

GARY FAIGIN



VIEWPOINTS 15

COVER: *Billboard with Real Lemons*, 1999, 46 x 60 in.

BACK COVER: *Transparent and Solid*, 2001, 24 x 36 in.

Exhibition dates: July 13 through September 2, 2001

Viewpoints is a continuing series of exhibitions devoted to the work of contemporary artists who are redefining the concepts of representation and content in modern painting.

Editors: Debra J. Byrne and Richard V. West

Copyeditor: Carole Levinthal

Designers: Beth Koutsky and Charla Reid

Photography: Susan Dirk/*Under the Light*: cover, plates 2 and 4

Richard Nicol Photography: back cover, plates 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9

Printer: Hemlock Printers, Ltd.

Contents Copyright © 2001 Frye Art Museum

GARY FAIGIN

TRADITION & CONTRADICTION

FRYE ART MUSEUM

2001



PLATE 1 *Among the Falling: Drop Zone*, 1995, 60 x 30 in.

TRADITION & CONTRADICTION

GARY FAIGIN'S IMAGERY IS DERIVED FROM CONVENTIONS OF TRADITIONAL STILL LIVES AND MASS MEDIA BILLBOARDS THAT AT FIRST GLANCE SEEM EASILY ACCESSIBLE. UPON FURTHER CONTEMPLATION, HOWEVER, MORE COMPLEX POSSIBILITIES ARISE: THINGS QUIETLY FLY APART OR EXPLODE, SCALE EXPANDS IN SIGNIFICANCE, PICTURES BECOME INCORPORATED INTO OTHER PICTURES, SIGNAGE TRANSLATES INTO RIDDLES, AND THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN NATURE AND ARTIFICE ARE CALLED INTO QUESTION.

Conducting these gentle tensions and paradoxes is the hand of a consummate formalist. The witty contradictions are made possible, and even beautiful, because they float on a harmonious grid of symmetry, repetition, and rhythm and are painted with a love for the virtuosity of the Old Masters. The Frye Art Museum is pleased to present this exhibition and catalogue of Gary Faigin's recent paintings.

Projects such as this are collaborative endeavors and we would like to extend our gratitude to Dr. Robert Bell for his contribution toward the catalogue, as well as Richard Nicol and Susan Dirk for their photography. The exhibition would not have been possible without the private collectors who generously loaned their paintings. Loans

and additional assistance were provided by the Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle, and the Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco. A word of appreciation is also due the artist's many supporters including Pam Belyea, Joe Basiste, Eli Levin, the Seattle Academy of Fine Art, and Miller Paint in Ballard. The Frye Art Museum staff deserves recognition for their ongoing dedication to excellence. Finally, and of paramount importance, we would like to give a special thanks to Gary Faigin, who not only inspired us with his artworks, but also devoted his time and professional abilities to the realization of this exhibition and catalogue.

Richard V. West, *Executive Director*

Debra J. Byrne, *Curator of Exhibitions*



PLATE 2 *History Lesson*, 2001, 64 x 90 in.

GARY FAIGIN

A CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

Gary Faigin, artistic director and cofounder of the Seattle Academy of Fine Art, received his training at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, the Art Students League in New York, and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He has exhibited widely, including solo exhibitions in Seattle and Santa Fe. His paintings have been featured in numerous publications and are in corporate and museum collections across the United States. In addition to painting and teaching, Mr. Faigin wrote and hosted the video *Drawing from the Live Model*, and he wrote and illustrated the classic text *The Artist's Complete Guide to Facial Expressions*. Gary Faigin is also the art critic for KUOW, Seattle's National Public Radio station.

DEBRA BYRNE: You have claimed that your ideal painting would have the “serenity of Bellini, the light of Caravaggio, and the attitude of *Catch-22*.” Please expand on this idea.

GARY FAIGIN: My statement about Giovanni Bellini (Venetian Renaissance painter, about 1430–1516), Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italian Baroque painter, 1573–1610), and Joseph Heller (American novelist, 1923–1999) refers to the idea of creating a space that can make us believe, even for a fleeting moment, in the possibility of transcendence over the literal detritus of everyday life. For me, this is the fundamental issue of painting.

You wouldn't know it from looking at a Madonna by Bellini, where everything is so pure, tranquil, untroubled, and harmonious, that he was living in a time that was, arguably, at least as anxious and corrupt as our current era. In Bellini's world, half of all newborns did not survive childhood, plagues swept through Venice repeatedly, and despotic rulers were unbridled in their power to torture and

pillage. Painters such as Bellini were able to create serene spaces in spite of all the chaos. His painting was part of the machinery of salvation that centered around the Church, and he includes the Madonna so often because she was mankind's leading advocate with the Almighty. Bellini's art connected the viewer directly to the absolute, and if the artist had nagging doubts and issues, he hid them well.

Gradually, after the Renaissance, art became divorced from the sacred, the Madonna went AWOL, and patrons stopped believing that paintings could help save their immortal souls. One artistic response was cynical and despairing and another became a sort of searching for what had been lost. I think my paintings fall into the latter category. I want to recapture the feeling that Bellini had when he painted his Madonnas, but to do it while staring at Aurora Avenue—the lonely auto body shops, strip malls, discount warehouses, and endless signage. I want to find and express the possibility of order and transformation in the unlikeliest part of our modern urban landscape. It's a stretch to go from K-Mart to the Infinite, I admit, but the potential for connection is there.

Now the thing with Caravaggio, of course, is all about transcendence through light. Caravaggio's use of *chiaroscuro* (very highly pitched lights and darks) was the last great technical innovation of the post-Renaissance era. Caravaggio took the quiet chamber music of Bellini and turned it into roaring grand opera. Light became the primary vehicle for overcoming the ordinary. Caravaggio's light is electrifying, impossible, perfect, intellectual, and a metaphor for the spirit. Once Caravaggio had let the genie of heightened pictorial drama out of the bottle there was no turning back. From Rembrandt to Sargent, artists have been



PLATE 3 *Mixed Messages*, 2000, 72 x 66 in.

inspired by Caravaggio's technical breakthroughs in one way, shape, or form. I myself have real trouble painting anything that isn't spotlighted against a dark background. I revel in the gleam of a highlight against a backdrop of Prussian blue; that's a big part of what gets me out of bed in the morning.

I call on Joseph Heller as my patron saint of transcendence through irony. Yossarian in *Catch-22* is a wounded idealist, but it's his idealism that makes it possible for him to see the ironic—the disconnect between the real and the ideal. If we can laugh at something, it implies a level of distance, of understanding. Heller demonstrates that even the worst scenario—the conditions of wartime—can be made more bearable through the strategies of irony, humor, and the capacity of art to provide distance and structure. Like Heller, I don't expect to find beauty where artists found it two hundred years ago: unspoiled nature, a perfect still-life arrangement, afternoon light in the parlor. I'm after the unexpected beauty, the hard-won beauty, the quirky beauty with thorns and a bit of background radiation. You don't ever lose the anxiety; that's one of the givens of contemporary life.

In short, I am attempting to strike a balance between my desire to create beautiful images, the demands of the dramatic depiction of light and shade, and an underlying sense of anxiety leavened by humor. *Drop Zone* PLATE 1, for example, is sort of scary, beautiful, and funny, all at once.

DB: Is your *Billboards* series related to or inspired by the Pop art movement?

GF: While my billboard paintings are about the mass media in general, the series involves other matters as well: pictures within pictures, communication, marketing, pictorial illusionism, and what happens when objects are reduced—or elevated—to being images on a signboard.

I am more wedded to art of earlier periods than to Pop art. The Pop artists were very much of their time in their

response to the Abstract Expressionists' abandonment of recognizable imagery. In the case of artists such as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, their defiant reaction was to quote wholesale from mass media images. The Pop artists' intent in appropriating images from popular culture was not based on recovering illusionistic space, but was much more about blurring the boundaries between "high" art and "low" art. Marcel Duchamp had opened up the anything-can-be-art Pandora's box, and the Pop artists ran with it. That is not an issue for me at all. That battle has already been fought. I am more concerned with the potential of reconciling the various shards of art history and creating a new synthesis by combining elements from both the twentieth century and the eras that went before, in a way that I find personally resonant.

Another difference between my work and some of the Pop artists (not all) is that I am a sort of closet formalist. Part of what I do is a social critique of the pervasive quality of advertising media, and some of what I do is narrative. Ultimately, the bottom line for me is a real desire to work with the formal elements of picture making on an abstract level. I am fascinated with symmetry, repetition, rhythm, and the structural grid that brings order to something that appears chaotic at first glance.

In *Mixed Messages* PLATE 3, for example, there is a seemingly random overlapping of unrelated imagery: a portion of an unintelligible circular sign with a star pattern, an advertisement for jet travel, a portrait of Lincoln with a cartoon balloon, a moon, a horizon, and a stylized set of hills. Look more closely, and there is a grid that holds all of these fragments together. The vertical lines dividing the plate glass window function as organizing elements in the grid. The visual quote from Edward Hopper (the building facade behind the figures of the man and woman) establishes a regular horizontal rhythm and pays homage to another of my artistic mentors. Quite often in jazz there's a series of free-form riffs that keep circling back to an underlying, continuous rhythm, and that's the idea behind that apartment building wall—that repetitive link.



PLATE 4 *Signposts*, 2001, 24 x 36 in.

DB: How does the *Still Lives* series express your perceptions of tradition and contradiction?

GF: At its inception, the still-life genre was the ultimate celebration of the domestic. It originated when the Dutch finally achieved peace and prosperity after a long era of war and privation. Almost overnight the larders were full; the silverware, cups, and tablecloths were new; and even the tulips were bigger and brighter than before. So the early still lifes were testimonials to the pleasures of peacetime and having lots of stuff. The genre has never completely lost the time honored associations evoking order and calm.

I am stimulated by the tension between my desires to both subvert and commit to those traditional qualities. The earliest artwork on display in this exhibition, *Still Life with Explosion* (1983), was one of the first still lifes that I painted, and it established basic concepts that have been repeated in various ways throughout the entire series. From the beginning, the overriding theme has been to disrupt the idea of “still life” in its most literal sense—as a place where life has been frozen, where things are at rest. In *Expulsion from Paradise* PLATE 5, a sudden gust of wind has sent the objects flying, spiraling into the distance of an endlessly recessional Dutch landscape. The paradise of stability and social cohesion is flung into an unknown and conflicted future. One of my recent still lifes, *Hurry Up and Wait* PLATE 8, makes use of yet another means of putting things into motion. One of the objects has a rather photographically reminiscent blur as though it were on its way out of the group, or on its way in. It depends on your perspective.



The strategy of subversion that I have employed most often is to create a dichotomy between the objects in the foreground (the domestic space) and the scene in the background (the outside world). In my early still lifes, I was striving for an overall pastoral mood,

although the backgrounds tended to be stark desert scenes, which allowed for a bit of tension. I have abandoned that tactic because it was getting too harmonious, and while my foregrounds remain domestic and peaceful, my backgrounds have become more ominous, threatening, or apocalyptic. Structures are often set ablaze in an urban industrial environment, and it is unclear as to whether the fires are the result of an accident, a manufacturing process, a battle, or an explosion.

I have also experimented with creating a dichotomy between the foreground and background in terms of light, color, and focus, as evidenced in *Signposts* PLATE 4. In this painting, imagery derived from my *Billboards* series has crept in as a mediating filter. We are used to road signs functioning as objects that direct us, but the signs in this painting are blank and don't precisely conform to the standard shapes. These pictorial signs, which we had hoped would give us some clues to the scene, do nothing of the sort. On a formal level, however, they balance, complete, and activate the composition. The line of reasoning here is that even when the messages from our environment are cryptic, there is always the possibility of finding a new order through the relationship of elements. It is the responsibility of the viewer to frame a new message that might make more sense than those from the past.



PLATE 6 *On Display*, 2001, 64 x 86 in.

DB: In your opinion, what is the role and position of the artist in contemporary society?

GF: Many people think that artists are supposed to be visionaries and help make the connections that escape the rest of us, but this is too heavy a burden to bear in our contemporary era. Artists are as confused as the rest of society about where we are going and what it all means. Yet, despair, indifference, nihilism, and cynicism are not options—at least not for artists, because these responses lead to art with little or no visual power. If artists still subscribe to the idea that one of their functions is to produce something beautiful or sublime, then they are forced into the position of cobbling together elements that by themselves are often abysmal and discordant. I don't expect to reclaim the possibility of the sacred in art—my own goals are more modest. I use painting as a way to bring some of the angst and contradictions out into the open, but at the same time, to work through them and make a virtue of the chaos.

On Display PLATE 6, from my *Billboards* series is a logical extension of these issues in terms of my place as a contemporary representational artist. The idea of creating my own self-portrait as a billboard is a way of recognizing my role as an image maker in this technologically advanced period when image making is so rampant and universal. Every self-portrait, to some extent, is self-promotion because historically portraiture has been used to frame and immortalize people. To paint a self-portrait is to give star billing to one's self. In this instance, I am acknowledging and celebrating the fact that I am a painter who produces large-scale paintings that compete in the marketplace of images.



This self-portrait is not simply the billboard image in the painting; the entire painting is the self-portrait. Everything in it is about me. I have placed a sign to the left that says “Traditional Doors and Windows,” and this refers to my belief in the traditional concept of painting

as a window onto reality. There is small cut-out house on top of the sign, which signifies that I am also a traditional “family man.” My wife and two children are a major focus of my life. There's even a stylized Menorah that signifies my renewed practice of Judaism. Because I have spent a great deal of time studying the nuances of the face, I quote an expression from my book, *The Artist's Complete Guide to Facial Expressions*, on one of the signboards. On the right edge of the painting, there are letters apparently spelling out “market,” although all that is seen in the frame is the word “mark.” Of course, the attribute of any artist is to make marks. What I am suggesting is the duality of artist's attribute within the larger whole of the marketplace. Additionally, I have included a typical highway strip sign that advertises a lounge and grill called the “Grand Illusion” to designate the brand of picture making to which I subscribe.

The self-advertising that animates the painting above all else is a formal structure based on overlapping and unexpected convergences and correspondences. Brought together in a rhythmic and interesting space, the pictorial illusions are based on opposing complementary colors (reds and greens), opposing curves and right angles, and the repetition of certain elements, all enlivened by the odd burst of chromatic color. *On Display* is my stand, which I place side-by-side with all the other images in the world.



PLATE 8 *Hurry Up and Wait*, 2001, 16 x 36 in.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Height precedes width, and dimensions are given in inches. All artworks are oil on canvas.

BILLBOARDS

Billboard ele, 1999, 50 x 64, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Billboard R, 1999, 64 x 32, Collection of Jerry Anches

Billboard with Real Lemons, 1999, 46 x 60, Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Price Explosion, 1999, 60 x 60, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Hot, 2000, 42 x 72, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Mixed Messages, 2000, 72 x 66, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

History Lesson, 2001, 64 x 90, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

On Display, 2001, 64 x 86, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

STILL LIFES

Still Life with Explosion, 1983, 19½ x 24½, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Return to the Source, 1994, 34 x 60, Private Collection

Among the Falling: Drop Zone, 1995, 60 x 30, Private Collection

Arrival, 1996, 66 x 48, Collection of Lauren Antonoff and Alex Hopmann

Artist about to be Struck by Inspiration, 1996, 48 x 24, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Entanglement, 1996, 48 x 60, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Expulsion from Paradise, 1996, 70 x 40, Collection of Charlotte and John Behnke

Still Life with Western City, 1996, 36 x 76, Private Collection

Rain and Shine, 2000, 22 x 28, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco

After the Fall, 2001, 24 x 36, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco

Fadeout, 2001, 22 x 28, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Harvest, 2001, 20 x 28, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Hurry Up and Wait, 2001, 16 x 36, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Signposts, 2001, 24 x 36, Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery, Seattle

Transparent and Solid, 2001, 24 x 36, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco



PLATE 9 *Artist about to be Struck by Inspiration*, 1996, 48 x 24 in.



FRYE ART MUSEUM

704 Terry Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98104