

HECTOR DIAZ

Javier Arizabalo

The Legacy Narratives | Vol. 5

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Javier Arizabalo:
The legacy of realism

By Héctor Díaz

Introduction

As one of Javier Arizabalo's gallerists, I have had the privilege of closely observing his remarkable journey as one of the world's foremost realist painters. Working with him has allowed me to witness firsthand not only his extraordinary technical skill but also his unwavering dedication to capturing the nuances of the human experience through his art. His approach is meticulous, his process deeply thoughtful, and his work consistently reveals layers of meaning beyond the surface.

What truly sets Javier apart is his masterful ability to blend precision with profound emotion. He creates pieces that are not just visually stunning but resonate with a quiet intensity, allowing viewers to connect with his subjects on a deeply personal and even visceral level. This interview aims to offer a deeper look into the mind of a master, shedding light on his artistic philosophy, his journey, and the creative discipline that has made him one of the most respected figures in contemporary realism on the global stage.

Arizabalo's art invites us to pause and reflect on the beauty and complexity of the human condition. His capacity to elevate realism into something transcendent speaks not only to his technical mastery but also to his deep understanding of the world around him. For American readers and collectors who appreciate the power of art to connect us to our shared humanity, Javier's work stands as a powerful testament to the timeless relevance of realism.

As Javier continues to push the boundaries of his craft, we look forward to seeing how his art evolves and the lasting impact it will leave on the global art scene.

–Héctor Díaz
October 2025

Interview

1. What drew you to realism initially, and how did you begin developing the highly detailed, precise style you are known for today? I began with a training, in my youth, very focused on drawing and frequently with a live model, which allowed me to acquire a foundation and a certain ease with realistic representation. I approached every new work as a challenge, on one hand to understand how this idea of reality was constructed, but on the other, to reach the emotion of the painting.

2. Are there any specific artists or artistic movements, past or present, that have significantly influenced your work? Throughout my artistic life, I have taken from here and there. I have been attracted to Impressionist painting, in terms of the way they simplify reality into quick brushstrokes. Velázquez, who could be considered the first Impressionist, and Singer Sargent, Sorolla, are the artists I have liked the most. On the other hand, I have also been captivated by the work of realist artists like Gabriel Morcillo, and the more contemporary Antonio López, who has so strongly influenced recent generations of Spanish artists. In fact, a high school professor I had, who was a student of Antonio López, helped me greatly in the way I approached drawing; he left that germ of influence in me.

3. The human body plays a central role in your work. What fascinates you about depicting the human form, and how do you approach capturing its complexities? There is a recognition of my own nature, there is a cult of the body derived from the Greco-Latin tradition, the thousands of figures retained by the retina, the mythification of the body, the presentation of vitality, the persistence through time beyond mortality, the trace that time and effort leave on the body. On the other hand, yes, the body is complex and ever-changing. Instead of intimidating me, this motivates me and poses a challenge to its comprehension and representation. Each fold of the body is a challenge, in terms of correct proportion, and also the capture of light, its color, its characteristic—that understanding and retention is what makes me insist and insist when it comes to capturing the idea of reality.

4. Many viewers are moved not just by the technical precision of your paintings, but by the emotion they convey. How do you balance technical accuracy with emotional storytelling in your work? Technical precision comes from years of learning and practice. On the other hand, the strong luminous contrast, the chiaroscuro, the essentiality and the elimination of the superfluous, the unembellished figures, the expressiveness of the model in terms of gesture or posture, and my admiration for expressive moments in art, like the Baroque—all of this helps in rendering these emotional states.



Suspension, Jun. 2025, Oil on Canvas, 114 x 146 cm, “Iconic” Sessions, “Girls” Series © Javier Arizabalo



Irene, Jan. 2024, Oil on Canvas, 114 x 195 cm, “Irene” Sessions, “Girls” Series” © Javier Arizabalo

5. Could you share what a typical day looks like for you in the studio? Do you follow specific routines to stay productive? Indeed, I do not extract a personal mood to pour it into the painting; rather, I place myself in a state of concentration and analysis. For this, I start by choosing the area I am going to work on, depending on whether it is more or less complicated, and I think about how I am going to resolve it. Next, I prepare the main color mixtures I will use during the work session, which lasts about three or four hours. The first half hour or hour of each work session is for introducing myself into understanding the form, the color, the tone, with an initial block-in, and then I polish and refine this approximation.

6. Your paintings are known for their attention to detail. How do you manage your time while working on such intricate pieces? Do you find yourself becoming more patient as an artist over time? Detail is something like an anecdote; it is deceptive. It doesn't require special attention from me. What is truly difficult for me is achieving a general unity in terms of volume, space, and the handling of the brushstroke, as they must be kept harmonious across many work sessions. The work on which I have spent the most time is a painting of two people on which I worked for up to nine months, because I inserted a lot of detail and it was an exceptional piece of work. I have not managed to become more patient over time. Typically, my attention span for a work drastically reduces after a month and a half of focusing on it. For many people this may seem like a long time, but it is relative.

7. How important is the use of light in your compositions? What techniques do you use to control light and shadow to enhance realism? Light and shadow are fundamental in my painting; they reinforce the drama and personal characteristics. Their importance stems from a process of decanting from my photographs, and from the way of making volume emerge from the plane of the painting. I make sure that the light creates a wide shadow area. Without shadow, mid-tones, and light, there is no subject volume. With the light, I focus on the elements to be highlighted, and I try to apply it in a grazing way to elements of the anatomy to enhance their characteristics.

8. How do you select your models and subjects? Do you seek specific qualities in your models to achieve the emotional impact you're aiming for? Three aspects interest me when conceiving a subject: the environment in which I place the figure, the subject and what they want or what I want them to say, and finally, the way of "dressing" it, supporting it, or welcoming it. Yes, I look for specific aspects in a model, attending to their beauty or proportions, youth or classical typology, their physique, their features, the pose.

9. Realism requires precision and dedication. What are the greatest challenges you face when working on a piece, and how do you overcome them? The greatest challenge is maintaining the state of concentration during the execution of the work. In the course of the process, one must be especially analytical regarding the drawing, the tone, the color, constantly paying attention, comparing the parts. All of this requires programming, method, consistency, and sometimes containing expressiveness and emotion.

10. Over the years, how has your technique evolved? Are there specific skills or methods you've developed to push your work to the next level? Over time, it is normal to increase the degree of complexity of the paintings, with each work serving as training for the next. Likewise, the most optimal materials for the desired results are being refined: the sufficiently smooth canvas, brushes with the precise elasticity, the ideal palette, the sufficient but not excessive range of nuances, the unexaggerated amount of thinner, the application times of the paint, the sufficient ambient light and a measured environment—all of these are the conditions that make the work easier.

11. How do you feel about the ways people interpret your work? Do you enjoy hearing the different emotions and thoughts your art evokes in viewers? The simple fact that someone dedicates their time to seeing and expressing their opinion is already gratifying. Generally, these are positive, simple opinions, without major analysis, which leads me to wonder if I should stir consciences a bit more, and not focus so much on technical skills. In any case, I am the first critic of my work, and the important thing is that I consider my objectives to have been achieved.

12. As a French artist, do you feel your cultural background has had an influence on your art? How does being part of a global art community impact your creative vision? I was born in France, but only circumstantially. French culture has not influenced my formative process, but rather the pictorial environment of the region where I grew up, and subsequently, the Spanish environment. The globalization of art has indeed helped my way of producing. I would not be working the way I do if I hadn't been influenced by the contacts that have come to me from galleries, artists, collectors, and projects arising from this. In this sense, what it provides also obligates me to enrich and perfect my work.

13. Realism is often viewed as one of the most demanding styles. What advice would you give to young artists who are trying to master this approach? Realism requires an extensive learning curve, which is why, when asked for an opinion, I always advise doing what one is most passionate about, as that is where the greatest amount of effort and energy will be invested. It is necessary to keep in mind adapting our work to our personal characteristics of vitality, capacity for concentration, opportunities, and other conditioning factors.



Irene, Feb. 2025, Oil on Canvas, 97 x 70 cm, “Irene” Sessions, “Girls” Series” © Javier Arizabalo



Barbara on the beach, Jun. 2024, Oil on Polyester, 73 x 116 cm, “Barbara” Sessions, “Girls” Series © Javier Arizabalo

14. In an age where contemporary art trends lean toward abstraction and conceptualism, how do you view the relevance of realism in today's art world? Abstract art, or conceptual art, have been with us and have spread for several decades; the time when they were novel has passed. There are reasons why they continue to have a strong presence, one being economic: they are easier to produce with modern techniques and technologies, and their economic return for the involved actors is greater. The containers of art have transformed over time; now the architecture of the space is as much or more highlighted than the work exhibited. These spaces have expanded towards monumentality, and the works or projects must follow suit, which means much figuration has been displaced because the old rules of scale no longer meet these requirements. Many figurative artists, by being left aside due to producing less quantity and less quickly, are forced to focus on private clients, who appreciate more careful, less standardized, and more personal work. Realist art, figurative art, photorealist art, or whatever you want to call it, has not disappeared, nor will it. It is part of the human concept of reality.

15. Are there any specific goals or milestones you hope to achieve in the next few years as an artist? I want to create some works different from what I have done until now, searching for the limits of my abilities, some composition with figures, along with some social commentary, something political. Some paintings by artists I have admired also come to mind, who have dealt with the human figure, such as Claudio Bravo, Gabriel Morcillo, Caravaggio, and I would be interested in giving my contemporary interpretation of some human being in their maximum fullness, as well as in their decadence.

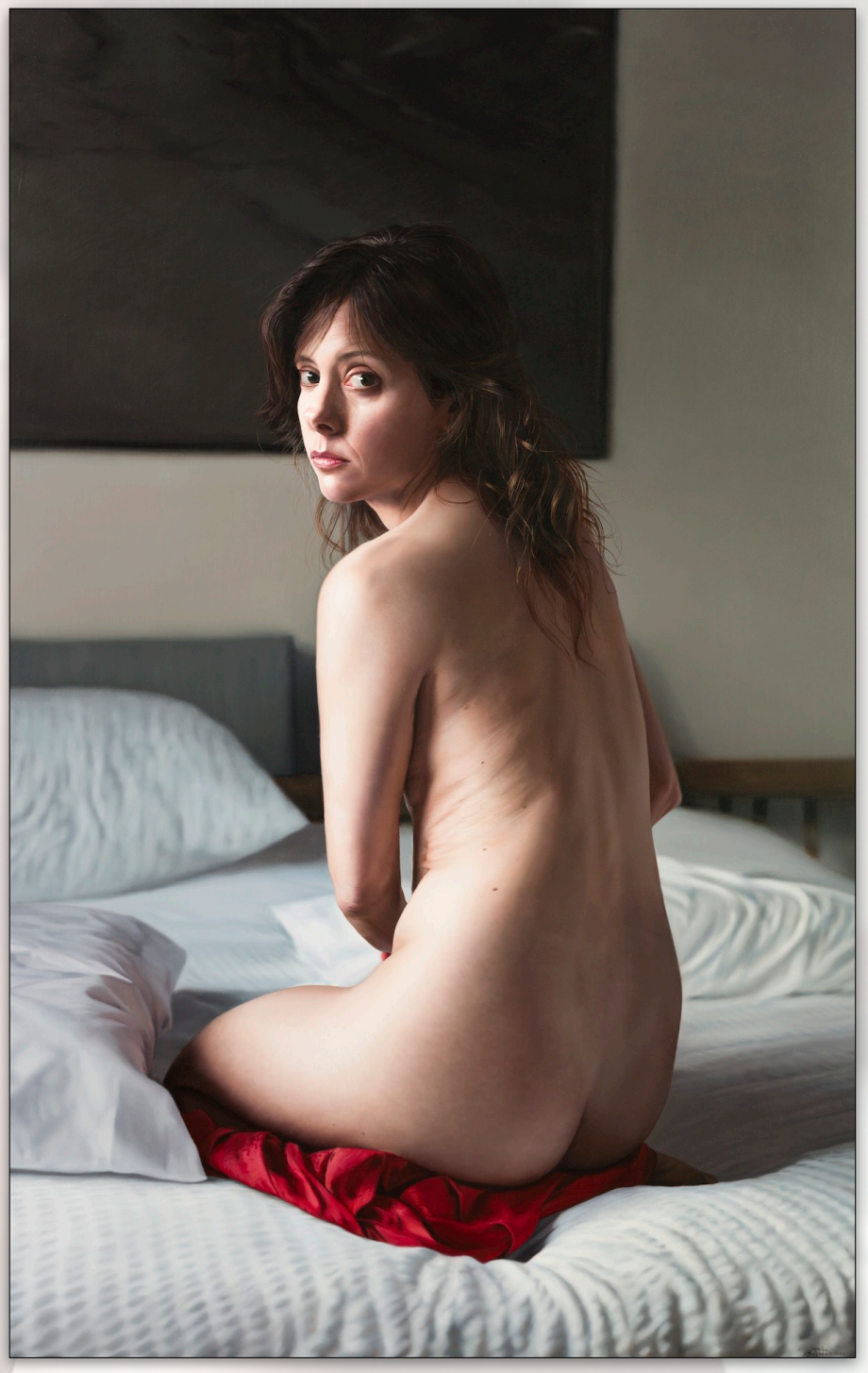
16. While your work is grounded in realism, do you ever experiment with new techniques or explore other artistic styles outside of realism? I have occasionally tried to do some abstract painting, but I cannot work in a vacuum; I need references, I need an object and an objective to aim for. Perhaps this is easier for me with graphic design techniques, which I do in a more intimate and playful environment.

17. What does painting mean to you on a personal level? How has your connection to your art changed over the years? Painting, on an emotional level, means concentration on a part of the physical aspect, although it also means effort on the more economic side, it means enjoyment on the spectator level, and it means socialization on the collective level. In the years of learning, it meant challenge and experimentation, and over time it transformed into refinement and harvesting the fruits of all the previous work.

18. How do you balance the demands of a professional art career with personal life and other commitments? It is a complicated issue; we all do what we can. The way of seeing, being, and appreciating the world is not the same for everyone; we have a way of approaching reality or the social based on developed abilities, and sometimes it is difficult for me not to be thinking about art, about aesthetics, all the time. Having had a previous professional experience, I have assimilated certain routines, to the point where my practice is almost understood as any other profession, but the compartmentalization of time is not complete. There is always an extra to contribute, as if everything could be perfected or improved, due to the very demands of creation, competition, or incompleteness.

19. What have been the defining moments in your career so far, whether exhibitions, awards, or personal breakthroughs? I don't yet perceive having had something that has significantly decided or changed my work. Obviously, there are events that mark milestones along the way, influencing your experience and, sometimes, affirmation. Perhaps the IBEX Masterpiece experience, a project to create a masterpiece, has been one of those notable points, both from the positive point of view, for its difference from the rest of the artistic experiences I have had, but also negative, due to the lack of continuity. Individual exhibitions have served me to receive responses to what I have been developing, and they have always been very positive, although I also regularly receive that interest through social media. In this way, I don't feel particularly pressured to achieve typical social recognitions, but rather to pursue more personal and intimate goals.

20. As one of the leading realist painters today, what legacy do you hope to leave behind for future generations of artists? For now, I only think about being a continuator of realist and figurative painting, of techniques that should not disappear, that are important for the appreciation and perception of the world, for personal health itself, mental work, and the attitude of effort. Perhaps I don't think I will change the world, but it seems to me a creative way of being in the world.



Barbara, Sep. 2024, Oil on Polyester, 116 x 73 cm, “Barbara” Sessions, “Girls” Series © Javier Arizabalo

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Javier Arizabalo © Javier Arizabalo

Back Cover:
Suspension, Jun. 2025, Oil on Canvas, 114 x 146 cm, “Iconic” Sessions, “Girls” Series © Javier Arizabalo

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