



# Surrealism Revisited Through Contemporary Realism Opens at RJD Gallery

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by Pat Rogers

An alluring woman looks over her shoulder as a zigzag of flames destroys a swath of the natural world. Is she contemplating the destruction or is something even darker afoot? A woman holds up a finger as if to shush someone unseen. To her right, a flock of white owls in a tumble seems to await her command in a land where green trees stretch for miles.

In other portals to unusual worlds, fish seem to fly; a long scroll of paper is read by lantern light amid a swirl of moths; colorful butterflies swarm from a barefoot woman in a desolate land; and a pink wisp of rising smoke provides a backdrop to a peacock cradled like a treasured pet by a bare-chested man.



“Fire Starter” by Jorge Santos. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of RJD Gallery.

Welcome to just a few of the unexpected scenarios that can be explored in “Surreal Alternative,” an exhibition of figurative narrative paintings at [RJD Gallery](#) in Bridgehampton, NY. The show allows viewers to walk on the surreal side and step away from the everyday while experiencing the different ways surrealism is finding its way into the minds and artistic expression of contemporary realist painters.

“Surrealism allows us to see art in its purest form because it stems from the imagination rather than rational thought,” gallery owner Richard Demato said. “While the works first appear to be classical in composition and technique, viewers will be challenged by the enigmatic provocative narratives.”

The exhibition features paintings by [Jorge Santos](#) and [Siyah Fatih Gürbüz](#) along with art by [Armando Valero](#), [Stephen Wright](#), [Margo Selski](#), [Alexander Klingspor](#), [Salvatore Alessi](#) and [Harmonia Rosales](#). The show opens on April 14, 2018 with an Opening Reception from 6 to 8 p.m. “Surreal Alternative” continues on view through May 13, 2018. It can also be viewed online on the gallery’s Artsy page by clicking [here](#).



“Myth III Angel Peacock” by Fatih Gürbüz. Courtesy of RJD Gallery.

All eight painters are influenced by surrealism, Demato said, and weave its influence together with contemporary narrative realism. The artists may also draw inspiration from magical realism, poets from around the world, art history and personal experiences of what it’s like to live in today’s world. The result is a group of paintings that are distinctly their own and bring art history forward for a contemporary audience.

“It was at a very early age that I understood in order to develop an original body of work, I should walk away from realism,” exhibiting artist Armando Valero wrote in an email. “I ... work with elements in my imagination—not the ones I see with my eyes—to forget about the real world and invent a new one. That way, my paintings would come out different, fresh and if I work hard: unique.”

Newly arrived for the exhibition is a painting by Harmonia Rosales from her [“B.I.T.C.H. series \(Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony\)”](#), in which she reimagines classic masterpieces by substituting black women in roles portrayed by white males. Going viral last year for the Afro-Cuban American painter was *The Creation of God*, her take on Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, which is displayed in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City in Rome.

Stephen Wright is exhibiting his new series, “Celestial Body.” RJD Gallery now exclusively represents Wright and his new paintings are a gallery debut. The artworks depict nude figures set among the stars.

Paintings by Jorge Santos and Siyah Fatih Gürbüz are prominent in the RJD Gallery exhibition. New paintings by Santos unveil a new direction for the Portuguese-born American painter. Initially inspired to work with paint after seeing an Odd Nerdrum show in New York in the 1990s, his work has a sense of playfulness as he experiments with paint and possibilities.

In the new direction revealed in “Surreal Alternative,” Santos’s compositions have become more minimal and serene, with a continued emphasis on narrative with a surrealist bent. The artist’s skill as a master painter can lead viewers to believe his work is Photorealist, but subtle dreamlike settings make it clear Santos is not reproducing life. For Santos, composition is paramount and his painting is stylized, recalling Italian Mannerist painters of the 16th century, according to his website.



“Castaway” by Jorge Santos. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 80 inches. Courtesy

of RJD Gallery.

The exhibition at RJD features five paintings with one or two figures in each, instead of a larger cast of characters. The one exception is *Dry Lake Sirens*, in which a trio of women surrounds a man who appears to be sleeping or unconscious sprawled in a tiny vessel. The composition conjures the sirens in Homer's "Odyssey," whose hypnotic songs and beauty lured sailors to their death upon the rocks.



"Dry Lake Sirens" by Jorge Santos. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches.

The unusual lake surface in *Dry Lake Sirens* may also reference environmental conditions, especially those in California, where Santos currently works. His painting *Fire Starter* evokes images of the wildfires that have proved especially devastating recently. Despite these possible influences, Santos doesn't consider himself a social commentator; creating an emotional landscape with characters that light up viewers' imaginations is what's important to the painter.

Siyah Fatih Gürbüz's art is born deep in the imagination, with significance attached to the triad of nature, humans and animals. Making use of realist techniques, the art conjures a supernatural or transcendent atmosphere and may contain mythological elements.



"Everything Will Be Beautiful" by Siyah Fatih Gürbüz. Courtesy of RJD Gallery.

The Turkish-born and soon to be Liverpool-based painter creates compositions that are a reflection of real life, people he knows and lands where he has lived. He also draws inspiration from films and books, according to the artist. The scenes in his paintings, while fantastical, contain an aspect of naturalism as elements of the compositions are pushed within credible parameters. In all his work, Gürbüz creates with consciousness.

"I approach an object as if I am approaching a living thing," Gürbüz wrote in an email. "If it should grow in mass, I enlarge it, and I make it smaller, if I should. It does not change our life to enlarge or shrink something but it allows us to look at it in another way ... I have equal distance to everything so I try to reflect both the realist and the surrealist problems as well as the problems of today."



“Poem of the Butterflies” by Siyah Fatih Gürbüz. Courtesy of RJD Gallery.

To accentuate the various ways the flight of imagination manifests in the hands of these painters, RJD Gallery curated the show with small groupings for each painter in easy conversation with each other. In this way, viewers can spend time with each unique world created by a single painter with complementary narrative artworks nearby.

“Surrealist art liberates our perception and invites us to contemplate the human experience beyond the confines of rationalism,” Demato said. “It provides an escape and liberates our thinking from our everyday worlds.”

Taken together, the work of these figurative narrative painters reveals a microcosm of the ways surrealism continues to influence contemporary art. For all, paintings are sharply rendered and transport into exotic stories unfolding in mid-action at a point when anything is possible.

“I was an extremely imaginative child and I would use my imagination to transform my mundane and often difficult life into one that was fantastical, beautiful, mysterious and extraordinary,” Margo Selski wrote in an email. “Essentially, I entertain my viewers with my work, distracting them from their daily lives for even just a short while. Hopefully, the time spent with me leaves them energized, challenged or just amused.”

“Surreal Alternative” pays tribute to art history not only in its deep bow to surrealism but also by acknowledging another significant influence: American Regional Realism. An artwork from the RJD Private Collection by an artist of that school, Jamie Wyeth, will also be displayed for sale at the exhibition, marking the beginning of a new tradition for the gallery. Starting now and throughout 2018, the gallery will periodically provide an artwork from the RJD Private Collection to complement the curated show on view and will be available for sale.

Third-generation painter Jamie Wyeth is the son of American artist Andrew Wyeth and the grandson of artist and illustrator N.C. Wyeth. According to the gallery, the art of Jamie Wyeth and his family is cited as an influence for some of the painters exhibiting in the show.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Surreal Alternative” opens on April 14, 2018 with an Opening Reception from 6 to 8 p.m. at RJD Gallery, 2385 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. The show continues view through May 13, 2018. It can be viewed online by visiting the gallery’s Artsy page by clicking [here](#) or on its Artnet page by clicking [here](#).

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