



A new group show at
Rehs Contemporary
in New York asks
viewers to unleash
their imaginations.

BY MICHAEL CLAWSON

ESCAPE

*from
Reality*



Boris Vallejo, *Morning Envoy*, oil on board, 28 x 14" ¹



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The real world has an endless supply of subject matter, from the most crowded Manhattan street corner to the most desolate Himalayan peak, where the nearest human is not only far from view, but beyond the curvature of the earth. Subjects can be people in an artist's life, fruit from their local grocery store, or the store itself, its fluorescent aisles lined with stacked food items. They can be abstract ideas rendered into blocks of color, or hyper-detailed photorealism, in which paint is applied with almost microscopic accuracy. The one constant, though, is reality—subjects are drawn from the real world, an observable place governed by fixed systems that answer to biology, chemistry, physics, gravity and other aspects of the physical world.

But reality has its limitations. Its borders don't just have edges, but also impermeable barriers, and rules don't break easily, if at all. To transcend beyond these barriers artists have for centuries turned to their imaginations to transport them and their work beyond the realm of the real, into a



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dimension of fairytale and fantasy. On April 28, Rehs Contemporary in New York City will dive deep into the genre of contemporary imaginative realism with *Imagine*, a new group exhibition that will present works that stray far from the world we inhabit.

Artists in the Rehs show include major innovators of contemporary imaginative realism, including Boris Vallejo and his wife, Julie Bell, both of whom are well-established artists in fine art and illustration for their fantasy scenes that often include mythical monsters, nude warriors and exotic settings in otherworldly locations. Joining them is an incredible roster of talented artists, many of whom have exceptional careers focusing purely on works that reveal their deep and multifaceted imaginations: Timothy Jahn, Tenaya Sims, Eric Velhagen, Edward Dillon, Kevin Moore, Helen Crispino, Alex Jove and many others.

Imagine will also feature work from students, alumni and instructors of the Ani Art Academy, a nonprofit art organization that trains aspiring artists all around the world, especially in less-developed areas. Currently the organization has ateliers in Anguilla in the Caribbean, Sri Lanka, the Dominican Republic and Thailand, as well as two locations in the United States in Red Bank, New Jersey, and Bear Creek Township, Pennsylvania. Painter Anthony Waichulis, who will also be showing in the exhibition, founded Ani Art Academy and says the schools “allow for exploration within as well as outside of ourselves,” all inside the framework of highly skilled, technically proficient realism. “When developing our curriculum, we sought to minimize particular aesthetic influences so as to purposefully create a deficit that would be filled by the personal preferences, interests and cultural perspectives swirling within the individual,” Waichulis says. “I believe this strategy promotes creative development alongside the more conventional (technical) skillset that will eventually need to draw from it.”

Additionally, for *Imagine*, Rehs has teamed up with Pat Wilshire, founder of *Illuxcon*, the world's largest annual showcase of contemporary imaginative realism, to bring together this influential group of artists, many of them younger artists with their entire careers still ahead of them. “This fresh insight is nowhere more prevalent than in the younger generation of artists,” Wilshire says. “Raised with this foundation of the fantastic, it is a natural, obvious progression for young artists to want to share their own ‘vision of never,’ utilizing their highly proficient, skills-based training to illuminate their deepest inner vision.”

With Ani Art Academy and *Illuxcon* playing prominent roles in the show, gallery director Lance Rehs identifies a third important element worth mentioning—illustration. From Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth to Frank Frazetta and Vallejo, illustration has remained a significant force within the more fantastical realms of art. And even though the interest in traditional illustration has dipped in recent decades with the prevalence of photography and digital design, illustrators should not be counted out. “It’s remarkable how much illustration is still a traditional medium for these artists. Even the ones that have gone partially



digital, what they’re doing still looks like painting—they’re not using a mouse and keyboard, but instead are using tablets,” Rehs says. “The artists that have always gravitated toward the illustration side of things are starting to see more gallery representation, even some really great cutting-edge galleries. So it’s exciting to see illustrators producing amazing new work and staying relevant.”

One the artists whose work is expanding outward on both fronts, illustration and fine art, is David Palumbo, who will be presenting *September Moon*, an image of a robed female figure with large ram- or goat-like horns. “I’ve been working on a series of works for two or three years now that generally take place in similar settings to this, with an almost swampiness to it in this dark, woody scene. I wanted to have this literal connection to the forest so I made the horns almost snail-like in texture and had them merge with the figure,” Palumbo says of the work that features a crescent moon over the figure’s forehead, as if it were part of a sacred, or evil, ceremony. “The people are in these ritualistic ceremonies. I’m not really sure where it’s all going yet, but that’s OK because I’ve been having fun discovering it all and letting it guide me from place to place in this

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Tony Lombardo,
Swan Mist, oil on
panel, 18 x 24"

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Victoria Steel,
*Familiarity Breeds
Contempt*, oil on
panel, 18 x 20"

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Anthony Waichulis,
Dragonslayer, oil on
panel, 7 x 5"



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continuation of this unknown story.”

Palumbo will be showing with his mother, Julie Bell, who will be presenting *Aldebaran*, an image of a nude figure kneeling next to a large buffalo-like creature that is her protector. Palumbo doesn’t hide the fact his mother is famous in the art world, nor does he broadcast it—she doesn’t appear in his bio online, and he doesn’t appear in hers—only because he’s largely wanted to be considered his own artist, with his own career and interests, something that he has achieved with his complex figures and moody atmospheres. “When I was first contacted by the gallery, Howard [Rehs] didn’t know we were related,” he says. “It was only later, further down the road, that he found out and it was a surprise to him. We don’t often show

together in group shows like this, so I’m excited we’ll be showing together for this one.”

Donato Giancola will exhibit *Life Seeker*, featuring an astronaut amid a surreal space-scape tagged with graffiti embellishments as hands reach through the clouds toward the objects in orbit. “*Life Seeker* is a reflection on the discovery of life beyond our earthly shell. Descending from the heavens and bearing the news as a flaming, astral comet the astronaut messenger returns to Earth as Mercury, the Greek god, and is greeted by a celebratory populous,” Giancola says. “The animated forms speak to the concept that ideas and abstract thought are a driving force in how we proceed forward with developments and technology. Bound and heavily restricted by our worldly

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Michael C. Hayes,
Faun, oil on panel

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Donato Giancola,
Life Seeker, oil on
panel, 40 x 30”

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David Palumbo,
September Moon,
oil on panel, 20 x 16”



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bodies, it is our robots and science which will reach out beyond the stars to extract the greatest of coming discoveries.”

Waichulis, who has ties to many of the other artists through the Ani Art Academy, will be offering *Dragonslayer*, a Trompe l’Oeil of a small box containing various fantasy-based items, including two dragons, a 12-sided die, a knight figurine and a battle of mysterious red flakes. “I very much enjoy being able to explore very large, complex topics with small, playful compositions—and *Dragonslayer* is just that,” Waichulis says. “While the content of the piece was indeed inspired by imagery that quickly came to mind when considering the potential fantasy component of the exhibition—imagery built from a childhood riddled with *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures, visits to the Zork universe, and a host of other books/games—it was my aim to use this specific composition to explore a concept that is not necessarily limited to it. More specifically, with *Dragonslayer*, I aimed to explore just how influential our biases and heuristics are in shaping the context of whatever we are evaluating—a context that, in turn, tends to fundamentally determine the role or nature of each component. For example, when you first view this composition, how do you

view the relationship between the dragons and the knight? Who do you perceive to be the hero? Who is the villain? Is there even a conflict? How might such assignments be swayed by the title? It is my hope that the more one investigates the relationships throughout, the more the viewer may realize that our initial conclusions may not be as clear-cut as we may have thought. And at the risk of sounding rather cheesy, perhaps it is the impulse to diminish the influence of irrational bias and naïve intuition in our search for meaning that is the real ‘*Dragonslayer*’ here.”

In *Swan Mist*, Tony Lombardo paints four figures rowing out to a misty shape over a lake. The ominous shape suggests a sense of dread over the scene, yet the lightness and peacefulness of the enveloping mist creates a more ethereal mood, one that hardly feels dangerous at all. “I was inspired by the idea that there can be magic and wonder out in the world if we are open and willing to look for it. The mist is meant to convey that it’s not always easy to see. Some people don’t even notice the swan right away,” he says. “It’s part of a series of paintings I’m working on that uses the Lewis and Clark expedition as an allegory for seeking inspiration beyond our known environment and purposefully setting out into the world

without preconceived ideas or influences. I thought that having historical characters would echo the idea of the world being new and largely undiscovered, home to great things we could only imagine.”

Other works include Michael C. Hayes’ *Faun*, featuring a horned female figure in an ornate carved frame; Victoria Steel’s *Familiarity Breeds Contempt*, showing two figures facing each other with a bird-sand butterflies between them creating a Rorschach-like effect of shapes; and Vallejo’s *Morning Envoy*, a quintessential Vallejo image with a bikini-clad and sword-wielding warrior (likely his wife, Bell), a falcon landing on her arm and roaring dinosaur at her side. It could easily be the poster for the show, not only because it ties *Imagine* to a long legacy of fantasy imagery, but also because it shows how an artist’s imagination can untether a painting from the natural world and send it careening off into a beautiful, unexplored space. ●

IMAGINE

When: April 28-May 18, 2018

Where: Rehs Contemporary,
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Information: (212) 355-5710, www.rehs.com