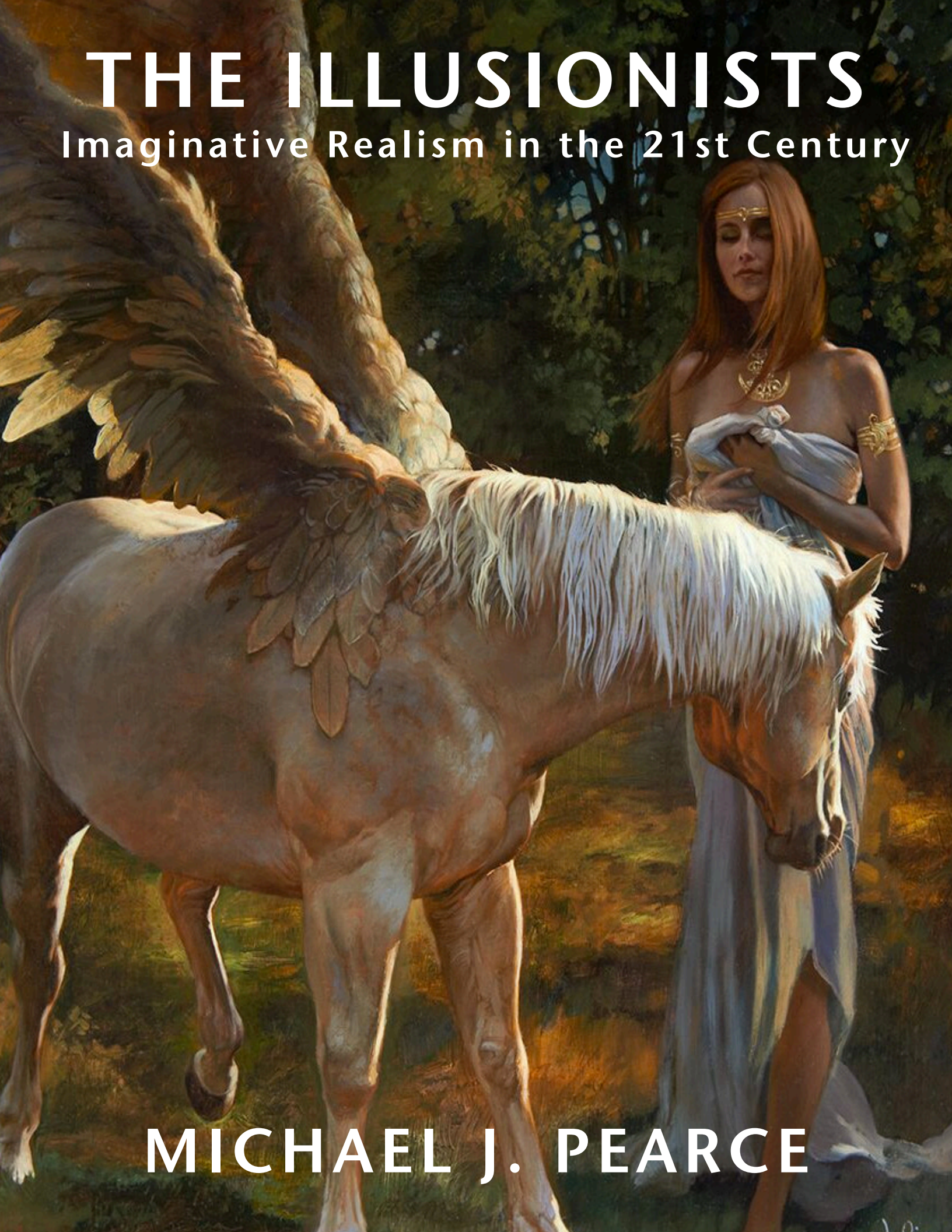


THE ILLUSIONISTS

Imaginative Realism in the 21st Century



MICHAEL J. PEARCE



Guy Kinnear- Paper Leap at Daybreak

“The Illusionists”

Studio Channel Islands March 30th—May 18, 2019.

Opening Reception: April 6th, 4:00pm—6:00pm

Phone: 805.383.1368 | info@studiochannelislands.org

Studio Channel Islands, 2222 E Ventura Blvd. Camarillo, CA 93010



The "Lion Man" — Discovered in 1939

Imaginative Realist painters and sculptors use traditional realist techniques to create images of things that are not real. Their work is founded on practices that have been in use since humans first painted hunting scenes on cave walls and sculpted figurines of man-beasts. It is deeply rooted in imagination. The works are romantic, and alluring, and fascinating because although they are painted using methodologies that are typically used to create traditional landscapes and figurative imagery, the scenes they describe are unfamiliar, unreal and other-worldly.

A continuing preference for mythical imagery pervades American culture, with a seemingly never-ending flow of Marvel Comics superhero movies, the "Harry Potter" and "Lord of the Rings" movies, and HBO's wildly popular "Game of Thrones" small screen franchise maintaining a dominant position in the filmed narratives that characterize the arts of our time. At first glance, Imaginative Realist paintings fit comfortably within the public's obsession with movie themes like these, and the world of these paintings could be viewed as a sideshow to the far greater financial impact of Hollywood productions. They, too, have a sense of being set within an imagined but orderly other-universe. They, too, follow an internal, speculative logic. They, too, step beyond the mundane into the extraordinary.

But there is an additional depth to paintings and sculptures that provides them with a gravity that is missing in motion pictures. This is the depth that time offers us. Paintings are slow. They allow an almost meditative process of enjoyment, in which viewers get to know single images, which can tell surprisingly detailed stories. This slowness is in direct contrast to the rapid cutting and tumultuous cascade of imagery that characterizes superhero films. In addition, the solid reality of a painting or sculpture offers an experience quite different from the transience of film or video imagery, which flits before us, untouchable and immaterial. When we look at a painting we are keenly aware that it is made of colored pigments, and aware of the skilled hand of the artist that made it—but when we step beyond the truth that the painting is goo, cleverly moved around with a stick, we enjoy the wonderful moment when we accept the image as a moment of reality. Paintings and sculptures are a deception, but they tell a beautiful lie, and we love to be seduced into the other world of their creator's invention.

Although Imaginative Realism was treated harshly by 20th Century critics with a deeply ingrained hatred for popular painting and sculpture, it has a long historical pedigree bound together by two particularly important strands. First, its technical excellence comes from studio practices that have been used for centuries to produce the masterpieces of art history we admire as our cultural heritage. Second, its subject matter is sourced in imagery and literature dating from prehistory, to Greek antiquity, to the present, using motifs that appear throughout the canon of art.

The cultural impact of imaginative realism in the 20th Century was already immense before the horror of 9–11 turned the millennium upon its awful axis, but its products were treated with contempt by the avant-gardist academy and by Yankee art critics who were supposed



Batman — First drawn in 1939, the superhero is 80 years old.

to comment upon culture with insight, but instead served the interests of American propagandists at the expense of the art of the people. The avant-gardist theorists of the 20th Century condemned sentiment as the antithesis of the un-ornamented abstraction that they believed symbolized a new, enlightened post-war world. In large part, their iconoclastic condemnation of sentiment resulted from an awareness of its

kids in it somewhere. The avant-gardists' snobbish disdain for figurative painting was guided by elitism, and their hatred of art which had any scent of sentiment was impressively vitriolic. They were wrong to poison the well of thousands of years of traditional image-making. Thankfully the 20th century is nearly twenty years past, and fully-formed postmodernism has released imaginative realism from the toxic acrimony of the avant-garde. The well is deep, and the water is fresh.



Richard MacDonald- Blind Faith

use as a manipulative tool of the propagandists employed by Stalin and Hitler. But rather obviously, not all imagery that appeals to us at an emotional level is crafted as propaganda for tyrannical dictatorships. Clearly, imagery that has a sentimental element is not always politically motivated. Experiencing sentiment is an inherent part of human life. Without it and without our emotional responses to the incidents of daily life, we would be machines. Even the most severe avant-gardist's home had pictures of the

Richard MacDonald's sculptures evoke a deeply sensual response. His work is tremendously well-crafted, and he has a remarkable eye for the physical form of human anatomy at peak performance. His "Blind Faith" is a good example of how his imagination takes his work a step beyond reality, into the unlimited world of potential. His models are acrobats from "Cirque du Soleil", the famous spectacular performance troupe that revolutionized circus and turned their shows into themed experiences of staged wonderlands populated by extraordinary people and phenomena. MacDonald's sculptures occupy the same aesthetic space as Cirque entertainments—his figures are dream-like, captured in moments of perfect balance, poised at the point of floating. They are theatrical, frozen moments of rich narratives. These strange people in fine, unearthly costumes are caught in a strange story that begs for completion in the viewer's inquisitive mind. They live in another world and another time, where gravity no longer pulls their perfect bodies to the earth.

The characteristics of Imaginative Realism are not limited to sentiment and excellent technique.



Julie Bell- If Wishes Were Horses

Powerful respect for ancient mythology provides rich source material.

Julie Bell's painting "If Wishes Were Horses" reimagines Pegasus, the flying horse of Greek myth. Pegasus was born from the blood flowing from Medusa's neck when Perseus struck the gorgon's snake-haired head from her shoulders while she slept. An abbreviated version of the story is in Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and other classical texts, but Pegasus has had a life in the visual arts far greater than the fragments about him that are to be found in the literature—artists have loved painting images of the fantastic winged horse for more than two millennia. Bell places her Pegasus pony in an arcadian Autumnal woodland, where a beautiful woman, a priestess dressed in white, wearing gold jewelry stands beside him. Bell told me that the priestess' eyes are closed and she is imagining the

flying horse that we see before her—begging the question of whether Pegasus will remain there or not after the priestess opens her eyes. If he does, will he mature into the full-blooded stallion of the myth, and fly to Mount Olympus? The painting captures a deep desire for an imagined world to be made manifest before us, a wish for a different world, where the power of myth is real.

Bell clearly admires the paintings of J. W. Waterhouse—"If Wishes Were Horses" is a direct homage to his magnificent "Lady of Shalott", which hangs in the Tate Britain. When we compare the two paintings the similarities are self-evident—the loose brushwork of the pastoral landscape, the lovingly rendered white dress and gold jewelry, the careful detail of the central figure, the color palette. Bell has clearly been careful to look closely at Waterhouse's tech



John William Waterhouse- The Lady of Shalott

nique as she produced her painting. This delight in the Pre-Raphaelite's work is consistent with the conservative care and attention to the foundations of Western painting found in much Imaginative Realism, both in the sources of the imagery and in the techniques used to paint them. This is a manifestation of a desire to reaffirm the foundations of Western culture.

That Bell's earlier work was profoundly influenced by Boris Vallejo should not be surprising, for the two painters are a married couple. Vallejo is famous for his sword and sorcery images of muscular heroes and heroines battling against awesome beasts. He too has begun crafting pictures that re-imagine classical mythology. Here is his "Amaryllis Embrace", a painting of Lamia as a fairy-like winged being, clinging to the stem of a beautiful flower.

Lamia was a beautiful woman beloved by Zeus. Zeus' jealous wife Hera took revenge on her by killing all her children, causing her such anguish that she was transformed into half-woman, half-snake. Tortured by her loss, Lamia hunts down children to devour them so that others might suffer as she did.

The painting is unexpectedly sensitive to the classical story. Lamia has a severity of expression that belies the triviality of her faux faerie rainbow wings. Despite the iridescent eye-candy of the wings, this is not a picture for children, but an interpretation of a character from



Boris Vallejo- Amaryllis Embrace

the canon of classical mythology—an imaginative Freudian expansion upon the ancient character. Like Bell's Pegasus, Vallejo's muscular painting of Lamia has deep roots in his appreciation of Western Art History, but he has reimagined the classical character within a new context. An erotic painter, perhaps he too was inspired by Waterhouse, who painted two sensual 19th Century images of Lamia.

Sometimes Imaginative Realists produce strange hybrids of things that dwell outside of the realm of classical mythology, raising them



Vince Natale- Falco Luciferus II

from dark recesses of the mind. Vince Natale's exquisite "Falco Luciferus II" resembles a classical atelier painting of the skull of a bird of prey, laid in a bed of red rose petals, but more careful examination reveals that this is no natural creature—it is a painting of an imaginary artifact memorializing the archaeology of horror; the skeletal remains of a weird little monster, collected and venerated by some insane antiquarian with a love for the sublime, shadowy objects from the places in our minds where we enjoy fear.

This painting of the skull of an imaginary beast may inspire thoughts of horror movies, but actually, the sources for such imagery are very old. They are part of the great lineage of Imaginary Realism, here with roots in Christian mythological art, found in graphic apocalyptic murals, or in the work of Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Brueghel's "Fall of the Rebel

Angels" and his other painted depictions of extraordinary spectacles were produced in the 16th Century, as European culture experienced the crisis of the Protestant Reformation, against a background of the new Prohumanist thought that began to undermine the Catholic church's religious authority. His remarkable



Pieter Brueghel the Elder- The Fall of the Rebel Angels



Sandra Yagi- Hatching Death

imagination produced strange creatures, weird costumes and demonic figures in a crowded landscape almost completely concealed by the mass of bizarre characters. What Natale has done is to imagine the stripped skeleton of a beast like one of Brueghel's in an occult ossuary, and painted its impossible skull like a still-life.

Imaginative Realist Sandra Yagi paints wonderful pictures of diminutive skeletons that belong in a 21st Century cabinet of curiosities. Her paintings present hybrid creatures that are based on real things, but she places them in wonderful combinations that inspire careful examination. Her little skeletons fly, play music and perform, in a celebration of impossible life. The bones of her hybrid twins dance together as part of the mad merrymaking of the dead.

Such objects would be very comfortable in one of the "Cabinets of Curiosity" that preceded our present-day museums. These were collections made by antiquarians who were fascinated both by history, which was being rediscovered during the Renaissance and also by the practices of early science, known as alchemy, which was beginning to reveal the secrets of nature, cracked open by the invention of distillation. The scent of miraculous divine intercession hung about these collections, which owed much to the reliquaries of the Medieval churches, and the antiquarians emphasized the Platonic principle "as above, so below"—the idea that earthly things mirrored heavenly things. Athanasius Kircher, the father of Egyptology, decorated the ceiling of his spectacular cabinet of curiosities with the inscription: "Whosoever perceives the chain that binds the world below to the world

above will know the mysteries of nature and achieve miracles.”

This is an allegorical way of thinking. Unusual objects that challenged expectations were particularly desirable to antiquarians and were thought of as revelations that might lead to a more enlightened understanding of the working of the creation. Consequently, in these early days of collecting for the sake of public edification, we find a special focus upon freaks, hybrids and weird things as centers of interest. Kircher’s cabinet collection included a mermaid’s tail, a giant’s bones, and optical illusions that amazed his visitors. Cabinets of Curiosity were intended to increase our sense of wonder, to open the possibilities of imagination.

Allegorical imagery is among the oldest historical sources of 21st Century imaginative realism. A deeply allegorical painter, whose paintings are carefully loaded with multiple layers of interpretive symbolism, Regina Jacobson offers a psychological approach to her imaginative

subject matter, concealing allegorical meanings within an approach to stories that is the visual equivalent to Anne Sexton’s “Transformations”, a collection of poems based on the Grimm brothers’ macabre tales, or Angela Carter’s rich and unearthly narrative writing in her “Bloody Chamber”, pulling its darkly erotic stories from Grimm’s and reimagining them from a woman’s point of view.

In her “Friend or Fowler” Jacobson sends her modern character into the ancient nemetons deep in the woods, where the druids’ clearings are the traditional locus of sacrificial bloodshed. Like the druids who prognosticated from the flights of birds, reading their murmurations as the book of nature, the woman communes with the crows, birds associated with Odin, but introduces a red robin to their dark haunts. It’s a pretty, but ominous scene, which reminds us that the forces of nature can be dark and potent and that sometimes, delicate, carefully bred things that produce beauty may be safer in the gilded cage. In other paintings, she suspends women within a magic circle, confining them in



Regina Jacobson- Friend or Fowler



Kathiucia Dias- A Murder of Crows

the protective ritual space where they can examine themselves in their nakedness before the mirror that reveals the artifice of costume and make-up. These rites of sacred space and storytelling are sourced from the deep cultural well. The perennial tradition includes the ancient rituals practiced by the ancestors who worked the land, fought for it, traded and made their people prosperous.

Kathiucia Dias makes similar use of the raven as a spiritual messenger. There is an allegorical narrative here—a private story that must be deciphered. A nervous man, clutching at his collar, waits for someone to arrive in a richly decorated Medieval cloister, sourced and re-imagined from the Isabella Stuart Gardner museum. He twists to look out of the gothic window to see if she is coming. There are two sensual features that create a subtly erotic atmosphere—a raven offers the dark stranger a red cherry from its perch on a tub beside him; a piece of silk lingerie lies on the ground before his feet. A Cherokee tale tells the story of the raven as the bearer of



Gentile de Fabriano (Italian, about 1370-1427)- Coronation of the Virgin

a red berry plucked from a tree in the world of spirits, which could grant redemption to an evil person and return their soul from darkness to light, should they choose it. The mosaic wall is decorated with stills of a corvid in flight, freezing frames of its movement like Muybridge's photo



F. Scott Hess- The Dream of Art History

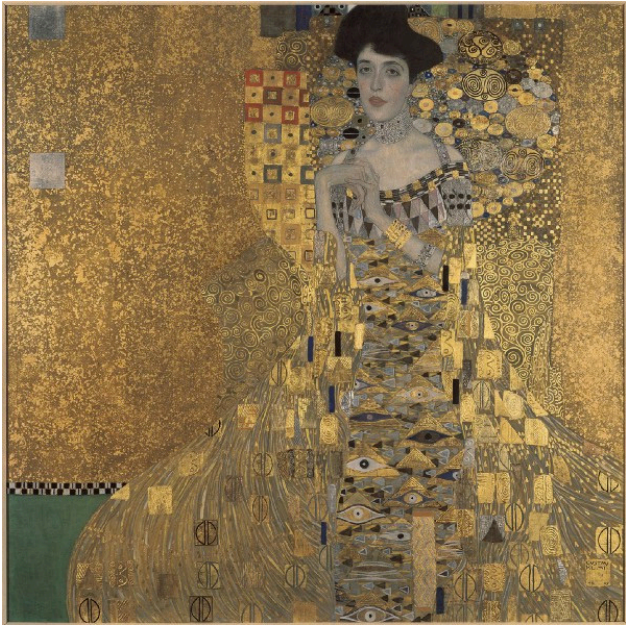
graphs of bodies in motion. The man in black is in the path of the raven's frozen flight, suggesting that he has dark intentions, but that he might still be redeemed if he eats the red berry.

Curiously, Dias says that she hadn't heard of Cherokee story before she painted the canvas, and this points to the interesting difference between an artisan's intent, and the viewer's interpretation. The muses of imagination are faithless mistresses - they gift us with beautiful visions without resolution.

The ornamented wall is extravagantly patterned. Dias put in many hours of devotional work to craft it so effectively. But she has been careful not to allow the decorative element overwhelm the imaginative pagan narrative. This sacred aspect of the work is humble and deliberately understated. Although her narrative may be sourced from native mythology, her attention to the detailed mosaic-like wall of the cloister, and the meditative process she has followed to produce such painstaking work allude to Christian religious art made to the glory of God (and donors) in traditional Catholic icons.

As Roger Scruton has said, the people of the present have a contract with the people of the past and the people of the future, an agreement to maintain the traditions that have brought culture this far. Without the decisions and practices of our ancestors, our culture would not exist. But honoring the atavistic contract does not mean that culture should stagnate in a sort of endless reproduction, or that we should attempt to duplicate the circumstances of the past, instead, it is an agreement that we should emulate our ancestors' work. Emulation is not imitation, but a building upon the work of past masters, a surpassing of the work already done.

F. Scott Hess' extraordinary painting "The Dream of Art History" describes the tragic 20th Century break in the lineage of tradition beautifully. A spiral of imagery swirls into a diminutive toilet in the house top left, a whirling cascade of famous images ranging from an Elizabethan portrait to Millet's "Gleaners" in the first two arcs, then, with more detail starting at the bottom left with Matisse's "Dance", a Mondrian "Composition", Malevich's Black Square—then shockingly, the front grill of a pickup smashes



Gustav Klimt — Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I

the spiral just above Magritte's famous painting of the man in a bowler hat with his face covered by an apple, "The Son of Man", and Salvador Dali's melting clock in The "Persistence of Memory". The three graces swoop in ahead of the truck to warn Hess of the catastrophe, alarmed by the skeletal form of death, which is poised to leap upon the artist. The spiral narrative of the paint-

ings continues above the pickup's interruption of the flow of representational pictures, with Warhol's Campbell's Soup, a Lichtenstein, Chuck Close's self-portrait and a Fischl cake. Then, in the final curve of the stream, a flow of images by living painters including an Adam Miller, an Aleah Chapin, and surprisingly, (but typical of Hess' wry sense of humor) a Loony Tunes Bugs Bunny. Then the pictures become a blur as the spiral runs into the future, which no-one knows. It's a brilliant allegorical painting about the disruption of tradition, but it is also an optimistic painting because living painters have continued with the inheritance despite the terrible damage to their rich lineage.

Traditional Christian icon paintings can be spectacular revelations of the value Medieval Christians placed in their faith. Gentile da Fabriano's "Coronation of the Virgin" is an exemplar of the ultimate in iconic panel making—it is richly decorated in embossed gold leaf and exceptionally detailed decorative pattern painting. The craftsman who made it fashioned it as a sign of his patron's devotion to his God, for the materials and the amount of time dedicated



Brad Kunkle- The History of Nature



Pamela Wilson- Dazzling Dark

to the piece are extravagant symbols of wealth.

This craftsmanship was emulated by Gustav Klimt in his *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, which built upon the tradition to create a new kind of icon, dedicated to the bourgeoisie instead of the church. The painting has the same degree of painstaking detail, and is made from the same rich materials, but the patterns refer to a fluid symbolic design of rectangles, spirals and circles similar to the Neolithic solar designs found at Newgrange, dating to five thousand years before Christ's birth. It acknowledges our very ancient obligation to our ancestors, and brings the emulative contract into the present, while also referencing our debt to the church. The same kind of craftsmanship is important to Imaginative Realists, who are thoroughly immersed in the long history of traditional studio technique. These are craftsmen and craftswomen—technicians of the imagination.

Brad Kunkle refers to icons, Klimt, and optical illusions in his paintings. He is delighted by

nature and renders homage to it by using precious metals in a painterly way, in much the same way that the icon painters placed the Virgin in an eternal, golden, celestial sky. The foliage in the foreground is painted by using brown paint over silver leaf, lifting the pigment to reveal the shining metal beneath. He plays with the two-dimensional nature of the picture plane panel by painting shadows of the flitting swallows as if they are inches away from the surface of the panel, creating that cognitive dissonance we enjoy when witnessing an optical illusion. One moment the silver background is the sky above the landscape, the next it suddenly becomes a wall behind the birds. His interest in the flattened patterns of icons and Klimt's work is evident in his use of the striped shirt and the peacock-like fan of gold and silver spread about the waist of the model.

Pamela Wilson uses the tradition of precious metal leaf to give her paintings an additional dimension of excess. The iconic quality of the gold suggests a religious fetishization of ex-



Roger Dean- Birdsongs of the Mesozoic

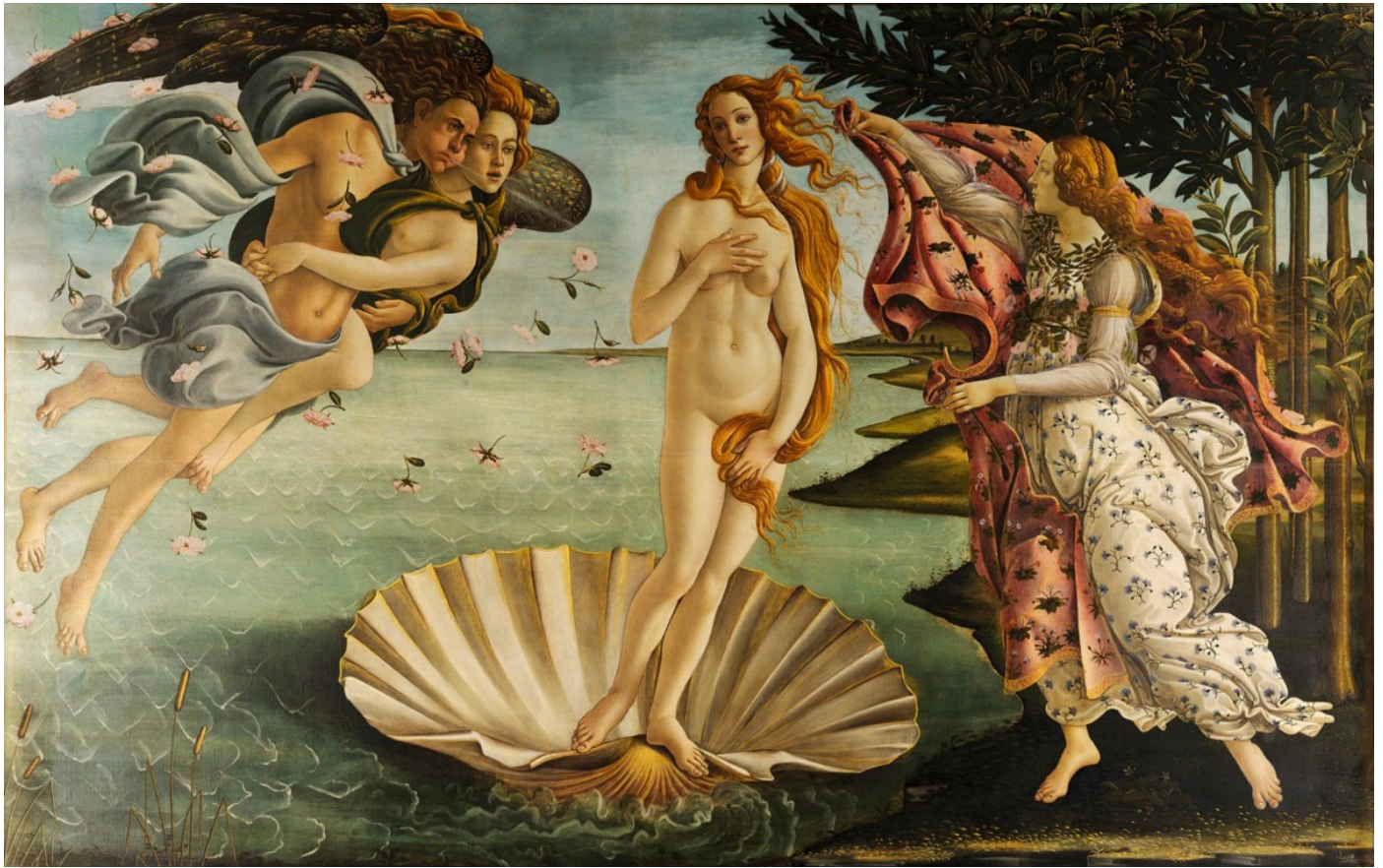
cess. In “Dazzling Dark”, one of Wilson’s seductive smaller works, a woman rides on a merry-go-round, clutching a child’s lolly-pop, made-up like the histrionic 1970’s vaudeville rocker Alice Cooper and dressed up in a costume taken from the wardrobe department of a cowboy movie—she is weeping, and her make-up has run. The decorative stallion she rides is a carved, wooden fake—hers is a false species of wildness and she pretends her freedom. Here there is the sweet scent of luxurious hysteria.

Always keen to create images of theatrically Bohemian life, Wilson’s golden backgrounds and her fancy-dressed characters suggest problems with the self-indulgent reaction to overabundance that is symptomatic of our time. She seems to ask a moral question—is dissolute pleasure-seeking the best way to deal with material wealth? Her work is paradoxical because although the paintings offer a moral lesson, they rejoice in materiality. The childishness of the woman in the painting seems to suggest we should avoid following her fall into licentiousness



Ma Yuan- Dancing and Singing
(Peasants Returning from Work)

and live with temperance instead, but the richly seductive materiality of Wilson’s paintings remind us of the desirability of luxury and the dangers of greed.



Sandro Botticelli- The Birth of Venua

Imaginative Realism is not a superficial style lacking cultural relevance or depth, but a vibrant, long-lived form that has developed over the span of millennia. And the debt imaginative realists owe to the past is not limited to the history of European painting. Roger Dean's landscapes are clearly inspired by Chinese landscape paintings made during and after the Song Dynasty, which isolated dramatic features from each other, suspending amazing rock formations in clouds, and elongating and exaggerating the proportions of the landscape to emphasize a dreamy other-worldly quality.

Dean is in the habit of carrying a sketchbook with him when he travels, allowing him to capture dramatic scenes that may be useful to him in his studio. His famous arches of stone in "Elbow Rock" are based on scenes he sketched in the Utah desert. "Dragon's Garden", and "The Watchtower"—both iconic paintings of trees clinging to floating islands—are based on weather-shaped Monterey cypresses he drew while visiting the Californian peninsula. A tree

uprooted by a storm near his home became the basis for the twisted branches in his Arches Mist. He is a landscape painter who takes his observations of reality and transforms them by asking "What if...?"

Dean hates the words "fantasy art." He's right to resent them. "Fantasy art" evokes thoughts of fey children's stories, fairytales, and conjures images of whimsical elegies, and immediately positions paintings and drawings in the forbidden world of sentiment. "Fantasy art" is a pejorative term used by art elitists to belittle people who love imaginative realism.

After the ancient Classical and Christian sources, precedents for Imaginative Realism may be found in Renaissance paintings like those of Sandro Botticelli, in Victorian illustrations of gothic horror and early science fiction; in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Burne-Jones and Waterhouse; in the delightful paintings and posters of Art Nouveau and the Vienna Secession; and later in popular 20th Century posters and album



Mark Gleason- Arguing Stil



Tenniel- Frontispiece for Poe's "The Raven"

covers. Often stories led the way to the imagery.

The successful literature of 19th Century writers like Edgar Allen Poe and Baudelaire laid the foundations for 20th Century authors like H. P. Lovecraft and H.G. Wells to imagine fabulous worlds, and artists responded by producing illustrative imagery to accompany the texts. The history of Imaginative Realism has largely been neglected by art historians, who have been slow to respond to its immense popularity, but sometimes cultural changes are recognized well after their ascent—the Renaissance was one of the most significant periods of art history, but it wasn't given its name until a century and a half after it had begun. By the 21st Century, Imaginative Realist painting, sculpture, film, and literature had become extraordinarily pervasive, yet it was overlooked as a tremendously significant cultural movement.

Mark Gleason channels Poe, with his dark but mischievous paintings of theatrical moments played out at dusk and into the night. His characters are busy with strange acts that might turn nasty—a woman clutches a sledgehammer behind her back. A foolish man wearing a paper crown beholds a giant cockroach in the palm of his outstretched, open hand. These are strange visions, with the threat of violence lurking within them, but here too we find the ancient roots of the Judeo-Christian myth, in a fabulous painting of a fearsome man wielding the jawbone of an ass. Here is Samson of biblical fame in Gleason's painting "Arguing Still", capturing a moment from Judges 15.14.

"...the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands. And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith."

That Gleason's shrieking Samson swings the jawbone among a field of poppies is surely not an accident—poppies are an ancient symbol of sleep and forgetfulness because of the opium they produce—bringing us from the pre-biblical era to the First World War, commemorated by Flanders' blood-red poppies on Armistice Day, and to the recent past of the war in Afghanistan, where the poppy fields feed the West's addiction. The painting also recalls memories of Kubrick's magnificent 2001, A Space Odyssey, when the ape crushes the skull of his enemy and hurls the femur into the sky, where it transforms into a spinning space station. Using a biblical source is unusual in Gleason's body of work, and he prefers to paint dramatic, dark images of frightening scenes, in which knives, snakes and black horses stand in as figures of fear, symbols cut from the same species of melancholy as the poetry in Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil.

Mark Poole deliberately mines the iconography of science fiction to imagine a world after the fall of an imaginary civilization, creating images of a distant future legend. His paint-



Mark Poole- Remnant

ings invent a story of human life set after the end of a strangely alien mechanical age. The giant, rusted cogs he paints are set within beautiful untouched landscapes—they are archaic, steampunk artifacts, alluding to the failure of a mechanical society which nature has overtaken. We are strangers in a strange land in Poole's world, which imagines a far future.

In Bryan Larsen's work, we are much closer to home, even though he sets his work in outer space. From the lineage of science fiction imagery, blended with 19th Century studio technique, Larsen imagines scenes from a utopian technological future, placing spacecraft into traditionally painted landscapes. His figurative painting A Guest in the Garden resembles some of Bouguereau's delightful images of children, but stretches far beyond the French master's sometimes predictable subject matter, for Larsen chooses to place the people in his paintings in space stations or preparing to go outside to play in an alien landscape.



Bryan Larsen- A Guest in the Garden

Sentiment draws us into “A Guest in the Garden” as we recognize the wonder and curiosity of the children as they gaze, fascinated, at a butterfly that lives within the fragile ecosystem of a starship that will one day deliver them to some far-off planet. These children are the future of humankind. Sentiment and hope are tied together here with a vision of our destiny in the stars. This is a vision of possibility. Larsen’s paintings are also reminiscent of the lofty work of Laurence Alma-Tadema, whose elegies to classical antiquity share the same sense of wonder at the scale of human achievement that Larsen puts into his work. Both artists are fascinated by height, placing figures in languid poses high up on architectural outcrops overlooking big landscapes, creating a powerful sense of the sublime as it is made accessible to people. Caspar Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” offered a sense of man’s intellectual

superiority over nature as its Kantian protagonist surveys the mountaintop view, but Larsen and Alma-Tadema show us how humans participate within the sublime landscape and become equal to it, or even transcend it through our collective scientific and cultural achievements. There is a subtle sense of danger in their work, a lurking caution against hubris—reminding us of the biblical warning against building great unifying towers of Babel for fear of provoking the anger of God. Nor has the Baroque been neglected as a source for Imaginative Realism. Here is Guy Kinnear’s “Assumption of Maggie,” which resembles ecstatic works like Giovanni Lanfranco’s “Magdaline Raised by Angels” painted in the Neopolitan Counter-Reformation.

Kinnear is not mocking or trivializing Christian art in his work, although he uses the visual language of transcendence. He has a deep interest in exploring ideas about form in the natural world. The paper and cloth dolls in his paintings allude to the mannequins of Pietro Annigolini, and occupy the same pictorial spaces as still life and 19th Century landscape paintings. They are made by his family and placed outside in the landscape around his home, where he lives off-the-grid. Kinnear is interested in the relationship between these dolls and academic plaster casts, which were used to train salon artists—while the casts are several steps removed from the human form, and deeply artificial, his little mannequins are sincere symbols of Kinnear’s detachment from technology. Placed in the natural world, their home-made quality is completely unpretentious. His low point of view makes his still-life dolls appear portentous and significant, the bringers of messages, and they are lit by natural, divine light like the golden sun that illuminates the sublime landscapes of the Hudson River School. By these clever devices, they are transformed into giant golems, whose huge alien forms stagger across the landscape like imaginary creatures from Dr. Frankenstein’s dreams.

His paintings are reminiscent of surrealist works, but while surrealists looked inward at the subconscious to attempt to understand



Giovanni Lanfranco- Magdalene Raised by Angels / Guy Kinnear- Assumption of Maggie

themselves, Kinnear prefers to work at understanding the world around him by looking at juxtapositions of strange, but prosaic objects and natural landscapes, creating dream-like imagery from the reality he sees.

Something fresh is brewing in Western painting and sculpture. A large community of exceptional craftsmen and craftswomen is producing beautiful Imaginative Realist imagery that is firmly grounded in excellent traditional studio technique and has solid foundations in art history, yet clearly belongs to our time. They are the Illusionists.