



ARTS & CULTURE

## Meet Louis Fratino, the 32-year-old Marylander taking the art world by storm

By Wesley Case 4/15/2026



A Baltimore Museum of Art visitor examines “Waking up first, hard morning light” by Louis Fratino on March 13.  
(Ulysses Muñoz/The Banner)

### MICA grad’s new exhibit uses the BMA’s world-class Matisse collection as inspiration.

How do you follow up Amy Sherald’s record-breaking “[American Sublime](#)” exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art? The BMA’s resounding answer is Louis Fratino, another Maryland Institute College of Art alum who, at 32, is already widely regarded in the art world as a monumental talent.

“We are bringing to Baltimore some of the most important artists alive today,” said Asma Naeem, the museum’s director.

Fratino’s work has been shown all over the world, but “Fratino and Matisse: To See This Light Again” — which places the Anne Arundel County native’s sumptuous, detailed paintings of everyday life next to famous works by the French master — is considered his first major U.S. exhibition. It opened last month and runs through Sept. 6.

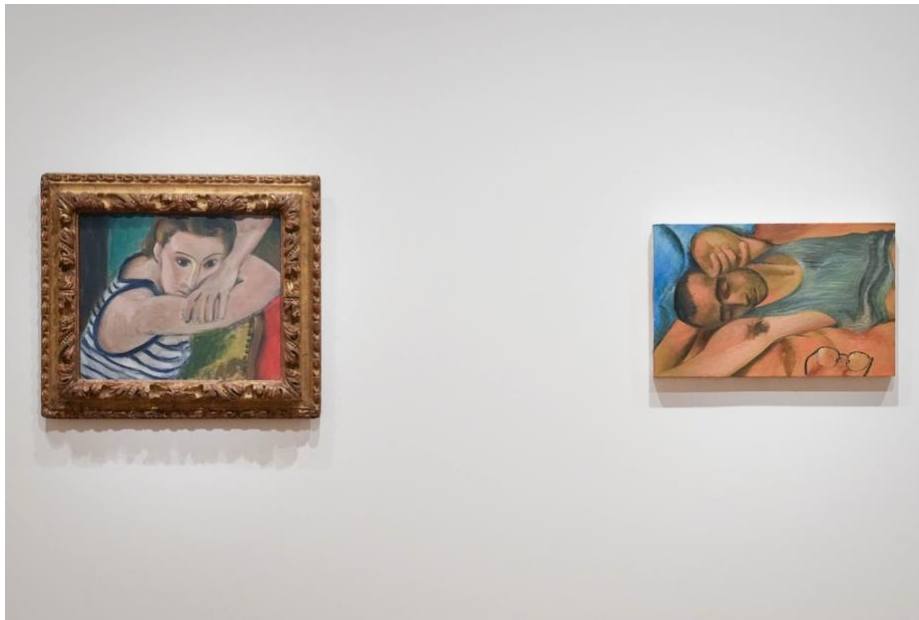
In some ways, Fratino, who grew up 30 miles south of Annapolis near Deale, still can’t believe he’s sharing space with a titan of modern art. “I couldn’t have imagined coming back to Baltimore for this reason,” Fratino said. “The invitation was, of course, an incredible one but came with some trepidation also.”

Art fans who’ve watched Fratino’s ascent won’t be shocked he rose to the occasion. His attention to detail — like the delicate sunlight pouring through a window as a naked couple lies in bed (titled “Waking up first, hard morning light”) — encourages a viewer to take a beat and luxuriate in the paintings’ delightful surprises. “The way he thinks about light and color in his paintings is spectacular,” said the BMA’s Virginia Anderson, who co-curated the exhibit with Katy Rothkopf.

The art world has noticed, with Fratino earning praise from [The New York Times](#), [The New Yorker](#) and [other outlets](#) not long after he graduated from MICA. His 2024 showing at one of Europe's most celebrated art festivals led [Artnet](#) to declare: "Louis Fratino Is a Star of the Venice Biennale. Good Luck Getting One of His Paintings."

But to put your work in direct conversation with Henri Matisse — who Naeem said is only rivaled by Pablo Picasso in terms of 20th-century artists — is a tall task, Fratino said. But it's also a natural fit: He fell in love with Matisse as a MICA student, taking full advantage of access to the BMA's collection — the largest public Matisse collection in the world.

Seeing paintings like Matisse's "The Blue Eyes," a 1935 portrait of a woman in deep contemplation, and his 1926 opulent nude "Odalisque with Green Sash" brought the artist's talents into even sharper focus for Fratino. Matisse's command of paint — and the vivid colors that became his trademark — opened Fratino up to new possibilities with the medium.



At left, "The Blue Eyes" by Henri Matisse. At right, "Ochre Alessandro" by Louis Fratino. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Banner)

"Matisse just does it with such extraordinary genius and such sensitivity that you can't look away," said Fratino on a video call from his studio in Brooklyn, New York, where he also lives.

When Fratino arrived at MICA, his skills were obvious, said artist and retired professor **Jo Smail**. But Fratino didn't know what to paint — until he turned inward, focusing on his family and his love life, she said.

"He painted in a way that manifested so much love and care," said Smail, whose own new exhibit, "[Thinking Like an Oyster](#)," is on display at Goya Contemporary Gallery through May 5. Since then, she said, Fratino's growth has been "phenomenal." "It's his love of every single detail in a painting — not just the figures and not the love between men," Smail said. "Everything is accounted for with such detail and authority that it's sort of magical."



Anne Arundel County native and international artist Louis Fratino poses next to an image of Henri Matisse at the Baltimore Museum of Art. (Katy Rothkopf)



A self portrait of Louis Fratino at the entrance to the Fratino and Matisse exhibit. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Banner)

In 2014, Fratino came out as a gay man during his junior year at MICA. The decision felt difficult at the time, he said, but it was also “excruciating” to not live in full truth. Afterward, his work improved, Fratino said.

“I think the thing people respond to is the specificity of experience,” he said. “Coming out is a major thing, but it’s just one way of getting closer to who we are as people, and I feel like I’m still on that journey.”

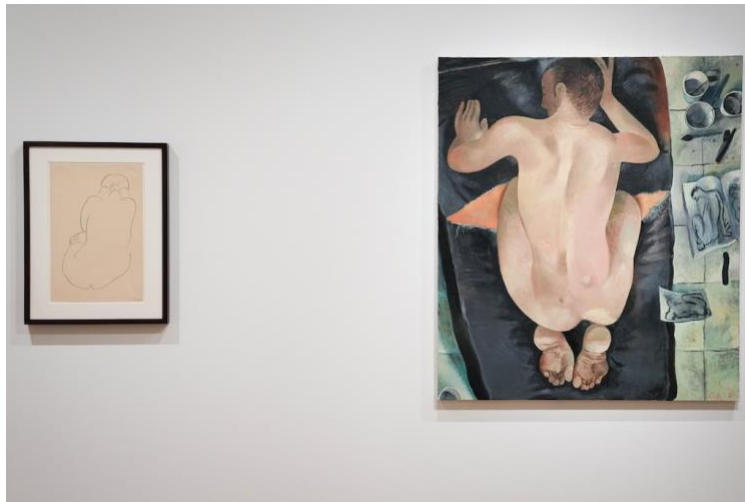
Fratino’s BMA exhibit captures the magic Smail described across a dozen paintings, from blooming flowers in luscious reds and purples (“Large roses”) to a more recent, striking scene of a man on all fours (“Studio nude”).

Placed next to Matisse’s work, the similarities are illuminated: These are intimate portrayals of domestic, interior life. Both also have a penchant for lovingly painting the human body, best captured in Fratino’s 9-by-12-inch “Tom,” a man contorting his body in bed next to a bowl and spoon, which hangs next to Matisse’s masterpiece “Large Reclining Nude.”

The pairings allow “you to see Matisse in a different light,” Anderson said. “But it also allows us to look at Louis’ work and think and identify what is contemporary about it.”



Clockwise from left, “Reclining man with moon” by Louis Fratino, “Girl reading, vase of flowers” by Henri Matisse and “Reclining nude 3” also by Louis Fratino. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Banner)



At left, “Seated nude, viewed from behind” by Henri Matisse. At right, “Studio nude” by Louis Fratino. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Banner)

While the exhibit is a major platform for a rising artist, it’s also a reminder that the BMA’s Matisse collection, and its more than 1,200 works, is one of a kind. It’s why the museum is concurrently running a trio of Matisse exhibits, including “Matisse in Vence: The Stations of the Cross” and “Matisse and Martinique: Portraits and Poetry.”

“What we have here is a rare gem: priceless works of art made by one of the masters in painting, who continues to inspire voices who may not have anything in common with Matisse but have found something contemporary and inspiring in his work,” Naeem said.

Fratino isn’t slowing down. He’s preparing for a new London solo exhibit, which opens in September. Before then, Fratino will be back at the BMA on May 21 for a conversation about “To See This Light Again.”

As for all the hype surrounding his career, “that’s for other people to decide,” he said. Fratino tries to keep an “emotional distance” from the praise because “that’s not what it’s about at the end of the day.” Once the work is completed and released to the world, it no longer belongs to him. “The paintings, they have their own life,” Fratino said. “So all these things that are happening, I credit, really, the paintings, which are somehow outside of myself.”