

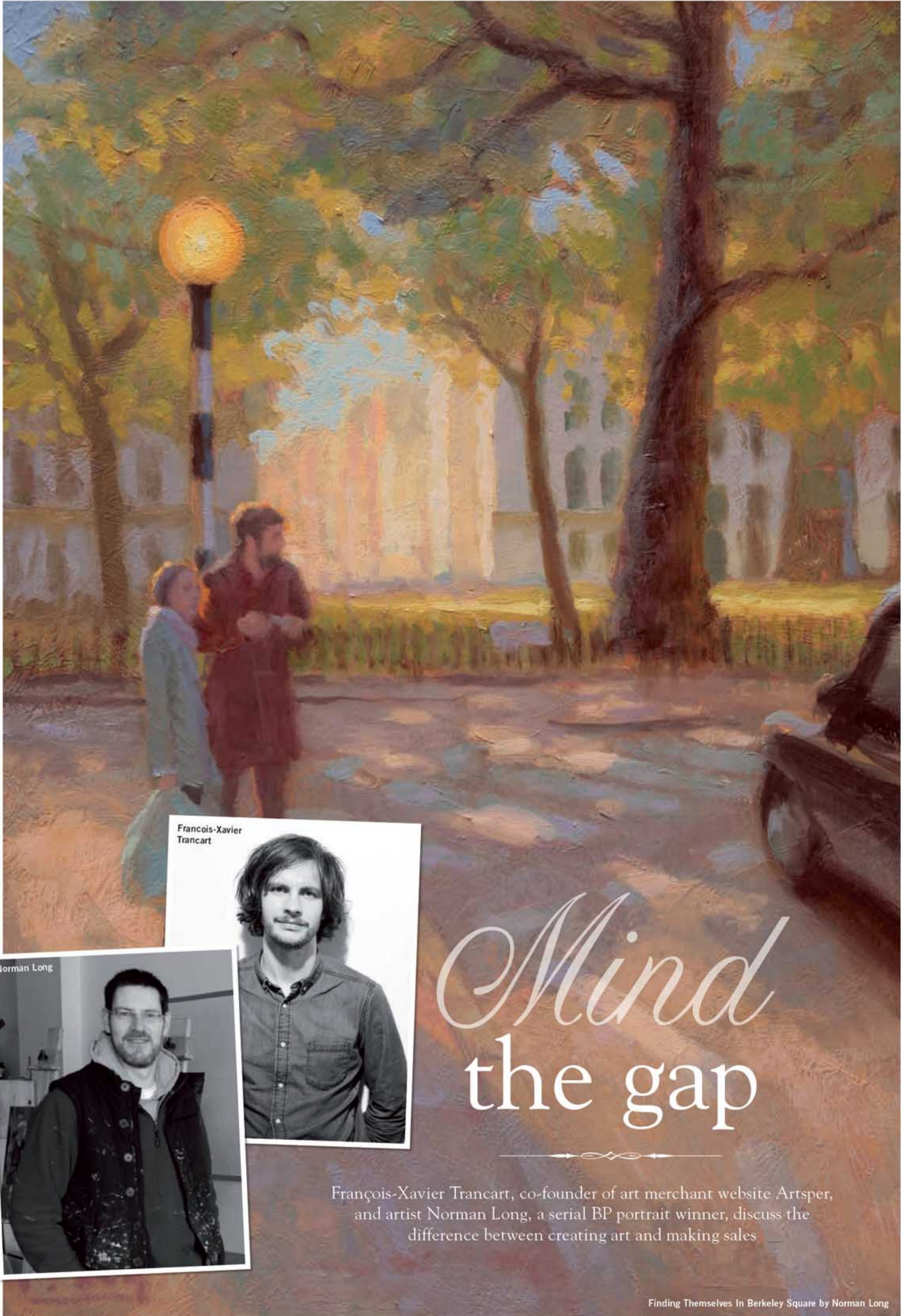


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François-Xavier Trancart



Norman Long

Mind the gap

François-Xavier Trancart, co-founder of art merchant website Artsper, and artist Norman Long, a serial BP portrait winner, discuss the difference between creating art and making sales

Finding Themselves In Berkeley Square by Norman Long



Art has historically had a tricky relationship with commerce. It's often been viewed as a symbol for values that waft higher than the things money represents; a slice of culture that cannot be for sale because more is lost than gained in the transaction; in short, a very Faustian bargain. This is, ultimately, why much of the world's finest art lies in museums rather than, say, private collectors' homes.

We do not live in such an age though – whether it was one of higher values or deeper hypocrisy we cannot know. Instead, today, students glean an air of culture at university in order to gain greater remuneration; Damien Hirst stands accused of being a businessman more than an artist; in general, the division between the priceless and the price has become permeable, unsteady.

'My paintings are not valuable to me,' Norman starts. 'They are an expression. It is getting the art out of me that matters.' The artist prioritises the process over the end. 'Don't forget that the entire course of a painting, its lengthy development, is often more enjoyable than the first thought, the spark.' He insists he could never paint if he is bored.

François-Xavier is keen to flag the fact that though Norman's relationship with his own work is important, if he wants any sort of audience he must ensure they connect with it too. 'People often don't understand the movements, the artists; simply put, they just don't know what they're looking for,' François-Xavier contends. He paints a picture of an intimidating and empty gallery, brimming with expensive items, where buyers feel that gallery owners might financially punish that ignorance. It's also a reality that he hopes Artsper will help abolish.

'Art merchants have a hard job,' Norman admits. 'It must be hard to translate the feeling I have invested into a price. I cannot stop working when I have achieved a nice painting, finished with a pleasant colour that I think

somebody might buy. I must go further.' He seems to be insinuating that markets do not (and perhaps cannot) reflect the attitude, the inner worth of the painter.

That's not to say it won't try though. Artsper has 5,000 artworks by 700 artists. The website attracts 90,000 visitors every month to the works of 230 partner galleries. 'The hardest thing when we started in 2013 was less getting the attention than showing people there was demand,' François-Xavier notes. Sales are now

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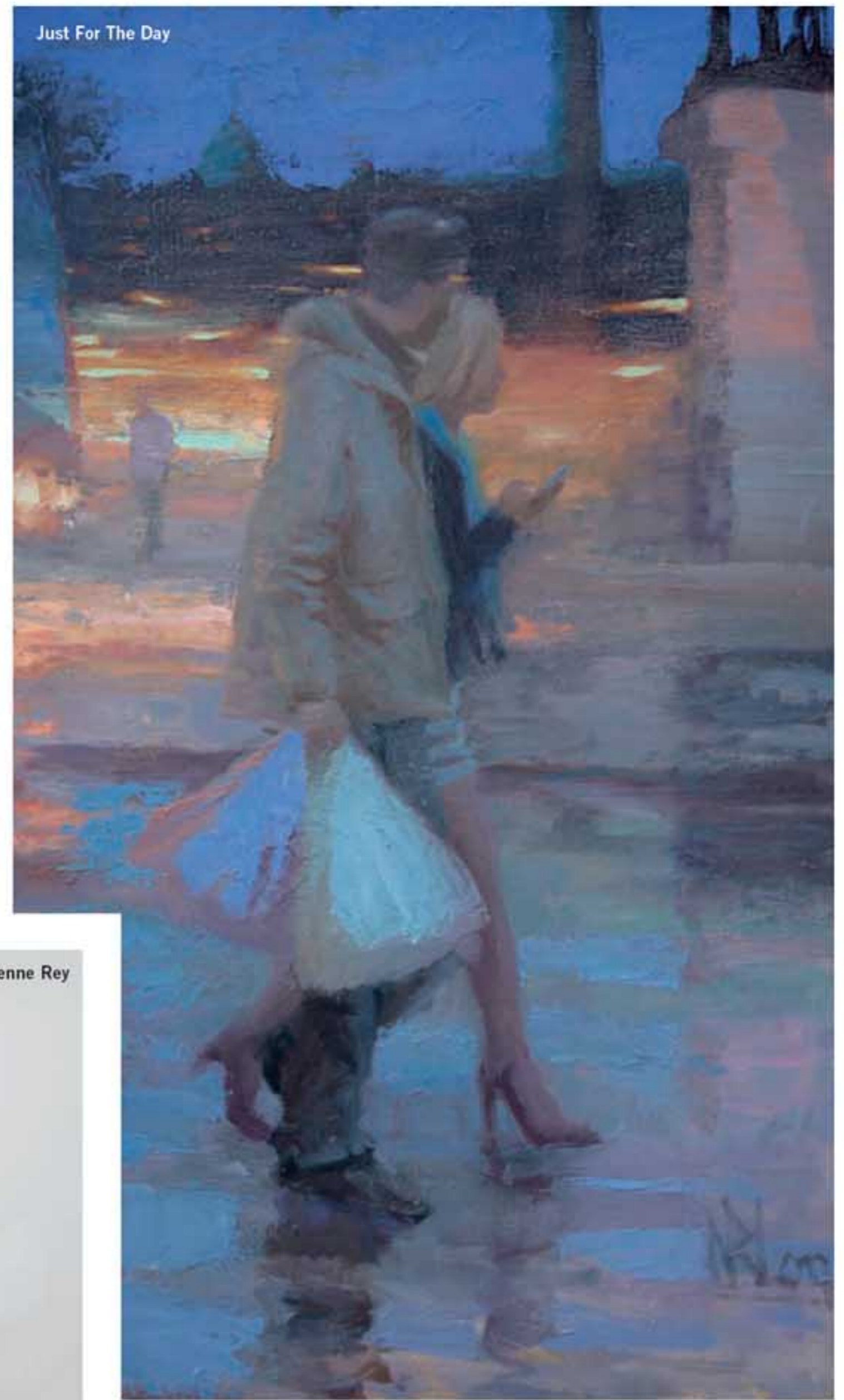
frequently topping the £20,000 mark, but 'typing in your credit card details to a relatively unknown website can be daunting, which is why we've focused so much on building the brand.'

Talk of brand feels far from Norman who is keen to highlight the fidelity an artist must keep to his or her 'true voice'. 'There are so many indefinable things an artist does that they don't even think about. It's alchemic,' he protests, prompting me to ask what some of his oddest habits are. 'I like to forget my paintings,' he answers with a cheeky grin. Norman, with as many as 35 paintings on the go, tends to face them towards and against the wall. 'I forget in order to know what a painting needs when I pick it up again.'

Knowing which works of art to pick up and put down is a big part of François-Xavier too. A committee, including a former French minister for culture, has devised strict criteria for website content, which, summarised



Another Day



Just For The Day



Virtualité 12 by Etienne Rey



Banksy - Trolleys

by François-Xavier, 'must include all types of contemporary art (without sacrificing quality for quantity) but must also reflect all price brackets.'

Here, the language of François-Xavier and Norman starts to diverge. The former begins talking of a brilliant new website 'interface', about making sure there's no 'lag', about 'algorithms' and 'filters'. Whilst the latter concerns himself with 'reinventing' art each day, keeping himself 'open to impulses' that result in his 'containment' of hopes and subject matter – watching them slowly, mysteriously elide.

Despite the division, a respect is sustained between the two. France has always honoured its painters more than any other nation and Norman is no stranger to an exhibition – of which Artsper seems to be a permanent example. Indeed, the artist admires the fact that Artsper caters for all types of customer in a market which has auction houses and art fairs scooping the cream off the market, leaving the normal galleries bannerless. ■

*Norman Long is showing at the Osborne Studio Gallery
21 April – 8 May
2 Motcomb Street, SW1X 8JU
020 7235 9667
(artsper.com)
(normanlongartist.com)*