

# Novorealism

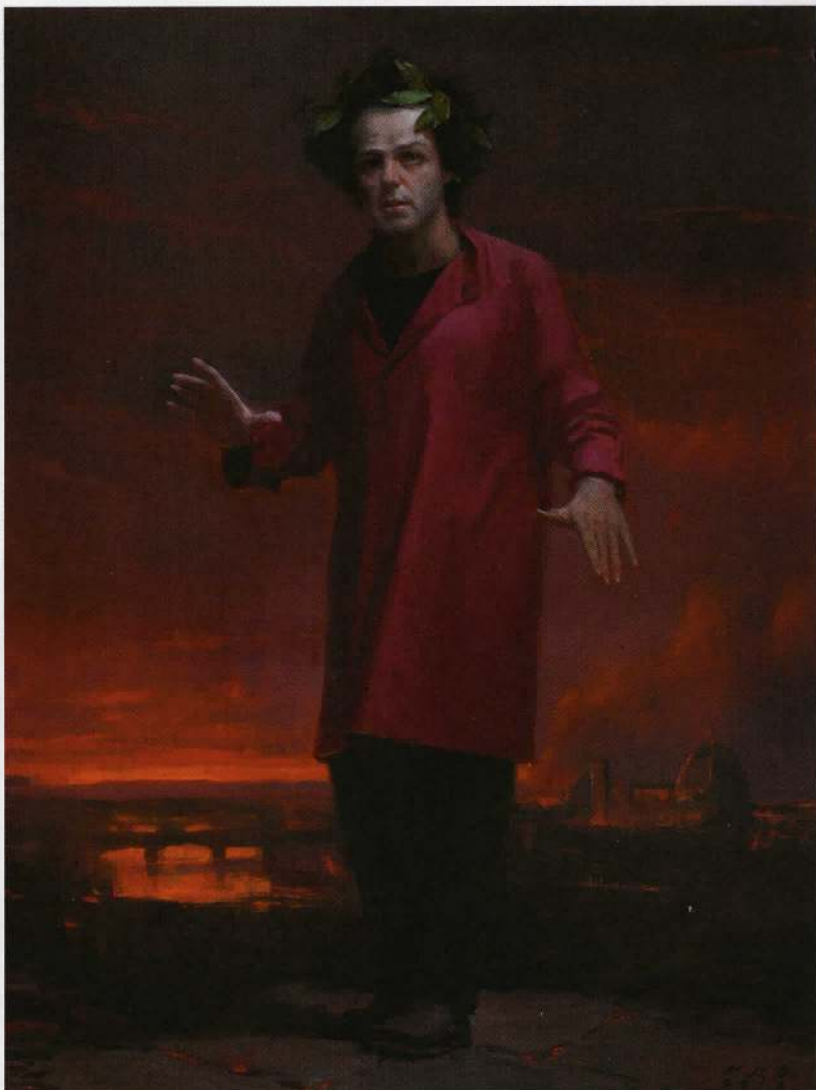
## *Honoring the Human Element*

For members of this growing movement, representational art is a powerful tool in what they consider to be a "revolution"—one that asserts humanity in the face of our technological, mechanical world

by NAOMI EKPERIGIN



# It can be difficult getting in touch with artists as busy as Alexey Steele.



With his workshops, classes, exhibitions, lectures, and written work, he barely has time to sleep, let alone conduct an interview. So after I emailed him on a Sunday morning with questions regarding the tenets and goals of Novorealism, I was shocked to receive a response less than 24 hours later. When I saw that his response was five pages long, I was reminded that I wasn't just working with a busy artist but also a passionate one.

"It is important to me that people 'get it right' when it comes to Novorealism," Steele says. "It's a

new concept that can grow into a titan, and I feel that it must be defined carefully and not become part of any sort of hype." 'Novorealism' is a term that the Russian-born, California-based artist coined to explain the goals of a group of artists who aim to do more than simply depict the world realistically. For Steele, the invention of the term was, as the saying goes, born out of necessity. "For years, viewers and collectors asked me to describe what kind of art I do, and I always had a hard time doing so because every available definition was inadequate,"

he says. "The word came to me while I was in the shower one day, shortly before Christmas 2009. I thought about it for several months before sitting down to write. When I started, I was trying to describe what I do and why I do it."

In essence, Steele set out to write a manifesto. The result was "Revolution That Came," the first blog post in what would become a web magazine and the stirrings of an art movement. In this first piece, Steele demonstrates that the mode of realism he and his comrades practice is not new. What is of note are the ways in which

## ABOVE Il Comico Divina

by Tony  
Pro, 2012,  
oil on linen,  
40 x 30.  
Collection  
the artist.

## OPPOSITE PAGE Lovers

by Alexey  
Steele,  
2012, oil,  
30 x 24.







realist painters are honoring their methods and refusing to be ignored. "NOVOREALISM is not a retrovert vision by any stretch of imagination," Steele writes. "It is a forward-looking cultural thrust that chooses to stare in the eyes of reality and to reflect it in various forms. It is based on a civilization-long combined experience, knowledge, and practice in understanding of humans' abilities to perceive the visual world."

Steele first shared his ideas with fellow California artists Jeremy Lipking and Tony Pro, who he refers to as his "brothers in art." For many years the trio has met regularly to discuss art, enjoy good food and wine, and paint. There have been many evenings when the artists shared frustrations about the state of today's art world and the future of art in the face of what they consider to be the oligarchic rule of modern art. "The art market has been held captive by Postmodernism for too long, and we believe that people are tired of being shocked and annoyed," says Pro. "People need something they can identify with, and they need beauty. I'm not saying that all art has to be beautiful, but I believe that it needs to uplift or provoke thoughts that inspire feeling."

Of course, feelings can be incited by any image—and we all know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder—but Novorealists argue that beauty is firmly rooted in the qualities of the beheld. They also believe that in our double-clicking digital age, an artist depicting the human form is the most universal symbol of beauty that can stir and satisfy the mind and heart. During a workshop sponsored by the California Art Club, Steele explained this in terms of the differences between painting and photography. "We live in a world of cameras," he pointed out.

"Our society thinks photographic images are the ultimate truth. But the camera can only record a very narrow spectrum of tone in either a light or a dark range, never both. It also has a very limited ability to read color. The human eye can see so much more. If a camera snaps one frame at, say, one-sixtieth of a second, it captures only a tiny part of reality. Life painting takes hours or days and involves the full richness of human experience. ... As an artist, you have to synthesize thousands of seconds of seeing—and reflect deeply on each step of the process. That is why painting offers so much more than a snapshot."

"Representational artists get branded as illustrators, but I think that's an excuse for modernists who decided to take the easy way out," Pro adds. For Steele, realism is actually a successor, in a way, to Modernism. "Serious realism of our day is in many respects a product of Modernism itself, because for the first time in history, realism is not the only available mode of expression but a definitive choice made by artists," he says. "Every one of its practitioners is aware that this kind of painting has been marginalized. It is in clear opposition to today's 'official' postmodernist establishment, much the same way that Modernism was originally



**LEFT**  
**Carnavalesque**

by Tony Pro, 2011, oil and gold on linen, 18 x 12. Collection the artist.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Rising**

by Alexey Steele, 2011, wash, pastel pencils, and pastel on paper, 100 x 80.

"This piece best exemplifies my current thoughts on how realist representations of the figure are translated through compositional development into a complex and loaded image," Steele says. "It captures my need to anchor multifigure images in a real sense of human form."





opposing the late academic art. In this way, Novorealism continues in the true anti-establishment spirit of the original Modernists.”

Keeping in mind the results of major art movements of the past, Novorealism does not aim for “totalitarian aesthetic domination,” as Steele writes in “Revolution That Came.” Realist art, Steele explains,

#### **Drifting**

by Jeremy Lipking, 2011, oil,  
70 x 40. Private collection.

is democratic in terms of how it can be understood. Although it can be considered “elitist” in the sense that only a certain type of person can create it—either an artist is able to depict a subject representationally or not—its audience is not

## **More on Novorealism**

Alexey Steele, Tony Pro, and Jeremy Lipking will discuss Novorealism in a lecture and discussion at this year’s Weekend With the Masters event.

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For more information and to register, visit [www.aamastersweekend.com](http://www.aamastersweekend.com), or “like” Weekend With the Masters on Facebook. If you want to prepare questions for the Q&A portion of their talk, read more about Novorealism at [www.novorealism.com](http://www.novorealism.com).

confined to a select few who can parse out its meaning.

When asked to name artists who they feel demonstrate the tenets of Novorealism, they do not aim to apply the label to their peers. Steele and Pro cite such contemporaries as Rose Frantzen, Michael Klein, Christopher Pugliese, Scott Burdick, Nicolás Uribe, and Jacob Collins as those who demonstrate the new direction of realism. “Despite their individual approaches to the process, they all have a virtuosic ability to draw and paint from life and continuously come up with ever-more-complex compositional applications of this ability,” says Steele.

After years of developing and honing one’s technical skills, it is often in the application that new artists find the most difficulty. Many instructors refer to it as “developing an artistic voice.” But for the Novorealists, it’s more of a manifesto. Pro teaches at California Lutheran University, in Thousand Oaks, where he is in the process



of putting together a conference on realist art in collaboration with art department chair Dr. Michael Pearce and fellow artist and instructor Michael Lynn Adams. "Our time has come to return to the new modernity, but we need to step up to the plate to show them what we really can do," Pro says. "That means we produce thought-provoking material with the highest attention to subject matter. I'm a fan of beautiful landscapes and still lifes, and I love to paint them, but to really make a dent we must produce figurative work that utilizes our subject matter to form one cohesive statement or idea. This is what makes the impact."

Although it may seem fanatical, Novorealism rests on the idea of empowerment—of both artist and audience. By establishing a standard of technical proficiency and an ideal of beauty, viewers needn't doubt their interpretations of a work. By naming and outlining their creative and personal

#### **My Father Leonid Steele**

by Alexey Steele, 2011, oil, 48 x 60.

"This portrait stands for the most direct and intense description of reality on a very personal level," Steele says of this portrait of his father, which was done entirely from life over four sittings shortly before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. "In my current understanding, this piece best shows what can happen when subject matter and content are combined with honest depiction and technical skill in execution."

goals, artists work with a greater clarity, and their finished products can possess a deeper meaning. "We, the artists, define the art of the future," Steele says. "For me, perhaps the single most important aspect of the Novorealism movement is that it provides me with the format to gauge more intensely the kind of art I need to be doing right now. I also hope it will help other artists do the same and collectively push beyond restrictions into the heights of a truly great art." **A**

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