TEMPLON

DAVID SMALLING

CREATIVE BOOM, October 15, 2026

David Smalling turns mattresses, pearls and instruments into something unsettling and uneasy

The Jamaican-born painter stacks beds and hangs pearls around candelabra in oil paintings that look gorgeous until you get closer.

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Family Resemblance, 2025

David Smalling's painterly world is full of things you'd expect to find at a lavish dinner party – the candles are lit, and precious metals are twinkling, the table has been swapped for a mattress, and there's an unsettling uneasiness in the air. In Standing Ovation, you see gold drapery falling behind a French horn, a trumpet and a candelabrum tied up in pink ribbon with pearls twisted and cascading around them.

Similar motifs are found in No Jacket Required, where musical instruments adorn the place settings where food would be, again decorated in bows and jewellery – though this time there is an open lipstick waiting to be used. Each painting is so polished you want to touch it, the items so realistic that you want to wear them. But in each, there is also the sense that something faintly wrong is going on.



Standing Ovation, 2026

David was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, and moved to the US in his late teens. He studied applied maths at Yale, trained at the Yale School of Art, then completed a PhD at Harvard. He currently lives and works in New York, and says those strands meet in the studio: "structural thinking, close looking, colour and the physical intelligence of oil paint". His last show, Elizabethan Collar at Templon New York this spring, looked at "aspiration, intimacy and the hidden costs of belonging."



A Night to Remember, 2025

When searching for his motifs, he usually starts with a clash. "I often begin with a contradiction: beauty and discomfort, luxury and restraint, invitation and obligation." His references are from Mannerism, Early Netherlandish painting and Dutch and Flemish still life, where a lemon peel or a lit candle carried a moral. In his hands, "a pearl, mattress, shell, platter, instrument or snail can carry ideas about class, gender, desire, vulnerability and time." Moving between cultural and social worlds taught him to notice the "unspoken codes that govern belonging".



Supplemental Course, 2025



No Jacket Required, 2026

That's why, when creating one of his delectable paintings, it usually starts with an "emotional tension or a phrase". From there, he plans it like an engineer, with drawings, constructed references, digital studies, colour tests and plenty of layering. "I then build the image in oil on wood panel through successive opaque and translucent passages. The planning is exacting, but paint introduces its own drag. Drying time, luminosity and resistance; that tension between control and discovery is essential."

While some paintings, like Standing Ovation, picture the instrumental tablescape as the protagonist, others feature the more unsung hero that they're placed upon – the mattress. Tallow and Supplemental Course are his recent favourites, both of which set a candelabrum on a precarious stack of mattresses and turn "the bed from a place of comfort into an altar or monument". The quilting of the mattress is puckered and precise, while the material creases reflect and warp the light of the candle, adding a strange sense of mystery to the artworks. The candle wax is dripping, naturally. It gives an allusion to the old fairy tale, The Princess and the Pea – the idea that something small, unmomentous, might be hiding beneath towers of mattresses.



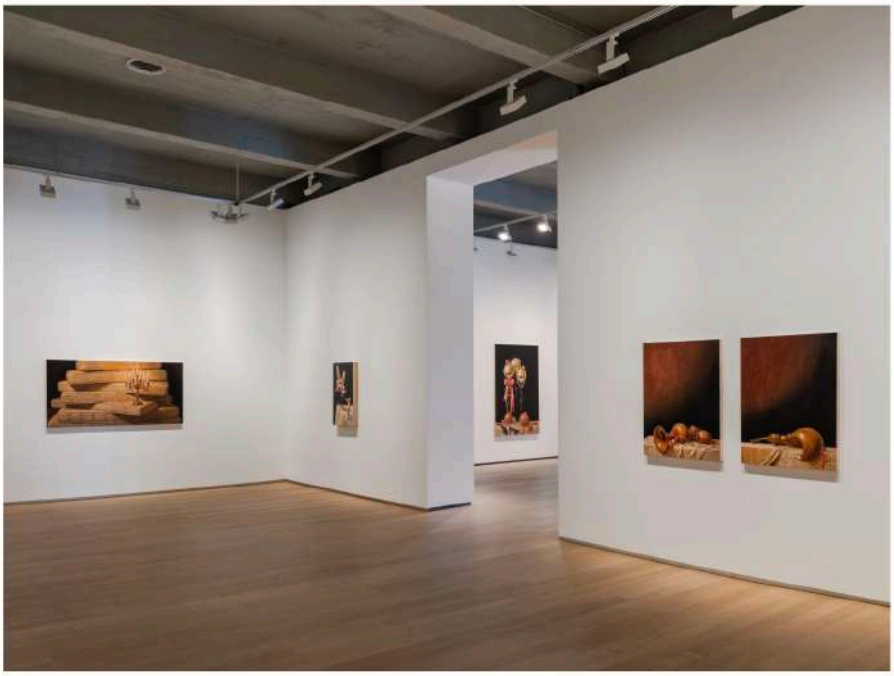
Chandelier, 2026



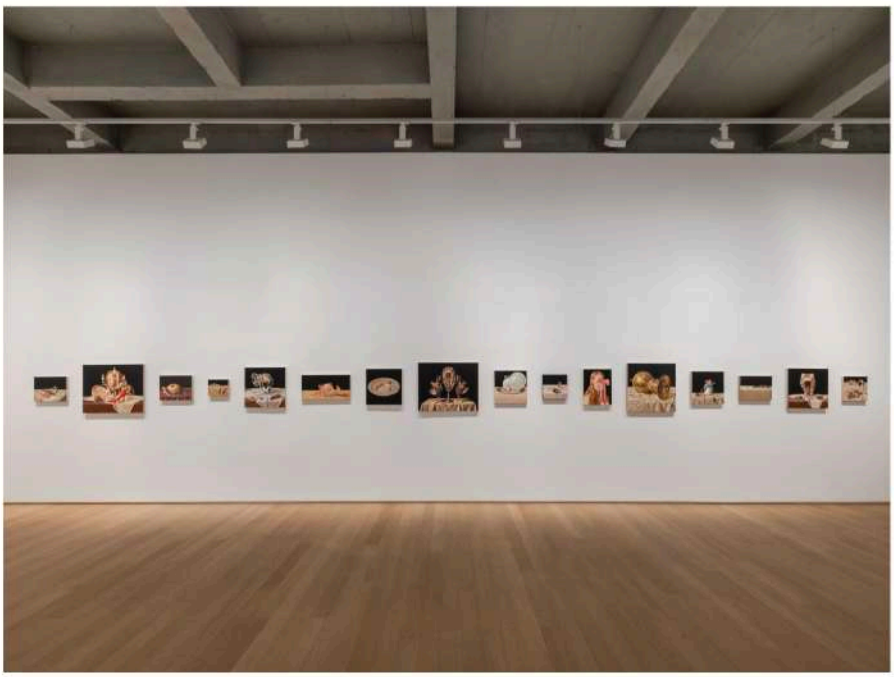
Tallow, 2025

The titles also carry a subtle joke hidden within them: "In Tallow, the title invokes the rendered animal fat historically used to make candles; illumination becomes inseparable from the expenditure of a body," David explains. "In Supplemental Course, 'course' suggests a lesson, a serving and a layer of masonry; comfort accumulates until rest becomes impossible. I like that both paintings remain materially seductive while something bodily and quietly threatening gathers underneath."

There are many tales that could be plucked from these artworks, but David wants his audience to reach their own conclusion on the plot. "I do not want to prescribe a single interpretation," he says. "I hope beauty, luminosity and craft draw viewers in, then a quieter unease complicates that pleasure." If it works, familiar things feel "newly charged", and people become "more alert to the inherited ideas about class, gender, desire, belonging and mortality that surfaces can conceal."



Exhibition view, David Smalling - Elizabethan Collar, TEMPLON New York. Photo © Charles Roussel



Exhibition view, David Smalling - Elizabethan Collar, TEMPLON New York. Photo © Charles Roussel

Tales aside, David's next move is a technical one. He's developing a method that brings modern fabrication into the tradition of copperplate engraving, inspired by the dense, elastic crosshatching of Albrecht Dürer and Henrick Goltzius. He wants to see "what happens when the intelligence of the burin is partially transferred to a machine: where precision begins to produce distortion and inherited images become unstable".

The aim isn't to imitate Northern Renaissance engraving; instead, he wants to "reactivate its eroticism, grotesquerie and moral tension through processes its artists could never have imagined." You can see the paintings in person soon at David's second solo show with Templon, which opens at the gallery's Brussels space on 12 November.



Supplemental Course, 2025