



ART REVIEW: The Magic of Realism at RJD Gallery

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by Eric Ernst

In “Get Real: New American Painting,” the RJD Gallery in Sag Harbor continues to carve out a rather unique niche in the gallery scene on the East End of Long Island. This is due in large part to the site’s dedication to representing primarily painters working in the realm of Magic Realism, a predominantly Midwest American school of painting often considered an offshoot of Surrealism, but which traces its roots to the early 20th century as an outgrowth of German expressionism (thereby actually pre-dating the surrealists by a few years).

Further, whereas Surrealism focused on a perception of reality emphasizing the boundaries between (at least) two oppositional universes, in Magic Realism the sense is that the discrepancies between these perceptual dimensions are reconciled. Creating a balance between the conscious mind and its perception of reality, Magic Realists thereby illustrate and illuminate a world in which unreality is perceived as an actual corporeal entity in and of itself.

As noted by the late critic and historian Franz Roh—who coined the term “Magic Realism” in an essay in 1925—artists are capable of acknowledging and expressing the idea that “the mystery does not descend to the represented world” as Surrealists would later contend, but rather “hides and palpitates behind it.”

This is particularly apparent in Kevin Muenté’s works, in which the artist uses a profound understanding of the structure of nature itself to conjure images that are powerfully cinematic in the way they are manipulated within his compositional framework. Originally primarily a landscape painter, the artist now uses the natural world as a stage upon which the emotive and poignant postures of his figures serve to orchestrate an emotional intensity and also coordinate the pictorial narrative.

In *Smoke Signals* (oil on canvas), for example, the viewer sees from behind a figure holding an axe, his posture relaxed. Yet the scene is redolent with a powerful air of portent as he stares at a fire of stumps and deadwood. The lush surroundings offer a striking counterpoint to the dead tree that vigorously anchors the central area of the canvas, while the attentiveness to painterly detail in the field of grass stretching towards the painting’s central plane creates a sensibility that is rife with dramatic tension and yet still reflecting nature’s bucolic rhythms.

Another New Years Day (oil on canvas), by contrast, maintains a similar cinematic atmosphere, but here the mysterious sense of malevolent augury is even more palpably present and distinctly disquieting. Picturing a reveler in a party hat trailing slightly deflated balloons while walking past a dilapidated shack in an overcast, unkempt field, the work’s deep emotional intensity is accentuated

by the dead trees that frame the composition and further highlight the feeling of foreboding in the work.



“Another New Year’s Day” by Kevin Munte. Oil on canvas, 30 x 48 inches.

Haley Hasler, on the other hand, uses self-portraiture and mostly interior settings as well as a highly refined and playful use of allegorical imagery to create the ambiance and atmosphere of a reality that is both immediately recognizable and yet still powerfully influenced by the forces of symbolic whimsy and fantasy.

In her *Portrait As An Allegory of Fidelity* (oil on linen), the artist presents herself holding her child while around her are piled the trappings of family life including toys, a dog, and a strange gentleman peering from around a curtain in the right rear quadrant of the painting. Here, as in all her works, the artist presents the same visage to the world, which serves to break what in theater is called the “fourth wall” between audience and performer while, interestingly, also destroying the “fourth wall” meant to divide the character portrayed from the artist doing the portraying.



“Portrait as an Allegory of Fidelity” by Haley Halser. Oil on linen, 52 x 36 inches.

Frank Oriti’s portrait work also seems to revel in destroying the “fourth wall” as his subjects confidently engage the audience as if bringing them into a literal conversation. Both the power and the impact of the characters themselves are dramatically accentuated, however, by a fascinating physical juxtaposition that places the figures themselves on highly abstract and painterly backgrounds which reminds the viewer that realism and abstraction are, despite their different priorities and approaches, two ends of the same continuum.



“30” by Frank Oriti. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches.

Anne Marie Kornachak, the only artist featured who will not be exhibiting when this show moves to

Jacksonville, Florida, paints highly mysterious tableaux of an ambiguous narrative, emphasizing voluminous folds of fabric and small hints of human figuration to illustrate emotion as products of internal and highly private dynamics. Creating landscapes of shadow and light through the manipulation of the material that drapes the body beneath, the artist is able to impart both emotional drama and theatricality almost entirely through gesture and impulse.



“Weightless Mad Tea Party 2” by Anne Marie Kornachuk. Oil on linen, 48 x 36 inches.

Another gallery artist, Andrea Kowch, will also be included in the exhibition in Jacksonville and, although not included in this group exhibition, is featured in a large print hanging in the gallery’s downstairs viewing area.



“Sojourn” by Andrea Kowch. Archival Pigmented Print, 50 1/2 x 42 inches, Edition of 20.

BASIC FACTS: “Get Real: New American Painting” is exhibited through April 20 at RJD Gallery, 90 Main Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963. www.rjdgallery.com.

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