

Rebirth of the real

A conversation with four of the nation's leading galleries that are witnessing a renaissance of classical realism.

By Eric Cohler

There is a wave of change sweeping across the American art scene bringing with it a rebirth of academic painting and sculpture. This renewed interest in the classic is partially cyclical but also possessed of a definite sign of our times; a time when people are finally able to grasp that the past is indeed prologue. While much of contemporary art is cutting edge, today's art references the past as well, and we have to keep in mind that any art being produced at a certain place in time is considered *contemporary*. That is, whether a Rothko, a Damian Hirst or a Rembrandt, art is often the shock of the new and of the unexpected. What then is classical realism? It's art that references the past in an academic tradition, yet looks full on at the future. It's painting, whether figurative or landscape that addresses the here and now yet is steeped in classical training. What differs from older works is the color palette, brushstroke, iconography and a certain lack of formality in composition.

I spoke with several preeminent art dealers to take their pulse on what constitutes classicism

today and what they see as new trends in the art market. These gallerists include: Laura Greening of Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, NY; Liz Feld of Hirschl & Adler Gallery in New York City; John Pence of the John Pence Gallery in San Francisco; and Ann Pope Long of Ann Long Fine Art in Charleston, SC.

Eric Cohler: Classical realism is a term that I am seeing used more and more. What constitutes classical art today?

Laura Grenning: These works echo the constant drumbeat that has been exhibited through the oil paintings in my gallery over the past decade. The revival of classical skills in oil painting and in sculpture is motivated by the desire to connect the viewer to nature and human subjects. Ironically, this heightened focus on craft isn't to describe external surfaces, but rather to explore and celebrate the abstract qualities that this generation sees in nature and humanity.

EC: Meaning?

LG: That their underlying philosophy, which



John Pence, owner of John Pence Gallery in San Francisco, California



The expansive John Pence Gallery includes paintings and sculpture.



The John Pence Gallery was instrumental in bringing contemporary realism to the west coast.

is different from the recent generations, is that nature is in balance. Whether expressed in a landscape, a human figure or a still life, the techniques demand great patience and humility to acquire, and ultimately, to execute.

EC: And in an artist's own words?

LG: These artists claim that they must experience their subjects directly, which means that no photography is used. One of my sculptors, Rob Bodem says very clearly that 'nature is a great instructor, and working from direct observation allows me to unlock some of her mysteries. The forms that I am able to bring to the surface clarify my interpretation of human relationships.'

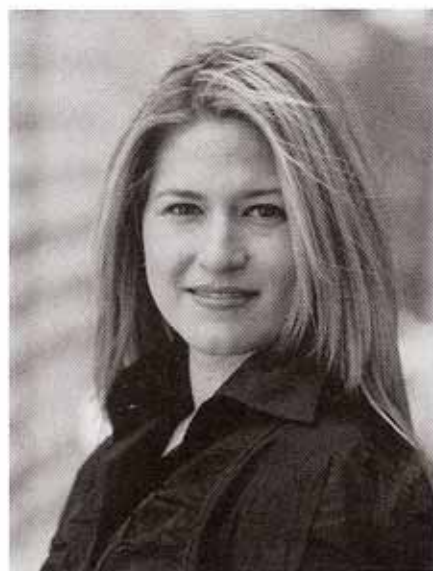
EC: John Pence has managed his eponymous gallery in San Francisco for thirty-plus years. He is a man with consummate vision and the

galleriest who helped bring contemporary realism to the west coast.

John Pence: It's been a fun adventure. I never liked the status quo in art. I was always searching for the ineffable, for the rare and beautiful. Sometimes it's best to buck trends and with classical realism I've done just that. It was not in vogue for years, except among a select group of cognoscenti. But now it's taken off. Today's collector truly appreciates and even more importantly understands realism.

EC: Do you mentor people in their collecting? There must be something of a teacher in you.

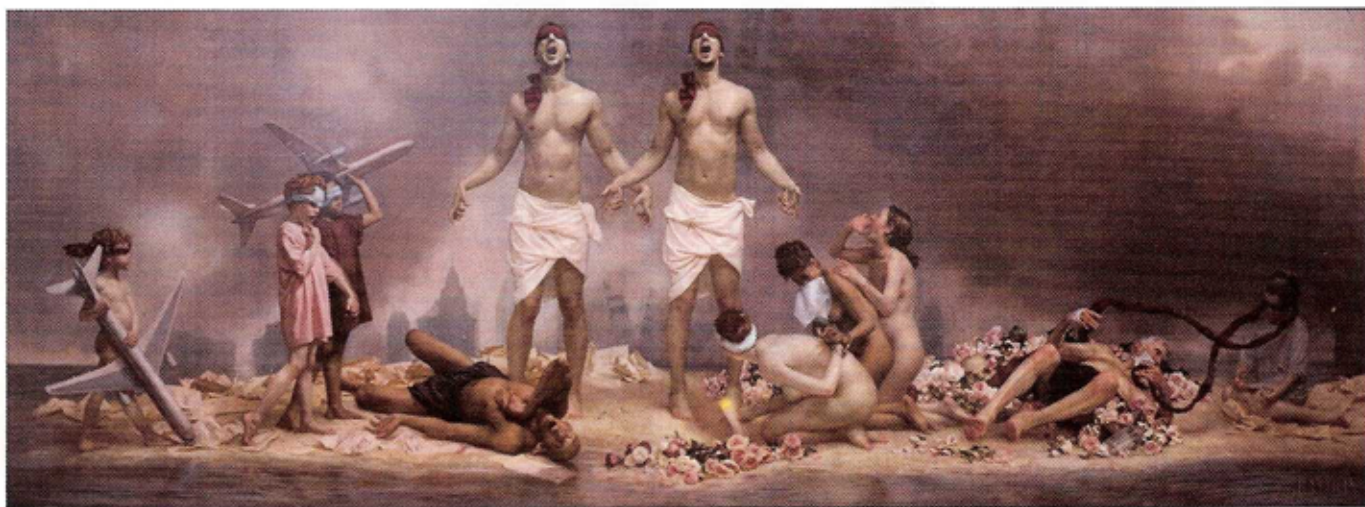
JP: As in most of us, yes. It is crucial to put artists and collectors together. I'm something of a matchmaker and have literally made matches between artists as well as between collectors. This is part of the job. I am a curator as well



Liz Feld of Hirschl & Adler Gallery in New York City.



Jacob Collins, *Reclining Nude*, oil on canvas, 26 x 44"
 COURTESY HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERY, NEW YORK



Graydon Parris, *Allegory of Tragedy and Terror*, oil on canvas, 214 x 78"
 COLLECTION OF THE NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF ART

as a dealer. And as such I need to seek out the rare and the beautiful. Many of my artists have trained in Florence and New York, and I go to their studios to select pieces for exhibitions and for specific collectors.

EC: But your primary focus is...

JP: On American Realism. I live and breathe it.

EC: Advice to collectors?

JP: Be truthful in your reaction to a work of

art. Let art speak to you, to wash over you. If it doesn't, move on. As a collector, ask yourself what attracts you to an image. The answer will be innate and swift.

EC: It seems that human relationships are everything. Liz Feld agrees with this assessment

Liz Feld: I believe in living artists and what they are saying today. Artists who are of their own time and make a statement sell works. These artists are aware of the 20th as well as the 21st century and say it all in pose, hairstyle

and clothing of their painted subjects. Most of the academically trained artists are working in studios here and abroad, in the tradition of the great 18th, 19th and early 20th century portrait painters.

EC: Anyone today in particular spring to mind?

LF: Jacob Collins. He works in New York City and has begun a school as well where he helps train artists in classical technique. His work is nothing less than sublime and strikes

“The revival of classical skills in oil painting and in sculpture is motivated by the desire to connect the viewer to nature and human subjects.”

—Laura Grenning, Grenning Gallery



Large realism paintings exhibited at Ann Long Fine Art.



Rick Piloco, *Afternoon Nap*, oil on canvas, 13 x 18"
COURTESY GRENNING GALLERY, NEW YORK

a chord with both new and established collectors. Collectors today want work that is more than purely decorative or decoration on their walls. They are looking for art that says something about the artist as well as the collector; work that resonates with interest and soul.

EC: Do collectors come into the gallery seeking out realism?

LF: Yes, absolutely. They ask for realism. We may have an exhibition that has nothing to do with this and someone will ask if we have any realist painters or conversely we may have a Collins show up and a new collector walks in and is hooked. This may be a person who never contemplated purchasing a classical work before.

EC: So realism mixes with other schools of art?

LF: Beautifully. As does sculpture. It's this plasticity of form that transfers so well from sculpture to painting and vice versa.

EC: Advice to collectors, new and established?

LF: Buy what you love. If you afford it, do it. Our gallery has work that starts at under \$1,000. People don't always realize that you can find a fabulous drawing or sketch that is truly affordable.

EC: So from small seeds, large collections grow.

LF: Exactly.

EC: What do you collect personally? With so much art at your fingertips, literally, what fires your passion?

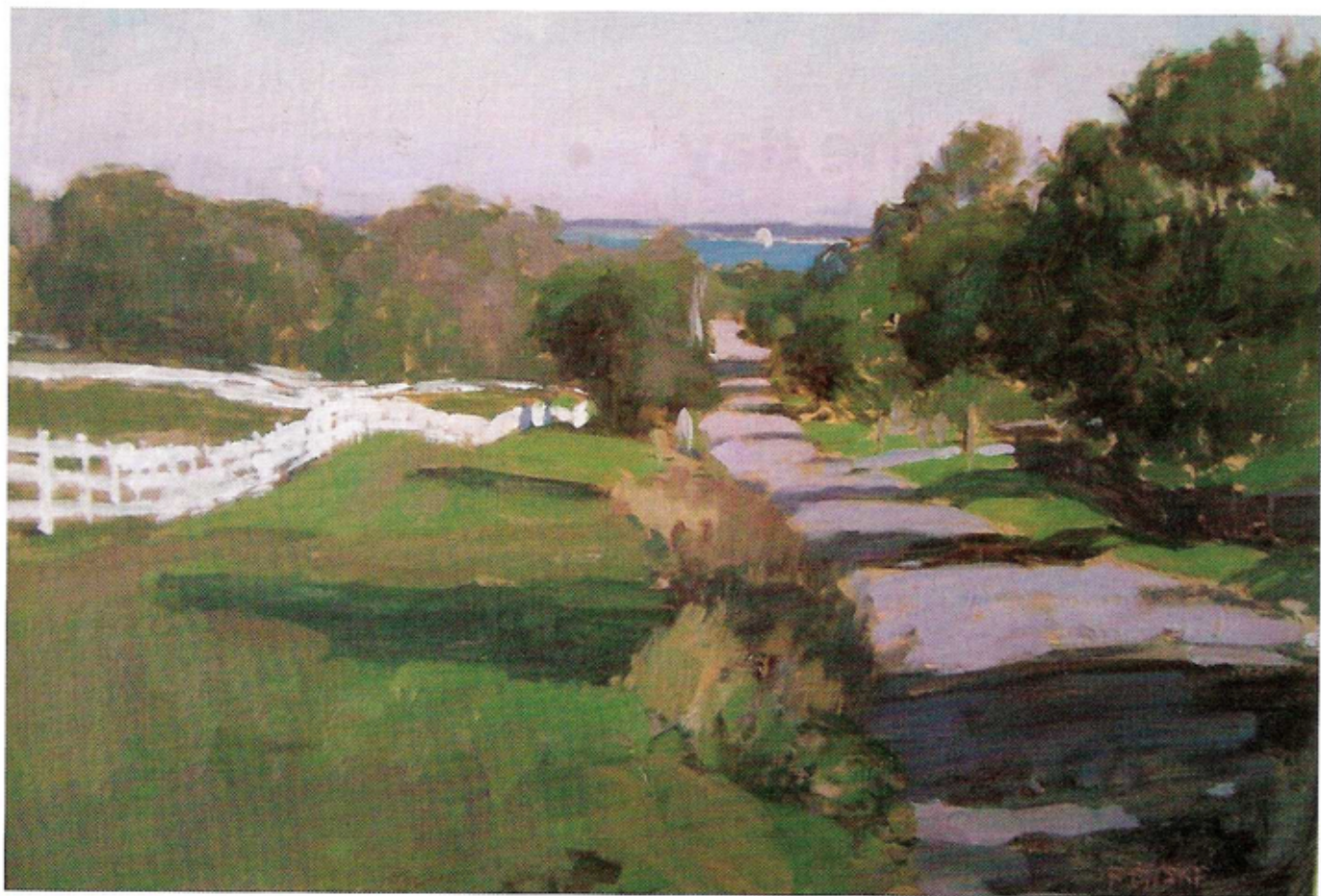
LF: The decorative arts and 19th century American furniture. We sell this in the gallery as well.

EC: Makes the perfect connection with 21st century realism, actually.

LF: True, it's all how one connects the dots.

EC: Ann Long has one of the leading galleries in Charleston specializing in American Realism and representational art.

Ann Pope Long: I am often asked how the gallery started or how I came to do what I do—generally the response is passion.



Ben Fenske, *Ram Island Road*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16"
 COURTESY GRENNING GALLERY, NEW YORK

EC: There's that word again, *passion*. Everyone who truly understands art and what it means to be a collector uses it, and as a collector myself I understand why.

AL: I too am a collector as well as dealer, so my enthusiasm for the work is genuine and contagious. For me this is a thrill, a job that is hard to leave each day.

EC: It must be difficult to close the door and walk away, but the good news is that the art will be there the next day, unless it's sold and shipped out. Ha!

AL: That's the name of the game, but it's always hard to part with pieces as I select each and every one with the artist themselves.

EC: How did it all begin?

AL: I began by representing painter, Jill Hooper, a classically trained artist living in Charleston. Soon after, her teacher, Jeffrey Mims and colleagues Frank Strazzulla and Kamille Corry requested

representation as Charleston proved to be the perfect climate for classical realism. The response to what we were doing—still life, plein air landscapes, and beautifully rendered figures—was tremendous. We were just following our own aesthetic and our audience proved very grateful for 'the back to real painting.'

EC: And now?

AL: Ten years later, the gallery, strong as ever, represents the classically trained artist many of whom are still in Florence teaching. The painters I represent are not just business relationships but they are dear friends—lovely to know and be with, honorable in their pursuits.

EC: Honorable indeed is how I would term collecting American Realism today. ●

Note to readers: These are some of the leading painters and sculptors working in American Classical Realism: David Bender, Robert Bodem, Jacob Collins, Tony Curanaj, Daniel Graves, Kate

Lehman, Dean Mitchell, Nita Moore and Angel Ramiro Sanchez.

Part Two: Next month's column will feature Arcadia Gallery, Wendt Gallery, and Eleanor Ettinger Gallery.

Eric Cohler, president of Eric Cohler Inc., holds a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998 and in 2000



the D&D Building in New York recognized him as one of the 26 leading designers in the U.S. Eric has appeared on CBS Morning and Evening News and CNN Style and he is a featured designer on the Home & Garden TV Network.