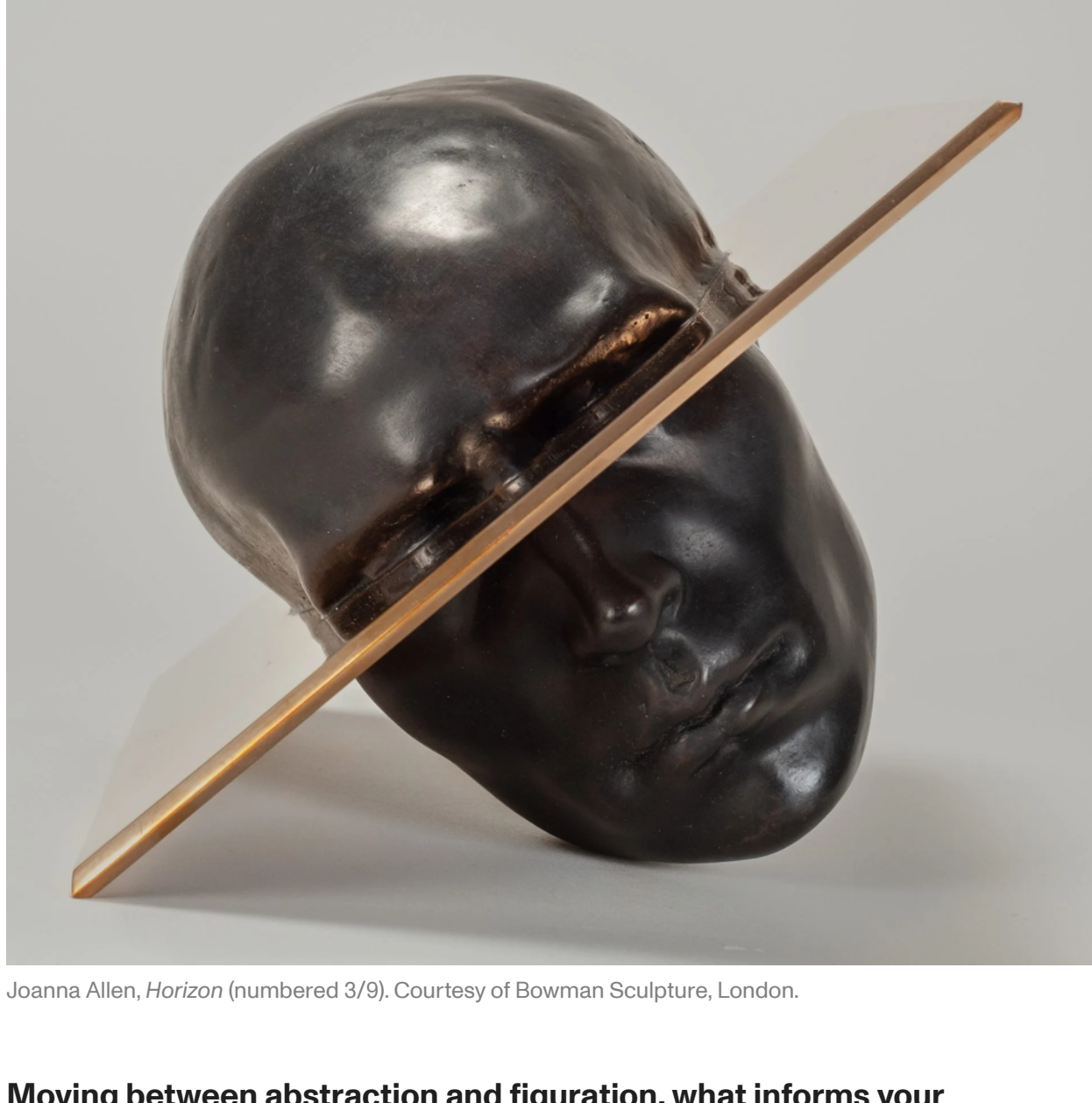


Installation view of 'Joanna Allen: Subconscious Playground' (2025). Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

On the heels of the 100th anniversary of André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, how would you describe the influence of Surrealism on your practice? Are there other historical movements or artists that you look to for inspiration?

I definitely relate to the Surrealist mindset and the way they approached the subconscious, not just as subject matter, but as a space to create from. There's something powerful about bypassing rational thought to access deeper, often contradictory truths. I admire the Surrealist aesthetic, but what drives me more is going beneath those visual projections to tap into something more psychologically rooted.

I'm also drawn to mid-century artists whose work feels emotionally and materially honest—people like Picasso, Bacon, and Giacometti. Their work isn't about perfection; it's raw and exposed and deeply felt, which is something I always come back to in my own process.



Joanna Allen, *Horizon* (numbered 3/8). Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

Moving between abstraction and figuration, what informs your inclination toward one visual language or the other in your practice? Or, alternatively, do you approach it as more of a fluid spectrum?

At the moment, it's very much a fluid spectrum—figuration and abstraction aren't separate territories in my practice; they overlap and speak to one another. But I do feel there's a gradual movement toward a purer form of expression—something more distilled and internal. My work is grounded in exploration, and that means constantly experimenting with materials, techniques, and ways of translating thought into form.

The figurative and abstract works stem from very different processes and states of mind. The figurative pieces are more conscious and deliberate. They usually begin with a persistent idea or emotional state, something that lingers and demands form. I'll often sketch, build maquettes, and construct armatures.

The abstract works, by contrast, come from a more primal or subconscious state. Historically, abstraction has often been used to convey pure thought or distilled essence, and I relate to that lineage. For me, abstraction isn't about stepping away from meaning. It's about getting closer to it, especially when the idea can't be pinned down with a recognizable form. The further inward I go, the more the form must shift to hold that complexity. So rather than choosing between abstraction and figuration, I follow where the work leads, whether it wants to speak clearly or whisper from somewhere less defined.



Joanna Allen, *Shadow* (numbered 2/8). Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

Can you give us some insight into your process? Do you have a fully formed idea of what you want to make before you begin, or is it more organic and with room for experimentation?

My process varies depending on the type of work I'm making. The figurative pieces tend to begin with a well-formed concept, usually a persistent idea or feeling that stays with me. There's structure to that approach, but it always starts from an emotional core.

For example, *Shadow* began from a childhood memory: feeling uncertain, almost invisible in the presence of adults, but also finding safety in retreating into my own imagination. The skull placed as a child's helmet became a symbol of that psychological withdrawal and the inner space that I built for myself. It's both protective and revealing.

By contrast, the abstract works come from a much more instinctive place. They begin with a practice I call psychomorphic drawing: one-stroke blindfolded drawings made in a meditative state. It's a way of bypassing conscious intention and tapping into something more primal or unfiltered. Afterward, I sit with the drawings and look for shapes that resonate—some kind of imprint that feels emotionally charged or recognizable on a gut level. If I find something compelling, I'll develop it into sculpture, shifting back into a more deliberate mode of making.



Joanna Allen, *Inherent* (numbered 1/8). Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

What (if any) role does viewer experience play in the development of a new work? What do you want visitors of the show to take away with them?

Viewer experience isn't always something I build into the initial development of a work, but I am deeply interested in how people relate to the pieces once they're out in the world. With this show, there are two more experimental works where the viewer's presence becomes an active part of the piece.

One is a projection piece I made in collaboration with writer and actor Harry Mason. He performed a 30-minute dream-state meditation for me, which is now projected onto one of the sculptures and paired with a voice recording of his experience. It adds another layer of subconscious narrative, externalized and wrapped around the physical form.

The other piece is a collaboration with textile artist Yuliya Surnina, and it draws more directly from my own studio rituals, particularly my psychomorphic drawing practice. It includes a voice recording of one of my written pieces, and we invite viewers to explore the space individually, at their own pace. There's a book within the space where they're encouraged to write down their own thoughts or responses, which remain available for others to read. It's quiet, open-ended, and reflective.

That installation also recreates the experience of me in the studio, sitting with those blindfolded drawings in that still, suspended moment before anything is made. That pause of simply being present with what the subconscious offers is a vital part of the process. In this show, it becomes something the viewer can step into.

As for what I hope people take away from the exhibition, that's ultimately up to them. But if someone leaves feeling that their own sense of normalcy—however strange or specific—is valid, then I think that's a good way to begin.



Installation view of 'Joanna Allen: Subconscious Playground' (2025). Courtesy of Bowman Sculpture, London.

What's next? Are there any projects you are working on now or have plans to work on that you can share with us?

I'm currently working on a new series of seven pieces that are connected both thematically and materially, exploring ideas around existence and how it takes shape through form. Alongside those, I'm developing a selection of large-format psychomorphic landscapes—an extension of my drawing practice that brings the subconscious gestures into a more expansive and immersive format. They feel like a deepening of the process, pushing the language of those initial marks into something more physical and all-encompassing.

“Joanna Allen: Subconscious Playground” is on view through May 30, 2025.

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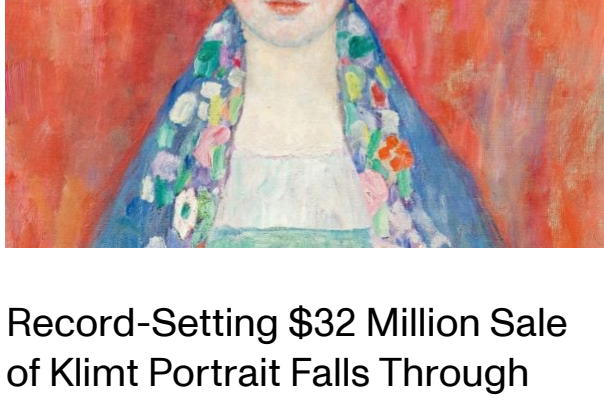
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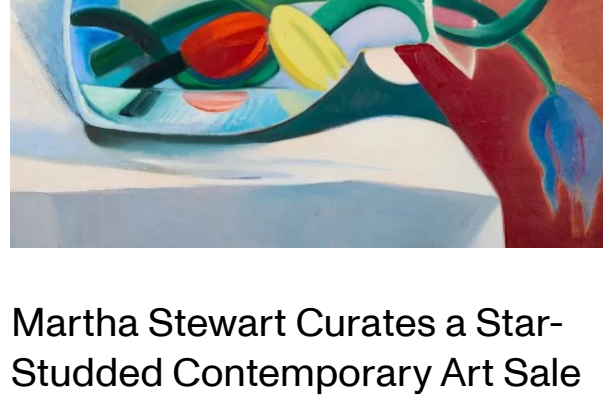
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