Javier Arizabalo

Essays by the Artist

HECTOR DIAZ

Essays by **Javier Arizabalo**

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Girls Series

From the origins of art, the figure of the woman has been a recurrent and fundamental theme. Throughout history, she has served as a symbol of fertility, divinity, idealized beauty, and, more recently, of individual identity and emotion.

The tradition of the nude in Western art is rooted in classical antiquity, where Greek sculptures celebrated the anatomical perfection and ideal grace of the human body, both male and female.

However, in the Renaissance, the female nude took on a new prominence, often justified under mythological or biblical pretexts, as in Titian's famous Venus of Urbino.

With the arrival of Impressionism and subsequent movements, the representation of women became more personal and less idealized. Artists like Manet challenged conventions with works like Olympia, which presented women not as distant mythological figures, but as real people with a direct and defiant gaze. This shift marked the beginning of a more complex conversation about the woman's role as a subject, and not just an object, of the artwork.

In the 20th century, artists like Picasso and Modigliani deconstructed and reinterpreted the female figure, exploring her form and psychology in abstract and expressionistic ways. The nude ceased to be exclusively a matter of beauty and became a means of exploring human identity, power, and vulnerability.

Within this long and rich historical context, the following works emerge as a fascinating dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity. The series dedicated to portraits of women and the nude are not a simple continuation of established canons, but a profound reinterpretation of the female figure through a masterful hyperrealistic technique.

In the nudes, the figure is stripped of any narrative or mythological artifice, placing her directly and honestly at the center of attention. The models are not simply "Venuses" or "nymphs," but women with a tangible presence and a palpable inner strength. It is an art that invites the viewer to look closely, to find beauty in imperfections and in reality, and to reflect on the individuality that resides in every human being. In this way, it also pays homage to a millennial artistic legacy, offering a fresh, powerful, and deeply human vision of women in the 21st century.

–Javier Arizabalo

Women Series

If the figure of the young woman has been a recurring muse for idealized beauty, the representation of the older woman in art offers a much richer and more complex narrative. Unlike idealization, the portrait of the elderly woman, the grandmother, or the matriarch has historically been a vehicle for exploring themes such as wisdom, experience, dignity, vulnerability, and the inevitable march of time. It's a kind of painting that doesn't seek perfection, but truth.

Historically, the older woman has been portrayed in very specific roles. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, she often appeared as a religious figure, such as Saint Anne (Jesus's grandmother) or in scenes of the Holy Family. Her role was secondary but essential, symbolizing piety and tradition.

It was in the Baroque period, with artists like Rembrandt, that the older woman acquired an unusual prominence. In his portraits of elderly women, Rembrandt didn't focus on the richness of their clothes or their social status, but on the depth of their faces. Each wrinkle, each line of expression, was a testament to a life lived. Works like the portrait of his mother or his famous *An Old Woman Seated* are studies of an honesty and compassion that transcended mere physical representation.

In the contemporary context of the works that follow, they are distinguished by an approach that rescues and elevates the dignity of the older woman. As with the portraits of young women, the hyperrealistic technique allows for the capture of every detail of the face and body, but in this case, every detail tells a story.

These portraits of older women are not simply portraits; they are studies of the human experience. The textures of the skin and the gray hairs that frame the face are not marks of decline but seals of a life well-lived. They are represented with an honesty and intimacy that invites the viewer to contemplate the beauty that resides in maturity. The models are not objects of pity but subjects of admiration and respect.

Stripped of any stereotype, the love of a faithful representation gives them a strength that forces us to look beyond the surface and recognize that beauty belongs not to youth, but to life and reality.

–Javier Arizabalo

Boys Series

The body of the young man, in its physical prime, has been a central theme in art since classical antiquity, symbolizing strength, vitality, and anatomical perfection.

Embracing this tradition, photographic precision endows the figures with an almost tangible presence. The models are not merely young; they are monuments to youth. Light strikes every muscle and tendon, highlighting a vitality that is, on one hand, an aesthetic celebration of the human form and, on the other, a study of anatomy in its most powerful state. This glorification serves as a reminder of the ephemeral beauty of youth, immortalized through painting.

However, there is a latent tension in these works that imbues them with remarkable psychological depth. Much like Michelangelo's *Slaves*, which seem to struggle to break free from the marble that encases them, these models convey a sense of being "imprisoned" within their own skin. It is not a physical struggle but an emotional restraint, a stillness that isolates the subject from their surroundings. The skin becomes the surface of this prison, a shell of flesh that defines the boundaries of the self. The inward gaze does not distract the viewer but reinforces the idea of an inaccessible inner world, a contained strength yearning to be embraced.

The parallelism with Michelangelo's sculpture is even more evident in the treatment of volume. Light and shadow give each figure a solidity that rivals marble. These are not flat bodies but volumes that cast real shadows, appearing to occupy three-dimensional space. This ability to generate a sense of mass and weight through painting is what gives these works their sculptural monumentality.

The result is an art that, despite its undeniable technical virtuosity, transcends the physical to delve into a reflection on the human condition, beauty, strength, and restraint.

–Javier Arizabalo

Men Series

The representation of elderly people has been quite limited since antiquity, often confined to figures of authority and power, and in sculpture, to saints and gods, typically male. It is due to the Judeo-Christian tradition that they tend to be depicted as venerable prophets, patriarchs, and saints.

With a greater emphasis on individualism among the upper classes of society starting from the Renaissance, we can see more examples of the portrait genre. Kings, nobility, patrons, and the church occupy religious and socially prominent spaces, with most of these individuals being of a certain age, displaying traits of serenity, wisdom, and power.

The Baroque period, with its dramatic effect and stark contrasts in lighting, brings more humble characters to the forefront, where serenity and balance are no longer important, but quite the opposite. Opposed to the portraits of saints, nobles, and religious figures, we find beggars, drunkards, and elderly figures in genre painting.

As with other stages of life, at first glance, we tend to attribute certain concepts to the depiction of these figures: vulnerability, loneliness, wisdom, dignity, the passage of time, and decay. These representations reflect attitudes towards aging, revealing both the prejudices and the idealizations of different eras. Even in our time, where the photographic vision prevails, we cannot escape these conventions, showing us that our view is always mediated and never entirely objective.

–**Javier Arizabalo**

Children Series

The representation of children in art has a history as long as that of adults. From Egypt to Greece, through Roman art, both in sculpture and painting, they have gone hand in hand with the character that was intended to be given to these representations, whether it was an idealization, forming part of a mythology, an incarnation of feelings or trying to capture the individual.

In the medieval period, which can go from the 5th to the 15th century, in what is considered the West, the representation of these, is practically reduced to the iconography of the child-man Jesus. It is said that children were seen (and represented) as small adults.

It is again in the Renaissance when they appear as the embodiment of innocence, but also, childhood is conceived as a period of formation and preparation for adulthood, with which, they also form part of scenes where they "fulfill" their future roles.

Few works of art about children, even contemporary ones, fail to project, from the perspective of both the creator and the viewer, ideas such as innocence, delicacy, sensitivity, joy, vitality, promise for the future, curiosity, fragility, tenderness, beauty.

The childish features are not very accentuated, the smooth and soft skin, the fine hair, which usually materialize in less coarse presentations, which require a more refined technique, with less deep shadows, and more vivid colors.

Thanks to the fact that children have their natural playful attitude, ideas about reality, not formed and structured in a rigid way, as in adults, give rise to their insertion in less formalistic scenes, being able to establish a critique of the rigidity of maturity.

–Javier Arizabalo

Hands Series

Hands have always played a crucial role in art, often as an expressive complement to the face, a gesture that emphasizes emotion, or a narrative element that guides the composition.

However, in these works, hands transcend their secondary role to become the main subject, treated on a scale that gives them the same presence and impact as a full-body portrait.

The series dedicated to this motif transforms a detail into a complete universe of textures, volumes, and even emotions—a microcosm of the human condition.

The most striking feature is the way they are approached, as if they were bodies. By removing the context, the figure of the hand is magnified, occupying the canvas with undeniable force. Every fold, every wrinkle, every vein is revealed not as a uniform surface but as a living landscape full of history.

Light and shadow are sculpted with an almost sculptural precision, giving them a volume that rivals marble, just like the artist's human figures. This monumentality endows the hands with an intrinsic sensuality reminiscent of a torso or back, but with a gestural quality that only they can convey.

A clenched fist can convey tension or rage; fragility is revealed in an open palm; introspection in intertwined fingers. The hands become the epicenter of the narrative, communicating the subject's mood and history without the need for their gaze. It's an exercise in conciseness and power, where the gesture is the message.

Ultimately, these paintings of hands are not just a display of technical virtuosity but an exploration of the human condition through one of its most essential elements. Hands are tools, witnesses, and carriers of a person's life. With them, we work, touch, love, and defend ourselves. By treating them as a body worthy of being fully portrayed, the artist emphasizes that beauty, strength, and vulnerability reside in every part of our being, no matter how small or secondary it may seem.

It is a work that invites us to look closely, to find greatness in the detail, and to recognize a part of ourselves in the hands of another.

–Javier Arizabalo

Still lifes Series

Still life has long served as a genre for exploring the beauty in stillness, the vanity of life, and the symbolism of the ordinary.

These still life paintings don't feature compositions of fruits or flowers; instead, they are meticulous studies of everyday, forgotten objects with strong narrative weight. The arrangement of these elements invites us to look beyond their function and compose stories.

Objects like newspapers, letters, and old photographs reproduce not only the object itself but also the passage of time. Each crease, every water stain, the yellowing color, and the worn edges become a historical record. These items acquire a fragility and dignity that force us to reflect on memory, personal history, and the value of the ephemeral. An old photograph is no longer just an image but a fragment of a life.

Paper money is another recurring motif, and its choice is a statement of intent. It can be interpreted as a reflection on its value in modern society, its relativity, and the idolatry it inspires, as well as the fragility of the material it's made from.

The representation of objects like locks and keys speaks to archetypal symbols—metaphors for access and what is hidden. By painting these objects with dramatic light and palpable texture, I give them a sculptural presence and dynamism. The oxidation of the metal, the scratches, and the visual weight of the lock separate them from a cold, functional object, elevating them to the category of objects with a spiritual presence.

The image of fish wrapped in an old newspaper, aesthetically treated as if they were a bas-relief, is also unsettling under the gaze of those beautiful, dead eyes.

These components elevate objects and beings that are often consumed, discarded, and forgotten into works of art. From a perspective that verges on animism, the art invites us to create stories that go beyond our modern-day routines.

–Javier Arizabalo

Flowers Series

The floral still life is one of the oldest and most revered genres in painting. From the delicate compositions of Flemish masters to the vibrant color explosions of Impressionism, flowers have served as symbols of ephemeral beauty, life, death, and fertility.

Moving away from the intoxication of forms and colors that pictorial tradition provides, these works place the aesthetic experience closer to minimalism.

The flowers are bathed in light that passes through their petals, causing them to glow. The simple compositions, treated like portraits, endow these flowers with great solidity and monumentality, and sometimes a sense of solitude, as they are not framed within other adornments.

If we are sufficiently aware, nearly all the themes addressed in this catalog are transformed by light, the solidity of volume, and the absence of distracting elements, allowing us to focus on meditating, feeling, listening, and analyzing the subject. Sometimes this is done with what we know or believe we know—the subjective, what we think about it—and other times with the imposition of reality and the objective.

These flowers are a tribute to an element laden with symbolism, but through a contemporary magnifying lens that focuses on the small and silent.

–Javier Arizabalo

Details Series

The traditional portrait has historically sought to capture the entirety of a face to convey an individual's identity. However, in these works, the focus shifts.

Through the photographic frame, which has given us the ability to embrace new boundaries of the visible, a fragment of the face—an ear, an eye, lips—is isolated and magnified on the canvas.

This act of fragmentation is not a reduction but an expansion. By focusing on the minute, a macrocosm of details is revealed, transforming what was once a secondary element into a monumental protagonist, forcing us to find pure expression in a single feature.

A detail like an ear, often overlooked in classical portraiture, becomes a complete work of art. The folds of cartilage, the texture of the skin, the way light strikes and casts shadows are treated with a meticulousness that elevates it to the category of a landscape.

Each detail can be named, then defined as an entity; it is objective but also abstract, a geometric volume.

In essence, these works form part of a visual meditation. Hyperrealism is not an end in itself but a means, a magnifying glass to invite contemplation and compel us to look so closely that we lose the broader narrative, revealing only a single word.

–**Javier Arizabalo**

Drawings Series

This series of drawings represents a cohesive and meticulous journey through the figurative. While the motifs are inspired by the same themes as the paintings, the drawing technique with pencil and charcoal allows for a more intimate and direct exploration of details by the hand on the surface.

One of the central pieces of this exploration is a life-size drawing of a female nude, executed with graphite on a polyester canvas.

The pencil achieves its darkest gradients, creating a profound three-dimensionality through a masterful exercise in chiaroscuro that evokes the drama of the Baroque.
This same search for intensity is manifested in a study on a wooden panel, which captures the face of a homeless person. Here, the drawing uses the depth of shadows and the weight of a gaze to create psychological drama. Their eyes question the viewer, making them a participant in the harsh and rough scene.

The theme of hands, a recurring motif in the works, is approached with particular sensitivity. Unlike the brushstroke of painting, the pencil allows for a greater level of detail and exquisite meticulousness which, along with the representation of the most subtle values of gray, make these drawings a display of perceptibility. Here we can appreciate the tenderness of elderly hands, deformed and marked by life, that emerge from the pure white of the paper, capturing the essence of the human form with great delicacy.

In the charcoal portraits, seeking the qualities that this material allows on a rough engraving paper, the stroke becomes more energetic and gestural, shifting the focus from hyper-realistic detail to the textural qualities of the support.

The entire body of work is a true laboratory, an effort to test different materials and their possibilities.

Even so, these works retain the essence of realism, balancing expression with precision.

–**Javier Arizabalo**

Portraits Series

Portraiture is a theme with origins dating back to ancient Egypt some 5,000 years ago, where it served to honor and immortalize important figures like the pharaohs. Greek and Roman cultures also valued portraiture, with the Greeks creating realistic busts and the Romans employing it to represent political leaders and historical figures.

After a decline in the Middle Ages, portraiture strongly re-emerged during the Renaissance (14th and 15th centuries), marking a shift towards individualism, realism, and emotional depth. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael sought to capture the personality of their models, with iconic works such as the Mona Lisa.

The Baroque and Rococo periods saw an evolution towards greater emotional intensity and grandeur, with artists like Rembrandt and Caravaggio using chiaroscuro to bring their portraits to life.

The 18th and 19th centuries continued to emphasize personal expression, and the invention of photography in the 19th century revolutionized the genre, offering a quick and "accurate" representation. However, far from becoming obsolete, painted portraiture persisted, pushing artists to explore deeper layers of the human psyche and to enrich it with new formal styles.

Most of the works shown below are typically commissions, mediating creativity through client requirements. Nevertheless, if something can unite them, it is by showcasing the characteristics of what is known as realism, hyperrealism, or contemporary realism.
We can find a pattern in almost all these paintings, such as meticulousness, a certain photographic appearance, neutral or blurred backgrounds, and logically, the gaze towards the viewer, so that they recognize the vitality and reality of the portrayed, as a way of their permanence in time.
These works, predominantly oil on canvas, usually have their brushstrokes completely subjected to the interplay of light and chiaroscuro, to show the subtlety of tonal variation, highlighting the volumetric aspect of the portrayed.

Portraits of young people and those of older individuals have little in common regarding skin characteristics, but their treatments are clearly differentiated, allowing us to delve into the emotions of the represented. This is what the endeavor is about: presenting and bringing people to life, showing them in tenderness as well as sadness, tranquility, or anguish, making the observer empathize.

–Javier Arizabalo

Models Sessions

Barbara

Barbara isn't just a model, her training as a professional tango dancer has given her a deep understanding of her body, which is clear in every pose she strikes.

With exceptional intuition, she barely needs direction. Her ability to naturally and elegantly shift from one posture to another has allowed me to capture an unparalleled richness of movements and expressions in my work.

Her skill as a dancer is reflected not only in a toned and well-proportioned body but in an innate grace that elevates each pose into a form of art.

Her body, sculpted by years of discipline, reveals a defined yet never-exaggerated musculature that integrates organically into every pose. This combination of strength and delicacy gives the images a sublime elegance, capturing the essence of a dancer whose ultimate form of expression is her own body.

These paintings are a celebration of what's understood as classic beauty and the model's willingness to show the underlying harmony.

–Javier Arizabalo

Irene

Irene is a model whose professionalism is evident in every gesture, a result of her extensive experience in photography.

Unlike other models, I sought her out to explore a different typology: her light hair and eyes, along with a less voluminous figure, offer a distinct canvas for my work.

Her presence in each piece is not merely visual; it establishes a silent dialogue with the viewer. Her eyes, in particular, have a unique, almost questioning quality that draws the gaze and makes each piece feel intimate and personal.

Irene's natural poses and the expressiveness of her gaze challenge the observer to look beyond the surface and connect with the emotion of the work.

With her, every brushstroke not only captures form but also the feeling of a gaze that questions and communicates without words.

–Javier Arizabalo

Monica

Monica is a model I sought to collaborate with to explore a different aesthetic. Her focus in photography allowed me to go beyond a simple representation of the body and concentrate on elements that define the person: her hair, her fair skin, and her clothing.

Her long blond hair, often styled in braids, and her luminous, light complexion become the protagonists, infusing each piece with a sense of calm and tenderness.

In these paintings, Monica's body serves as a pretext to capture the qualities and colors of the fabrics. The different materials she poses with not only clothe her but also define and shape the composition, creating a visual narrative where texture and light are as important as the figure itself.

The result is a series of images that invite introspection, celebrating a serene and gentle beauty that stems from the harmony between the model, the fabric, and the light.

–Javier Arizabalo

Asun

Asun is the person with whom I truly began my professional journey in painting.

As a photo model and actress, her presence gave me the opportunity to explore and understand the human figure with a level of detail I had not previously worked with.

Her long, dark hair and strong features were also the starting point for a more defined and present elaboration of the face.

The sessions with Asun not only captured her figure but also laid the groundwork for the various approaches to the female form that I've developed throughout my career.

–Javier Arizabalo

Norma

I met Norma at the Gipuzkoa Artistic Association in San Sebastián, where she was posing for life drawing sessions, shortly before I began painting professionally.

Her body reflected years of ballet training: slender, elongated, with a flexibility that facilitated complex poses.

I asked her to pose on two occasions. The first session was in 2007 in a spacious, light-filled villa, which allowed me the necessary distance and lighting. I photographed her with colorful fabrics, lying down or leaning on the floor; they were almost academic figure poses.

Ten years later, in 2017, we did a second session in a photography studio. This time we worked with the nude, using fewer colorful fabrics, and with full-body shots without any additional elements. Her body had aged, as is natural, but it maintained its structure and presence.

The resulting works are a record of a search for serene, academic poses.

–Javier Arizabalo

Other

In an artistic space that lies somewhere between portraiture and the full-body figure, I focus on the female as a subject to explore the interaction between volume and light.

The female form becomes the framework for experimenting with accessories like hats and fabrics, using their colors and textures to add variations and suggest the vitality, optimism, and playfulness of youth.

–Javier Arizabalo

Cristina

I had the opportunity to meet and work with Cristina through a former student.

Despite her advanced age and the health problems she faced, what struck me most was her unbreakable spirit and her openness to the world.

Instead of limiting herself to her familiar surroundings, Cristina embraced technology and stayed active, exchanging information on her computer and participating enthusiastically in all the suggestions made to her.

When posing for the session, Cristina showed immense dignity and grace. Her presence wasn't just an act of posing, but a declaration of life—that age is not a barrier for someone who feels vibrant and curious.

It was a privilege to capture her essence and showcase the strength and serenity that emanated from her.

–Javier Arizabalo

Yeray

Inspired by classical art, I felt the need to explore not only the female form, but also the strength and vitality of the male figure.

I was looking for a model that would reflect a sculpted physique, one that conveyed a sense of strength and youth.

With this goal in mind, I contacted Yeray, a young man passionate about sports, whose body offered me the perfect opportunity for this artistic exploration.

With Yeray as my model, I was able to continue experimenting with dramatic lighting, using it to accentuate his musculature and the forms of his body.

Furthermore, I focused on capturing the expressiveness and intensity that his youth gave him, highlighting the energy and character of the model.

–Javier Arizabalo

Guillermo

I had the opportunity to work with Guillermo, whom I used to see asking for money on the street with his two dogs.

What immediately interested me was his appearance, marked by his curly hair, his beard, and the maturity of his physique.

His open attitude and Spanish origin allowed for an instant connection, and he agreed to pose for me without hesitation, showing a trust that deeply moved me.

The sessions with Guillermo were a privilege. Through my lens, I focused on showing not only his physical features, but also the strength of his character.

I leveraged his background as a believer and his inherent trust in others to create a deeper connection.

The experience allowed me to portray the humanity hidden behind life on the streets, revealing the beauty of his essence and the story he carries with him.

–Javier Arizabalo

Nedelcu

I approached Nedelcu on the street.

He was from Romania, and his pain was palpable—a story etched into his face and his limp, which, as he told me, had been caused by a youth mafia.

At first, he hesitated and cried, fearing I would harm him.

His fear reflected a vulnerability and innocence that contrasted sharply with the immense suffering he had endured.

However, he trusted me and agreed to pose, giving me the opportunity to capture not only his physical appearance but also the raw reality of his story.

Beyond the photo session, Nedelcu became a life teacher for me. He taught me about the harshness of the world and the resilience of the human spirit.

His trust in me, despite his trauma, was an act of true courage.

The experience became even more painful when his captors tried to extort money from me.

Although I don't know what became of him, his story left me with a deep sense of sadness and anger, and the memory of his humanity and his struggle stays with me every time I see one of his portraits.

–Javier Arizabalo

Babakar

Babakar, a Senegalese man who had married a friend of mine, gave me the opportunity to explore and work with a dark-skinned model.

My curiosity centered on a technical and artistic challenge: how to handle the chromatic aspects of his skin to capture its richness in a way that honored its uniqueness.

This project represented a counterpoint to the history of Western art, where the representation of people of color has traditionally been scarce, almost as if only well-to-do white people had the right to be remembered for posterity.

With his enthusiasm and willingness, Babakar was an exceptional collaborator in this experiment; he was delighted to be a part of it.

I was not only able to tackle the challenge of light and color on his skin but also to move beyond conventions and celebrate beauty in all its forms.

–Javier Arizabalo

Opinion

Reasons for the importance of contemporary realism in Spain

The dominance of realist and hyperrealist currents in Spain is not a random phenomenon, but rather the result of a convergence between monarchic tradition, patronage, and a solid pedagogical structure. Unlike other global artistic centers where abstraction dismantled technical craftsmanship, Spain has maintained a 'plastic continuity.'

This is explained, first and foremost, by the heritage of the Royal Collections. These holdings—nourished over centuries by masters from across Europe under the auspices of the Crown, as well as those emerging from Spanish creation itself—established a foundation of realism that eventually led to the creation of the Prado Museum. This institution has not only preserved the Baroque legacy but has also ensured that the fundamental references of Spanish figuration—such as Velázquez or Zurbarán—remain accessible to both the public and artists as a permanent visual reference.

This institutional accessibility was reinforced and modernized with the arrival of the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. The agreements of 1993 and, more recently, the 2022 agreement with the Thyssen family, have consolidated an international axis of figuration in Madrid. This axis spans from Dutch realism to contemporary photorealism, allowing for a fluid dialogue between national tradition and external currents.

Socioeconomically, the emergence of a thriving bourgeoisie following the end of the Ancien Régime and the industrialization of certain regions generated a level of patronage that favored academic and Impressionist trends. Figures like Ignacio Zuloaga, Ramón Casas, or Sorolla found essential support among these elites for a style of painting that, while modern, did not renounce technical mastery. This economic foundation allowed figurative painting to remain professionally viable and respected beyond the capital's administrative center.

On the educational level, the work of the Schools of Arts and Crafts has been the silent engine of this persistence. Institutions focused on the technical training of artisans and artists, placing life drawing and technical drawing at the heart of their pedagogy. This educational network democratized access to the craft and created a 'critical mass' of artists with exceptional representational skills. The combination of these factors—a solid institutional history, committed regional bourgeois patronage, and uninterrupted technical training—explains why Spain is today a sanctuary for realist painting on a global level

–Javier Arizabalo

HECTOR DIAZ

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