

HECTOR DIAZ

Javier Arizabalo

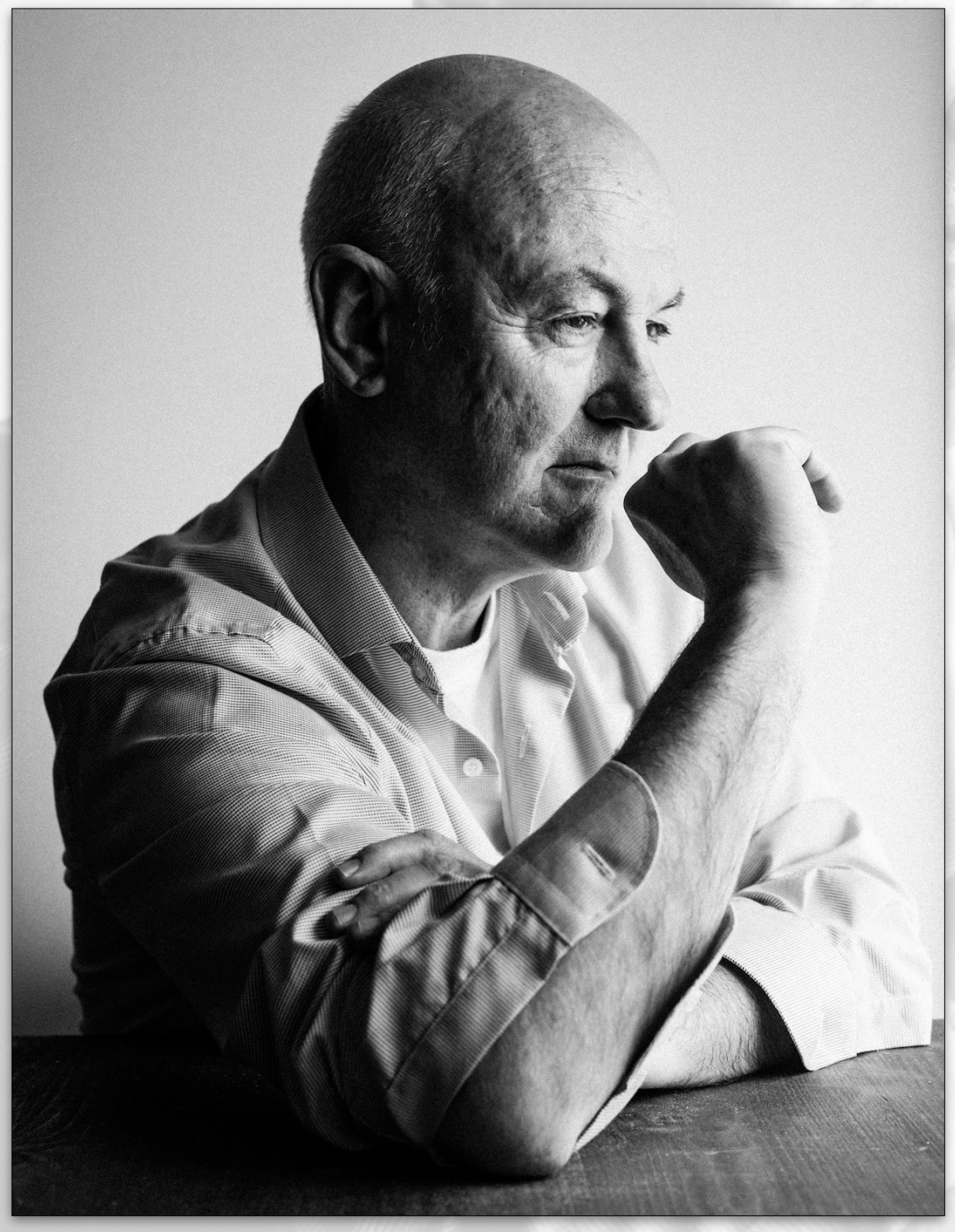
The crisis of permanence:
Why contemporary realism is the antidote to disposable art

By **Héctor Díaz** & **Javier Arizabalo**

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The contemporary art ecosystem is experiencing a crisis of meaning. As digital acceleration, hyperconsumption, and financial speculation dominate the industry's discourse, we have begun to dangerously blur the line between decorative painting and transcendental art.

Today, an alarming amount of "art" is produced, consumed, and forgotten with the same immediacy as social media content. Much of it is designed for instant gratification, to fit the aesthetic of a showroom or art fair, or worse, to match the furniture in a home or office.

However, the historical function of art is not mere decoration. Art exists to build a legacy, to defy the passage of time, and to document the depths of the human condition. Faced with this culture of the ephemeral and the disposable, the return to absolute technical, pictorial, and conceptual mastery, through the rigor of contemporary realism, does not represent a setback in the history of art; it is, in fact, the most radical and necessary act of rebellion of our time.

Often, the market misinterprets realism, reducing it to mere photographic imitation or an empty display of virtuosity. This reading is as superficial as it is misguided. True contemporary realism demands a level of conceptual and physical discipline that directly confronts modern immediacy. Building a visual legacy requires an unwavering commitment to the craft; it demands a patience that today feels subversive.

As a gallery owner, I have had the privilege not only of representing but also of closely observing the mechanism of this rigor through the work of one of the world's most outstanding contemporary realist painters: Javier Arizabalo. His methodical process is not merely a technique, but a philosophical manifesto against the speed of industry. In a world where novelty is demanded daily, Arizabalo can dedicate months, half a year, or even longer to the creation of a single spectacular painting.

This extreme dedication to the craft naturally leads us to a broader question about the current landscape of the primary market in the United States: Why does so much of the figurative art elite feel so vibrant abroad? Javier Arizabalo reflects on the specific historical and pedagogical ecosystem that makes this possible in the country where he has lived his entire life: Spain.



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



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

“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”.

Yet, this European sanctuary does not exist in isolation from the American collector. The American appreciation for such mastery has deep historical roots.

The strong presence of classical realist art in U.S. museums is largely due to the magnificent work of the art dealer Joseph Duveen. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he facilitated the massive transfer of masterpieces from Europe to American collectors. Many of these works form the core of institutions like the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York today, establishing the enduring foundation of American appreciation for European mastery.

Today, this transatlantic dialogue continues. The pursuit of rigorous representational art is kept alive not only by discerning collectors but by American artists who share this unwavering commitment. Creators such as Steven Assael, Jacob Collins, Anthony Waichulis, Casey Baugh, Lee Price, Annie Murphy-Robinson, Amanda Greive, and Mary Carroll, stand as prime domestic examples of this dedication to technical and conceptual mastery. Like Arizabalo, they refuse to yield to the ephemeral.

The art world—gallerists, collectors, curators, publishers, and so on—faces a crucial decision today. It can continue to feed a bubble of fleeting aesthetic trends, where value is measured by immediate impact and decorative potential, or it can assume a historical responsibility as guardians of cultural heritage. Supporting artists who demonstrate unwavering technical, pictorial, and conceptual mastery is not just an aesthetic choice; it is fostering and supporting what will endure.

True art is not made to inhabit the present, but to conquer history.

Héctor Díaz
Founder & Director of HECTOR DIAZ

Javier Arizabalo
French-Spanish Realist Artist



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

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Cover:
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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