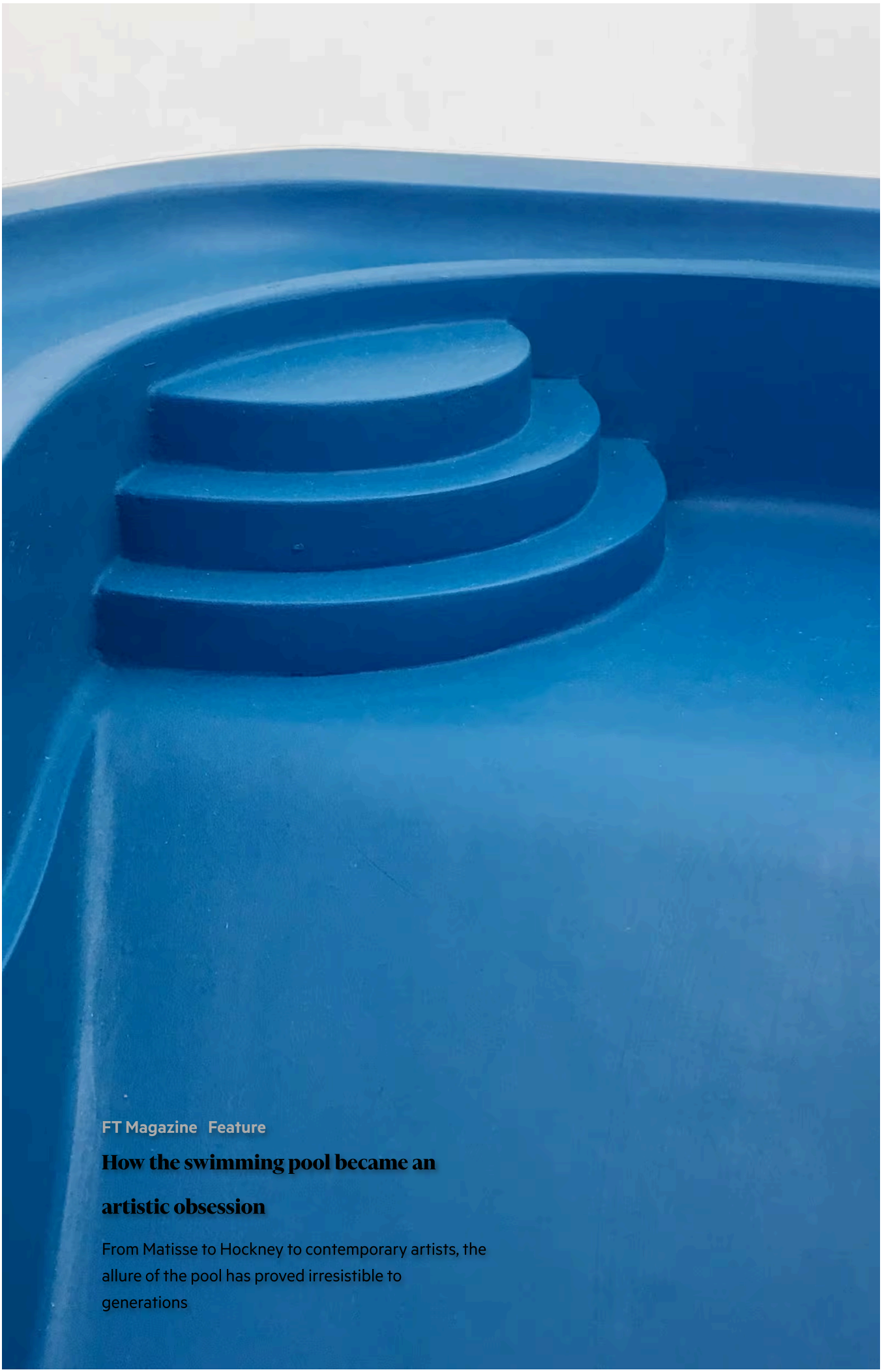

FT Magazine Feature

How the swimming pool became an artistic obsession

From Matisse to Hockney to contemporary artists, the allure of the pool has proved irresistible to generations



Mattis, Lap Pool (Cobalt), detail 2018 © Daina Mattis/ High Noon Gallery

Lou Stoppard

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In January 1964, the then 26-year-old David Hockney looked out of the window of an aeroplane and saw Los Angeles for the first time. “The swimming pools and the houses and everything and the sun, I was more thrilled than I have ever been in arriving in any city,” Hockney, a Yorkshire lad, later recalled.

The place was on the brink, humming with progress. New materials made everything seem possible. High-rises were shooting up next to old mansions. The freeway system was rapidly expanding, letting residents speed from one end of the city to the other, admiring themselves in their rear-view mirrors, thrilled by their status as drivers and car owners, a central tenet of the American dream.

Another symbol of the dream could be found in the backyards: pool after pool after pool. In the early 1960s, some 19,000 new swimming pools were built each year in southern California alone (then, over a third of the US’s 290,000 pools were in the state of California). Hockney looked down on the epicentre of the era’s backyard pool explosion, facilitated by the new availability of gunite — a form of concrete that can be squirted through a hose.

He was yet to memorialise pools in painting, but they were already becoming, in the popular consciousness, a loaded symbol of progress, of man’s ability to dominate the landscape. Success, glamour, middle-class leisure, the good life — and with them the looming arrival of a water crisis and extreme weather — were all contained within those portals of enticing chemicalised blue water. “We seemed to have moved from the fabulous idea of a chicken in every pot to a swimming pool in every backyard,” said a piece in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin in July 1967.

From Hockney’s vantage point, the pools were bright blue postage stamps and kidney beans: graphic, colourful, repetitive and yet constantly transforming. He undoubtedly projected narratives on to these mirrors of the cloudless sky above: tanned bodies, flirtations between two friends or strangers on a sun lounger nearby, cocktails in hand. But they could also be taken in as a purely visual proposition. Across his decades of painting, they would goad him to try to replicate their glistening surfaces, the shimmering hues, the geometric yet hazy patterns and lines of these many swimming pools.



David Hockney, Gregory in the Pool (Paper Pool 4) 1978 © Estate of David Hockney & Tyler Graphics Ltd

Just a decade before, Matisse had sought to do the same thing: conjure, rather than depict, a pool. It was the summer of 1952 and the artist headed, with his studio assistant Lydia Delectorskaya, to his favourite spot: the saltwater swimming pool at the Palm Beach complex in Cannes, France. He was in search of divers to study. But even back then, the heat was unbearable, and the pair eventually returned home to shelter from the punishing sun. “I will make myself my own pool,” Matisse exclaimed. He had Delectorskaya attach a ring of white paper around the walls of his dining room in his apartment on the third floor of Nice’s Hôtel Régina and furnished it with his famous cut-outs: lively, frolicking divers, swimmers and sea creatures, all painted marine blue. Some spilled off the white paper, just as swimmers slice in and out of a pool: a figure shooting down from above, about to bomb or dive headfirst, a pointed hand, sharp like an arrow, piercing the water in a cycling stroke. The work, and the room, were now a pool. And to Matisse, the paper mimicked the fluidity of water: a perfect dialogue between subject and form.

Hockney also came to find a synthesis between subject and means. He created his first pool works not long after his LA visit, starting with “California Art Collector” in 1964 and later, his two iconic pool paintings “A Bigger Splash” in 1967 and “Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)” in 1972. But a few years later, in 1978, the artist was going through a period of simultaneous creative frustration and expansion. He actively sought out new modes of working and came across paper pulp, a medium that seemed to blend printmaking and painting. He set to work, spending a few months obsessively and feverishly mastering the technique under the guidance of Kenneth Tyler at the printmaking studio Tyler Graphics in Mount Kisco, New York. Creating a work from paper pulp relies heavily on the use of water — the very same thing Hockney sought to capture — creating a loop of sorts between intention, imagination and reality.

Photos from the time show Hockney using a turkey baster to apply colour into metal cookie-cutter-style moulds filled with pulped rags immersed in dyes. Look closely and the moulds become mini pools: gleaming, inviting water, full of potential. The resultant works capture graphic shapes, radiant colours, the speckled, intangible patterns of pool water, and the lines of tiles, firm until they are not, until warped by a ripple from a swimmer, reverberating across the surface. A book of the series, *Paper Pools*, published in 1980, describes Hockney’s “fascination with the paradox of freezing in a still image what is never still — the swimming pool set in nature which it reflects, the play of light on water”.

In 2012, the artist Nazgol Ansarinia also found herself looking down at pools from an aeroplane. She was in the sky above Tehran, Iran, and the pools she saw were, in many ways, ghosts of the Californian ones Hockney had looked down on nearly five decades earlier. They’d been built during the Los Angeles — inspired optimism of Tehran’s urbanist project in the late 1960s and early 1970s, only to be left drained and abandoned following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of modesty laws. “I started to really take notice of the empty pools after a visit to my grandparents’ house after they had both passed away,” the artist explains.

These loaded blue boxes became the inspiration for some of Ansarinia’s works — most often sculptures — that embody the potential and disquiet of an empty swimming pool. “An empty swimming pool creates an opportunity for imagination,” she tells me. They trap one in a liminal space, between past and present, something and nothing. They suggest “a wish for them to be filled and used in an unforeseen future, while holding on to the memory of them once full”.



Nazgol Ansarinia, Connected Pools, 2020 © Nazgol Ansarinia/ Green Art Gallery, Dubai

When we think of famous pool artworks, we often think of the pool as a stage or even a backdrop. A mere set for the main event: toned lifeguards, bathing beauties, cocktail parties, heartbreaks, love affairs. Indeed, from the 1920s and '30s, when the swimming pool became a symbol of health and status, synonymous with prosperity, sexuality and the high life of Hollywood, the swimmer and the pool were widely deployed across advertising and visual culture as a means of invoking aspiration.

There are plenty of artworks that respond to this rush of interest in the poolside scene. Think of the photographs of Slim Aarons, say, which show beautiful pools and beautiful people, from his famous 1970 image of two blow-dried women gossiping by the pool of a Richard Neutra-designed Palm Springs house to his 1976 photograph of bronzed guests lounging at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc.

But the appeal of the pool for artists has always been multifaceted, reflecting the pool's many paradoxes: a site of prosperity and catastrophe, socialising and solitude, progress and destruction, community and exclusion. And for many artists, the pool is not a setting for other objects or subjects, but an object or subject in itself, one that reflects contemporary anxieties and longings, all while having intriguing and undeniable parallels to a work of art.

Both pool and artwork are places where action occurs but is contained and firmly delineated. Like a pool, a canvas, photograph, frame or screen traps and holds action, but also excludes. In both cases fixed boundaries keep things in and out.

In 1976, when Hockney and Aarons were also looking at pools, the film-maker Ellie Epp made *Trapline*, a now celebrated work of avant-garde cinema. The film, Epp's first, was shot in a large glass-roofed Victorian swimming pool in London, which was, at the time, scheduled to be demolished. The film's lingering visuals amplify the pool's uniform lanes, its repetitive tiles, right angles and straight sides. To Epp, the medium and the subject began to merge: "the camera, like the pool's room, a space intercepting light and sound; the film's rectangular frame like the pool's rectangular frame".



Ian Mwesiga, Man standing by the pool 2, 2025 © Ian Mwesiga/ Mariane Ibrahim Gallery. Photo: Pauline Assathiany

The idea was taken further in 1999 by the British artist Hilary Lloyd, who created the film *One Minute of Water*, in which footage of sunlight reflecting off water is shown on a 60-second loop. Water is trapped, first by Lloyd's lens, and later by the monitor, transforming the work into a kind of pool — a box of water that is mesmerising, consistent and yet seemingly ever-changing.

Pools and the swimming that takes place within them mirror the repetitive nature of art production. This thought is explored in Elisabeth Tonnard's *One Swimming Pool*, a book that functions as a portable swimming pool. The book is bound using an adhesive that allows the sheets, all 1,575 of them, to be taken out, one by one, and laid on the floor, in rows. Doing so will destroy the book in its original form, just as the construction of a pool requires a breakdown or destruction of what was there before. The basis of the image, which takes a day to assemble, is a pool that was photographed from a picture in Ed Ruscha's 1968 book *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*. This pointed piece of appropriation nods to the way the pool repeats across the history of contemporary art, with artists often paying homage to each other.

Tonnard's pool, alongside Epp's *Trapline*, Lloyd's *One Minute of Water*, and pieces by Hockney and Ansarinia, appears in a new exhibition I've co-curated, *For One Solid Time, Wet: the Swimming Pool in the Imagination* at Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle in Switzerland. The title of the show comes from a short story by the American writer Laurie Colwin, who writes of a growing chasm between a couple, caused by one of them secretly visiting a pool to swim. The story captures the mysterious and addictive appeal of the pool for artists, and all of us: the way it draws one back, the way it frustrates, as much as delights.

In the process of working on the show, I came to see that a museum — like an artwork — is also a bit like a pool: a space in which light, bodies and lines are controlled, where order prevails over disorder, and where certain boundaries govern behaviours, pathways, interactions and norms ("No touching!"). And just off to the side, someone sits watching — a lifeguard, an invigilator — in a place of clear authority, keeping their eyes fixed on you as you move, reminding you to be careful. Both pools and museums are places where we allow ourselves to feel a limited sense of freedom, reassured by rules and norms. It is a paradoxical state of compliance and release.

At the exhibition, the invigilator sits in a raised lifeguard's chair: a little joke, to make explicit the similarity. I imagine the visitors gliding through the gallery, taking in artworks the way one does objects in a pool: a hazy outline that suddenly comes into focus, eliciting joy (a waving friend), or discomfort, even horror (a used plaster).



Caroline Walker, Study for Fishing, 2017 © GRIMM, Amsterdam/New York/ London; and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh. Photo: Peter Mallet

In *Splash!*, an anthology of writing about swimming, Laurel Blossom draws a link between the physical and mental aspects of swimming and the creative mind, noting how both "engender and allow the trancelike state in which the imagination flourishes without censor or restraint". Similarly, the writer and artist Leanne Shapton, a former competitive swimmer and the author of *Swimming Studies*, a much-praised 2012 memoir, thinks that the life of a swimmer is similar to the life of an artist: the repetitions, the laps over the same ideas, turning back on oneself constantly: "Artistic discipline and athletic discipline are kissing cousins, they require the same thing: an unspecial practice," Shapton writes in the book.

Shapton is represented within the exhibition by a series of over 50 watercolours, each a square or rectangle or oval or circle hurriedly rendered in different shades of blue or green. Originally published in *Swimming Studies*, they capture her memories of almost every pool she swam in: Fitness First, Baker Street; the Holiday Inn City West, Berlin; or the Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre in Brantford, Ontario. Within her mind, pools are abstracted to edges, curves, angles: they are shrunk to fit the size of a small piece of paper, as if viewed from afar or high above.

Looking at them, one has a sense of what made Hockney's imagination ignite as he looked down on LA from his plane: a salad of shapes, of supposedly simple pleasures, the troublesome quest to both belong and escape, to connect with and master, or even shackle, nature.

"For One Solid Time, Wet: the Swimming Pool in the Imagination", curated by Federica Chiocchetti and Lou Stoppard, runs until February 21 at Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle. "Wet Proof" is published by MBAL

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Lou Stoppard