



IS THIS A GOLDEN AGE FOR REALISM?

Editor's Note: In celebration of Fine Art Connoisseur's 20th anniversary, we invited our esteemed colleague Milène J. Fernández to consider, in her own words, the state of contemporary realist art today.

It is a bit daunting to survey the lay of the land of America's realist art world, and of course I can offer only a glimpse based on my own observations. Having said that, I am delighted to highlight here some of the trends, people, and venues holding my attention at this time. I hope this summary will give you some impetus to seek out the artworks that resonate most with you.

BEAUTY IS IN THE AIR

Before I started writing this, I called my friend Victoria Herrera. She's known for her gigantic paintings of luminous hibiscus flowers, as well as portraits with intriguing, seemingly allegorical elements. Since studying at New York City's Grand Central Atelier, Victoria has honed her distinctive visual language and is now challenging herself to explore different subject matter. When I sought her thoughts on realist art's current zeitgeist, she immediately replied: "There's a call to create beauty. It is needed so much right now!" I agreed wholeheartedly. "And a respect for nature!" Victoria added. "Yes, to counteract all that ugliness," I responded.

Indeed, beauty with a capital B seems to be filling the creative airwaves. Recently I was asked to write about beauty for the online magazine *Crayon*, and a few days later I participated in the artist Gabriela Handal's podcast, where she always asks her guests, "What is beauty?" Around the same time, I was invited to see the exhibition *Beauty in the Hamptons*, curated by Shannon Robinson for the nonprofit organization Collectors for Connoisseurship.

QUANG HO (b. 1963), *Autumn Spirit*, 2022, oil on board, 30 x 16 in., available through the artist





ADRIANO FARINELLA (b. 1975), *Vows Made in Storms Are Forgotten in Calm — Indigo 75, 2022*, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in., available through the artist

Her exhibition on Long Island featured 10 artists, including Quang Ho, whose *Autumn Spirit* — a painting of a nude woman experiencing a moment of ecstatic revelation in tall grasses — reminded me of Jules Bastien-Lepage's famous *Joan of Arc Listening to the Voices* (1879, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Ho's work represents what seems to be a current trend of figurative artists combining carefully rendered forms with looser brushwork — so reminiscent of Bastien-Lepage — and sometimes enhanced with the flat abstraction or decorative patterning seen in Gustav Klimt's paintings. (A portrait by Ron Hicks in the Hamptons exhibition was a striking example of the latter.)

I also enjoyed Daniel Sprick's gentle interior paintings, full of quiet atmosphere; despite his careful rendering of details, they still feel open and vibrant. Several scenes by Charles Warren Mundy stood out for their celebration of light, evoking memories of Joaquín Sorolla. Though the paintings and drawings in the Hamptons show were vastly different in style and technique, they all looked great together under the banner of Beauty.

During our conversation, Victoria Herrera and I noted the predominance of electronic images, social media, and fakery; we are all beset with fake personas, fake valuations, fake art. There is much confusion as to what is real or not, and it takes a discerning eye, heart, and mind to tell the difference. Because beauty goes hand in hand with authenticity, it has also

become a way for artists to give us an antidote to fakery, to help us eschew counterfeit culture altogether.

Beauty, then, is a theme in our field, but let's not call it a trend; rather, it is a timeless principle. The best artists are those who don't follow trends but cultivate honesty in their creative process. They are not so interested in themselves or how they portray themselves, but in what they want to communicate with the viewer. They have something to say, and their works connect with us.

NATURE'S BEAUTY

Some might say landscape painters have a more direct path to making beauty accessible, and that thus it might actually be harder for them to distinguish themselves from one another. That being said, no matter how closely landscapists observe the same scene or use similar techniques, their art will always look unique if they are being true to themselves.

A recent exhibition by the latest cohort of Hudson River Fellowship recipients comes to mind. Hanging at New York City's Salmagundi Club, each landscape painting was exquisite, offering a lived experience captured on canvas after the artists spent weeks working together in an idyllic stretch of upstate New York. The up-and-coming artists participating included Diana Buitrago, Dan Bunn, Landon Clay, Susannah Collins, Kate Donovan, Jacob Gabriel, Eric Leichtung, Lorenzo Narciso, Patrick



D. ELEINNE BASA (b. 1967), *Aspen Shadows*, 2016, oil on linen, 40 x 30 in., Corwin Galleries (Hamilton, Montana)

Okrasinski, Kevin Muller-Cisneros, Paul Rosiak, Lara Saunders, and Mary Jane Ward.

Also riffing deftly on the Hudson River tradition are Erik Koeppel, Joseph McGurl, Ken Salaz, and Lauren Sansaricq. Two notable tonalists working in the Eastern U.S. are D. Eleinne Basa and Thomas Kegerler, who depict the landscape with a depth of character that's immediately recognizable. Another landscapist to watch is Pennsylvania's Adriano Farinella, whose paintings of the sky and clouds combine observation with imagination. In these paintings we can feel his delight, how he revels in "letting go" throughout the creative process.

Yet another artist showing passion for his subject matter is the seascape painter Edward Minoff. He spends hours on the beach working in all kinds of weather, later developing larger canvases by consulting his studies back in the studio. The prolific Lisa Lebofsky, who recently exhibited at Franklin Bowles Galleries' New York location, also paints the ocean with an intensity that echoes that of the waves themselves.

Looking to the American West, where the beauty of nature has long inspired artists, there is no shortage of talent, though it's essential to point out Santa Fe's Peter A. Nisbet. The sensitivity, vibrancy, and grandeur of his paintings always leave me speechless. Other Western artists of this caliber include Clyde Aspevig and George Carlson.

Plein air painting continues to flourish in this country as ever more Americans recognize the value of connecting with nature. Combining adventure with history, science, and land conservation, various entities are doing important work in this area. They include the organizations Plein Air Painters of America, Preserving a Picturesque America, and Hudson River Fellowship, as well as the magazine *PleinAir*. Dozens of high-quality plein air festivals and competitions occur throughout the U.S. every year. Just for example, this past October, artist Ryan S. Brown hosted a successful paint-out with stellar colleagues at Utah's spectacular Zion National Park.

BEYOND THE ATELIER

Another realist realm worthy of our attention is the quiet yet mighty cohort of highly trained artists who, after intensive study of classical realism at an atelier or academy, continue perfecting their techniques, even as they hone their own distinctive styles and personal aesthetic visions. Most are now mid-career (some having come to art from entirely different fields), but many are up-and-coming young artists. All have been shaped by one or more of what I call the main "pillars" of classical realism in America: essentially, each of the leading ateliers constitutes a pillar in the recent "up-skilling" of artists.

Some of the most influential artists — those who have taught, mentored, and inspired countless others via these pillars — include Jacob Collins (founder of Grand Central Atelier, New York City);



PETER A. NISBET (b. 1948), *Sunburst, Grand Canyon*, 2019, oil on canvas, 38 x 54 in., Meyer Gallery (Santa Fe)



ANTHONY BAUS (b. 1981), *Plaza Hotel*, 2021, pen and sepia ink, sepia, and gray wash on paper, 16 1/4 x 21 7/8 in., Robert Simon Fine Art (New York City)

Sabin Howard (sculptor of Washington’s forthcoming National World War I Memorial); Juliette Aristides (founder of Seattle’s Aristides Atelier and author of six bestselling instructional books); Dan Thompson (dean of Philadelphia’s Studio Incamminati); Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gulpide (co-directors of the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, Connecticut); Jeffrey T. Larson and Brock Larson (co-founders of the Great Lakes Academy of Fine Art, Minnesota); Glenn Vilppu (founder of the Vilppu Academy, California); and Steven Assael (senior critic at the New York Academy of Art). Outside the U.S. — yet enormously impactful here—are Daniel Graves (the American-born founder of Italy’s Florence Academy of Art); Norway’s Odd Nerdrum (founder of the narrative-figurative “Kitsch” movement); and Spain’s Antonio López García, whom the late critic Robert Hughes considered “the greatest realist artist alive.”

Of these pillars, I am most familiar with artists influenced by Jacob Collins, whose Grand Central Atelier (GCA) sustains the traditions developed from the Renaissance right up until the advent of impressionism. Their works are recognizable for an ability to render form with a conceptual understanding of how light interacts with the subject, be it a still life, figure, interior, or landscape.

GCA artists draw and paint from life. I find this practice especially appealing today as it offers a welcome respite from the digital imagery with which we are bombarded every day. It’s the difference between

eating home-baked bread straight from the oven and eating pre-sliced bread stored in plastic for days. The former not only tastes better but is more nutritious. The same could be said for how we nourish our souls with art.

A good example of a GCA alumnus with a distinctive vision is Anthony Baus, whose mastery of composition, perspective, and anatomy — among other technical challenges — is undeniable. This is complemented by his playful vision that riffs on the Italian Baroque, creating capriccios with intriguing narratives and a cast of imagined characters (primarily set in New York or Chicago) that awaken our imagination.

Similarly, GCA alumnus Justin Wood has taken the traditional genre of still life and played it forward in his own way. His scenes sustain the legacy of Dutch Golden Age art yet are easily recognizable as his, not only through the paint handling but also his compositions and their intimations.

Flower paintings by Katie Whipple are unmatched in technical execution and inventiveness: she paints one flower per day, creating arrangements that can exist only in her art. Patrick Byrnes, a GCA alumnus now based in Paris, paints beautifully sensitive *alla prima* portraits that are instantly recognizable for their deft rendering and graphically powerful design. A younger graduate showing great promise is Rachel Li, now teaching at GCA; her figure paintings and *tronie*-like portraits reflect both technical mastery and an intriguing depth of character.



RACHEL LI (b. 1995), *The Silk Wrap*, 2022, oil on panel, 24 x 18 in., permanent collection of the New Salem Museum & Academy of Fine Art (Massachusetts)

Looking beyond America's many institutional ateliers, there are centers of excellence and influence wherever a master artist or two is willing to teach. In Taos, New Mexico, for example, are David A. Leffel and Sherrie McGraw, a married couple who brought to the Southwest the virtuosity in painting and drawing they long demonstrated at the Art Students League of New York. The light effects in their paintings are wonderfully inviting, making visible their reverence for nature and the mysteries of life.

OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVES

As it matures, our field has become less focused on describing what we actually see with our eyes, or telling a specific story. Hyeseung Song, an alumna of Water Street Atelier (GCA's precursor), paints large figurative oils reflecting a curious engagement with the real world, myth, and imagination. Achieving a beautiful balance between realism, naturalism, and a fantastical world that is still somehow palpable, Song uses looser brushwork that is fully integrated with her figures' three-dimensionality.

Among other artists breaking ground in this mode is Colorado's Zoey Frank, whose large multi-figure paintings have become almost filmic by showing the passing of time and changes in space within a multi-dimensional universe. In the past two years, she has mounted two sold-out solo shows at New York's Sugarlift. This gallery also represents the prolific Nicolas V. Sanchez, who recently exhibited there paintings of Mexican folkloric dancers evoking his own heritage. His work spans oil, charcoal, watercolor, and ink, ranging from very small sketchbooks to larger-than-life figure paintings. Yana Beylinson's recent solo exhibition at Denver's Abend Gallery, titled *Synesthesia*, mesmerized visitors through bold coloring, abstract patterns, and shapes intertwined with human figures — all giving a sense of the connection between nature and the divine. Staying with decorative patterning, Yuka Imata — whose mentor was the late portraitist Ronald Sherr — recently exhibited dreamy figure drawings with

monotone foliage backgrounds at the Salmagundi.

Another artist whose works are readily recognizable for their perspective, atmosphere, value structure, and color harmony is Edmond ("Eddie") Rochat. He has painted many interior scenes with figures and is now working on a larger scale that will be exciting to see. Rochat is an instructor at Connecticut's Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, invited there by co-directors Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide, whose own portraits and figure drawings and paintings are extraordinarily sensitive. Comparably sensitive and honest are the beautiful figure and portrait paintings of Julio Reyes, represented by New York City's Arcadia Contemporary, whose figures seem to reveal their inner world to the viewer.

Some of the field's leading artists have taken up the challenge of



JUSTIN WOOD (b. 1982), *Pears*, 2022, oil on canvas on board, 14 x 18 in., available through the artist



ZOEY FRANK (b. 1987), *Wedding*, 2018, oil on linen on panel, 96 x 140 in., private collection

multi-figure narrative paintings. Inspired by Mannerist and Baroque art, the paintings of Adam Miller are monumental in scope, scale, and mastery. Likewise, in her series of homages to historical women artists, Gabriela Gonzalez Dellosso does not shy away from ambitious compositions, connecting viewers with history in a highly personal way that allows us to contemplate the significance of the events depicted. For example, she was inspired to paint *The Burning of Adélaïde Labille Guillard's Masterpiece* after recognizing her forerunner's painting at the Met and imagining how devastated she must have felt after revolutionaries burned a painting on which she had worked for more than two years. Looking at Dellosso's scene, we discover how the French Revolution was not really about establishing *égalité*; had it been so, this woman's masterpiece would have been praised rather than destroyed.

Other top artists who pursue narrative or allegorical paintings with multiple figures include Bo Bartlett, who reminds me of Norman Rockwell's knack for capturing the spirit of family and America, and the color-theory expert Graydon Parrish, who brought a historical sensibility to his monumentally scaled allegory of September 11, 2001, *Cycle of Terror and Tragedy*. Parrish's contemporary Patricia Watwood combines allegorical and classical themes (such as *Pandora's Box*) with her own insights on contemporary life.

Skillfully integrating his family members and friends into Western landscapes is the California master Jeremy Lipking, who captures the vibrancy of sunlight in a manner reminiscent of Sargent and Zorn. He is particularly admired for striking a harmonious balance between sharp rendering of form and looser, less defined passages of paint. A different kind of talent is Molly Judd, who reveals the influence of her training with Odd Nerdrum through a limited palette and the capacity to convey a sense of pathos in human frailty, all while developing her own aesthetic vision beautifully.

SKILLING UP

These are only a few of the many active artists I could single out for praise. Just as it took them years to become masters, it also takes time for art lovers to fully appreciate the depth of these contemporary realists without labeling them "old-fashioned," "academic," or even "photographic" just because their work looks so realistic.

Last May I was inspired by my preview visit to the New Salem Museum & Academy of Fine Art (NSMA) in Massachusetts. [Watch for a feature article on it in *Fine Art Connoisseur* as soon as it's ready to open.] NSMA will be not only a museum, but a dynamic place that encourages artists, collectors, dealers, and curators to learn from one another. It's also where the public will see works by living realists that are otherwise inaccessible in private collections. NSMA's collection, architecture, and installation all exude a genuine love for beautiful, authentic art. Director Michael Klein explains, "For me as an artist, the idea, composition, and color harmony of a painting stop at the frame, but for Laura Barletta [owner and NSMA's curator], the collection catalyzed the museum's perfectly customized interior design. We look forward to showing our visitors how art and architecture can complement each other."

Developing our eye and appreciation for great contemporary realist art can enrich our lives. We glimpsed this during the pandemic, when many people, myself included, began taking online art classes. Despite its emphasis on creating art directly from life, even GCA launched online classes for part-time students. The number of subscribers to New Masters Academy, an online initiative founded by draftsman-sculptor Joshua Jacobo



GABRIELA GONZALEZ DELLOSSO (b. 1968), *The Burning of Adélaïde Labille Guillard's Masterpiece*, 2015, oil on linen, 70 x 105 in., Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio)

with his sculptor wife, Johanna Schweiger, grew significantly, as it did for Domestika (co-founded by Julio G. Cotruelo and Tomy Pelluz), and Painttube.tv, founded by Streamline Publishing's Eric Rhoads.

Beyond these larger platforms, countless individual artists started teaching online or expanding their offerings; key examples include Stephen Bauman Artwork and Devin Cecil-Wishing. One long-term outcome of this boom may well be more amateurs-turned-collectors developing better taste through better-trained eyes: instead of choosing what to buy based on gut instinct, they are better equipped to recognize the technical excellence of a specific artwork, and more than likely its narrative or allegorical meanings.

The up-skilling trend has been sustained through publishing as well. Novices, indeed anyone, can benefit from Juliette Aristides's instructional

JULIO REYES (b. 1982), *Above and Below*, 2021, egg tempera on panel, 12 x 13 1/2 in., Arcadia Contemporary (New York City)





sketchbooks — especially *Beginning Drawing Atelier* and *Figure Drawing Atelier* — and from Patricia Watwood's brand-new book *The Path of Drawing: Lessons for Everyday Creativity and Mindfulness*.

The boom in competitions has also advanced the field. Led by member and conservator Alexander Katlan, the Salmagundi has increased the number of competitions (see page 91), which complement those already offered by such peers as the Art Renewal Center, Portrait Society of America, National Sculpture Society, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, and Bennett Prize (see page 93). Another worth following is the up-and-coming NTD International Figure Painting Competition, a Chinese-American initiative that promotes “beauty, goodness, and authenticity in traditional painting.” Look, too, for the Almenara Art Prize and the Donald Jurney Travel Fellowship.

Gazing toward the future, the School of Atelier Arts, headed by artist-educator Amanda Theis and partnered with the Florence Academy of Art, is a newly accredited, reduced-residency Master's program designed explicitly for classroom art teachers. These individuals will now be well prepared to teach youngsters how to make art more competently — and thus with greater joy and creativity. This initiative's overall goal is to help reverse the down-skilling trend we have seen in school and collegiate art education since World War II.

Perhaps this last program is the most encouraging of all because it is the young who will ultimately shape (or reshape) everything, in every walk of life. All of the relatively recent progress outlined above makes me hopeful that the next generation will move realist art forward in fascinating ways. I cannot wait to see what happens next. ●

Some galleries to watch: abendgallery.com, arcadiacontemporary.com, collinsgalleries.com, evokecontemporary.com, franklinbowlesgallery.com, galleryhennoch.com, gpgallery.com, grenninggallery.com, meyergalleries.com, rehs.com, rjdgallery.com, robertsimon.com, salmagundi.org, sugarlift.com, sloanemerrillgallery.com

Some podcasts to enjoy: artgrindpodcast.com, johndalton.me, suggesteddonationpodcast.com, thesculptorsfuneral.com, *The Unvarnished Podcast with Ryan S. Brown*

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MICHAEL KLEIN (b. 1980), *With Nature*, 2020, oil on panel, 72 x 35 in., permanent collection of the New Salem Museum & Academy of Fine Art (Massachusetts)
