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FROM THE MAGAZINE

The Artists Picking Up Where the Surrealists Left Off

For a new generation of figurative painters, reality is best processed through a fantastical lens.

by **Jori Finkel**
Photography by **Molly Matalon**
03.08.22



Dominique Fung, photographed in her Brooklyn studio, with (from left) 'Continuing by Boat,' 2021, and 'A Move to Land,' 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

The feeling of anxiety is visible, almost palpable. A woman sits in an upholstered chair in a simple room where golden curtains are pulled back to reveal a pine forest. But inside and out, animals have taken over. Above her head, a large white hobbyhorse is lurching through the air, perhaps chasing the white horse running through the forest outside. Next to her stands a hyena that seems to be lactating. And the woman has an animalistic edge as well, with hair like a lion's mane and pointy black leather ankle boots that echo the hyena's claws. Both hyena and woman stare directly at us.

This self-portrait, painted by the British-born artist and writer Leonora Carrington around 1938, before her crippling paranoia led her to a psychiatric hospital in Spain, and before she settled definitively in Mexico City, blurs the line between human and beast, suggesting the artist is drawing on her own animal or unconscious powers. The colors are likewise unsettling: The artist's dark green jacket is set against a blood red chair cushion, and her skin has a pallid green cast.

These colors—and a keen sense of foreboding—are showing up more and more in contemporary art today, as several young figurative painters are picking up where the Surrealists left off. They, too, are creating their own fantastic, sometimes phantasmagoric, worlds that defy the logic of our supposedly civilized society. But the new works, in galleries from Los Angeles to London, relate less to the slick dreamscapes of card-carrying Surrealists like René Magritte and Salvador Dalí, and more to the dark, gritty, even witchy tradition developed by painters such as Carrington, her Mexico City comrades Remedios Varo and Frida Kahlo, and the American painter Dorothea Tanning—a tradition that one might call, with a nod to the hyena, Feral Surrealism.



Fung's Increased Exposure, 2020.

Some of the artists working in this spirit, like María Frago and Dominique Fung, are openly and at times playfully paying homage to their Surrealist predecessors. For others, like Jill Muleady, Naudline Pierre, and Katja Seib, the similarities are less consistent and maybe less conscious, reflecting instead explorations of spirituality, alchemy, or metamorphosis-rich mythology. “Artists today are rediscovering forms of knowledge or epistemologies that aren’t the Western ones. There is also an interest in the occult—magic is in the air,” said the curator Cecilia Alemani, who has titled her upcoming group exhibition for the 2022 Venice Biennale “The Milk of Dreams,” after a book by Carrington.

What they all share is an awareness that our governing systems—whether it’s nationalism, capitalism, or patriarchy—are catastrophically failing us, much as the shell-shocked artists coming out of World War I and witnessing the rise of fascism in Europe realized a century ago. Surrealist techniques offer the promise of freedom by liberating the imagination. Or, as Frago put it, “Since all the systems we have don’t work, I’m painting

an unsettled reality that gives you an opportunity to look at what we have from a different perspective. You twist one reality into another.”

“I love painting our fears, desires, and anxieties as a way to put them out there in the world, making things a little more bearable,” said Mulleady, 41, who lets animals like ravens, serpents, jaguars, wild dogs, and coyotes run wild in her canvases, like evidence of our own stiff discomfort with our environment. “I’m hypersensitive about everything in the world, and painting is a way to process that.”



María Frago, photographed in her New York studio, with Unison (Two Boys Swimming in Green Water), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 1969 Gallery.



Fragoso's Augurio, 2021.

Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, and raised in Buenos Aires by a Swiss mother and an Argentinian father, Mulleady attended Chelsea College of Arts, in London, before moving to L.A. in 2013. At that time, her work was abstract, but a couple of years after the birth of her daughter, she returned to figuration with a vengeance, creating roughly realistic paintings rife with Expressionist and Surrealist touches—she mines a broad swath of art history—to capture the turmoil of living in violent, uncertain times. In *The Discovery*, from 2018, a nude woman partly covered in jaguar spots licks her left shoulder, as if to magically remove the marks. *Self Portrait in 2066/ Dementia*, from the same year, depicts the artist's future visage, ravaged and hollowed by many decades, as she cradles a genetically modified baby goat. Mulleady's next show, scheduled for September at Gladstone Gallery in New York, takes the theme of "predators" and Francisco Goya's so-called "Black Paintings" as points of departure. In her studio in downtown L.A., she showed me an epic painting in progress that, at about 14 feet

long and almost 5 feet tall, takes its dimensions from Goya's mural *Witches' Sabbath*.

No, she doesn't practice witchcraft, but Mulleady does feel she has some powers. "I'm very intuitive, and I know things before they happen," she said. "I think we use a very small part of our brain, and can go further if we connect to the unconscious." She pulled out her iPhone to show me a picture she recently took of her morning coffee cup, where the dregs had pooled into a form resembling two hunched-over men. The image gave her the idea of adding a hunter, bent over his rifle, to her latest "predator" painting. "I love to look at coffee stains; it's like a Rorschach inkblot test. I source a lot by getting into that state."

Mulleady was one of the artists featured last year in "The Emerald Tablet," an esoteric extravaganza at Deitch Gallery in L.A. that focused on alchemy and Hollywood magic across decades. One takeaway from that show was that women artists—like female politicians—have long been condemned as witches; it's high time they owned or celebrated their subversive powers. "Magic, witches, all of those things are really appealing—female figures who are very powerful and also, I feel, very misunderstood," said Katja Seib, 32, who moved to L.A. from her native Düsseldorf, Germany, four years ago, in time for the rampant sexism of the Trump administration.



Jill Mulleady, photographed in her Los Angeles studio, with untitled works.

Hair and Makeup by Zaheer Sukhnandan for Face Atelier; courtesy of Fitzpatrick Gallery, Paris, and Gladstone Gallery.



Jill Mulleady's *The Green Room I*, 2017.

More than Mulleady, Seib puts symbols and spiritual tools directly into some of her works, in the form of fortune tellers, mirrors, and tarot cards. Her scenes tend to be rendered realistically, but contain impossible moments. In one, a weary-looking woman sits at a table where a vase acts like a crystal ball, delivering a vision: a dark-haired girl in the glass. Stranger yet, that image casts a reflection on the table, which takes the form of the *Mona Lisa*. In a related piece, a pale woman sits alone at a desk with a blank notebook, while a serpent on the jungle mural behind her seems to spring out at her. “I think loneliness is a big theme for me,” said Seib, who shows with the gallery Château Shatto in L.A. “Feeling very helpless and vulnerable, that’s a major part of my work.”

María Fragoso, 26, who is from Mexico City but spent the past year in New York preparing for her first solo show, at 1969 Gallery, says she grew up seeing and liking works by the women associated with Surrealism, as well as artists from subsequent generations, like Julio Galán. But the heavy legacy of Frida Kahlo, in particular, felt oppressive. “For many years, I felt cautious about even mentioning her—you don’t want to be automatically associated with Frida Kahlo just because you’re a painter from Mexico,” she said. “But she is one of my favorite painters ever.”

One technique Fragoso borrows from Kahlo is to reverse the body’s interior and exterior—think of all of Kahlo’s bloody hearts appearing outside her body—as a means to explore the dynamics of fertility, creativity, life, and death. Many of Fragoso’s female characters wear glossy red gloves, as if blood has stained or lacquered their hands. Some also have long strands of saliva flowing from their mouths that look like snail secretions. In fact, snails recur in Fragoso’s work, along with flies that suggest something in the painting is rotting. There are also goats, dogs, and canine-human hybrids with human limbs and breasts—a way of collapsing the hierarchies that position people as superior to animals.



Katja Seib, photographed in her Los Angeles studio, with *A Picknick Inside*, 2021. Hair and makeup by Zaheer Sukhnandan for Face Atelier; courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles



Seib's *Mona Lisa's Smile*, 2020.

The idea of flattening hierarchies is also central to the work of Dominique Fung, 34, who cites Carrington and Tanning as influences, and often fills her canvases with a mash-up of animal and inanimate forms that are hard to decipher. One new jumble sits atop a wheeled contraption that looks straight out of a Remedios Varo painting. (“I just saw her work in the Met’s Surrealism show,” Fung said, referring to one of the recent exhibitions highlighting women Surrealists.) What gives it all a sense of continuity is that Fung’s fantastic motifs have a common source: They are based on East Asian antiquities.

Raised in Ottawa, Ontario, by first-generation immigrants (her father is from Shanghai, and her mother is from Hong Kong), Fung was living in Toronto after studying illustration in school, and making portraits of friends to explore Western notions of, as she puts it, “Asiatic femininity and identity.” But she found she was replicating the power structures she meant to expose, until she stumbled on new subjects: first, cheap trinkets from Chinatown shops, and then, after she moved to New York in 2016, the wealth of antiquities in the East Asian galleries at the Met. She began painting different configurations of the lustrous vessels, lanterns, and figures she discovered in the museum, online, and in auction catalogs, creating dreamscapes where it’s normal for, say, a ghostly cloaked character to interact with a duck-shaped jar from the Song dynasty. “I love this blend of reality and the uncanny, but I still think about physics in my work,” she said. “There’s a sense that things are grounded, not floating in space. Even with the little heads in the water, you can imagine it happening, like if someone fell off a boat.”

These heads crop up in her new show, currently at Nicodim Gallery in L.A., in a series of six canvases that depict the ocean-faring journey of unusual objects, like figurines in a conch shell hunched over a candle for warmth and light. You can read the objects as stand-ins for refugees who are braving the ocean in a quest for safety, but there is also the suggestion of the international trade in antiquities, which leaves cultural heritage from Asia stranded in galleries in the West. She will show the works as a series, but sell them separately to heighten the sense of displacement.



Naudine Pierre, photographed in her Brooklyn studio, with an untitled work in progress. © Naudine Pierre, courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.



Pierre's To Make You Whole, 2021.

While Fung fills her paintings with ambers, jades, and celadons, Naudline Pierre, 32, creates an otherworldly space in incandescent hues: fiery shades of red, orange, yellow, and purple. Since getting her M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art, in 2017, Pierre has been developing a personal mythology populated by winged, seraphlike characters who seem to care for a female figure she calls her protagonist. These creatures symbolize a kind of freedom, “not just the freedom of flying, but a sense of the unknown—a presence of some sort,” she said. “I’ve always been interested in the things that you can’t really see, but you can feel.”

Raised by Haitian immigrants mainly in Florida, Pierre had a strict religious upbringing in a Christian sect that emphasized the end of the world, but her canvases have a dynamic, open-ended iconography that is entirely her own. In her 2021 painting *To Make You Whole*, part of her survey at the Dallas Museum of Art (which runs until May, the same month her solo show with James Cohan opens, in New York), a seraph in the top right corner shoots flames from her fingertips, as if bestowing energy on the protagonist, who glows like a hot coal. A black, furry, humanlike creature to the left has feathery wings for feet, which also resemble the tips of paintbrushes. “Imagination is a means of survival for me. I know that sounds dramatic—I’m not in peril,” Pierre said. “But there’s a sense of power in reshaping things that are seemingly set in stone.” She also sees intuition as a tool for not getting boxed in. “A lot of history is placed on me as a Black artist making figurative work. Using ‘just’ my imagination allows me to have a little bit of space from that.”

Pierre says that the process of painting gives her the means to access spiritual beings that she cannot otherwise reach. And her figures, especially the winged ones, become her spirit guides—rather like horses were for Carrington. “The more that I chip away at this portal, the more I learn about these characters. But I also like not knowing—it makes me feel out of control a little bit. I just have to have trust that these characters care for me as much as I care for them.”