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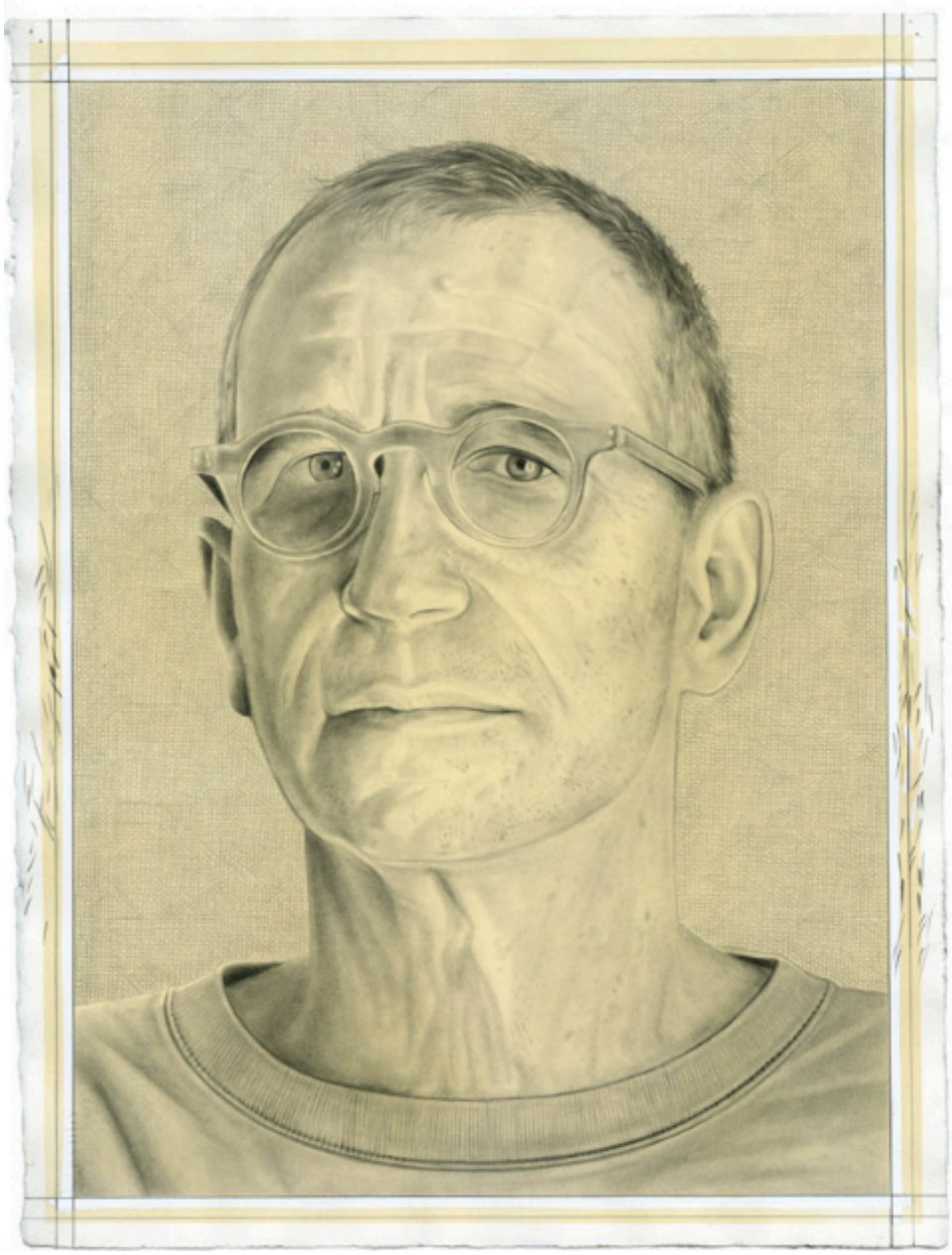
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **JUNE**2014

IN**CONVERSATION**

ROBERT FEINTUCH with Phong Bui

On the occasion of the painter's recent exhibit of six new paintings at Sonnabend Gallery (May 3 – July 25, 2014), Robert Feintuch paid a visit to the Rail HQ to talk about his life and work with publisher Phong Bui.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Phong Bui (Rail): Can you describe a bit of your early formation and your time at Cooper Union from 1970 – 74?

Robert Feintuch: I was born in Jersey City and grew up in Levittown, Pennsylvania, one of those mass-produced post-war suburbias. Since I came to New York to go to Cooper I have mostly lived in a five-block radius where I still live today with my wife, the sculptor Rona Pondick. My experience of the school at the time was somewhere between a 19th-century and modernist academy. I was taught drawing from models, in long eight-hour sessions. I also had a Bauhaus design class, calligraphy, and so on. Nicholas Marsicano and Sue Gussow were among my teachers, and I studied art history with Dore Ashton. At first, New York was a little overwhelming because I was a suburban kid. I vividly remember when I was in junior high school and my art teacher held up a reproduction of a de Kooning painting and said, "This is what they call art in New York" in a sort of ridiculing tone. For some reason I loved the painting. I have no idea what it meant to me at 12, but it meant something. At Cooper I was experimenting with making both figurative and abstract paintings, and both were important to me. I was looking a lot at Max Beckmann and early de Kooning. I also remember being knocked out by Brice Marden's paintings in a show he had at Bykert Gallery in 1972. At the time, they seemed deeply romantic and unbelievably beautiful. I should confess that I also majored in smoking pot then. [Laughter.]

Rail: I, too, minored in that recreation. Anyway, you went to Yale for graduate school right after Cooper?

Feintuch: I did. With Dore's encouragement I applied and submitted slides of figurative paintings. Once I made it through the first selection, when I was asked to bring actual paintings, I brought the abstract paintings I was making instead. These were reduced and very physical. I was adding a lot of materials to the paint, trying to make them thick, with a kind of adolescent, mournful palette.

Rail: What was your experience at Yale?

Feintuch: I learned a lot from Al Held and John Walker and from the other students. I learned a great deal about reductive painting that was coming out of Minimalism and geometric abstraction. I saw Al's show at the Whitney in 1974. Those alphabet paintings from the '60s really interested me a lot, particularly "The Yellow X" (1965) and "Mao" (1967). I was very much an abstract painter when I was at Yale, and the work became more and more reduced. Ed Rath, a painter friend, introduced me to Burgoyne Diller and Myron Stout's work, and when I left my work was pretty influenced by both of them. One of the things I saw in Minimalist work was the way it makes you aware of your own body, how you feel things like symmetry versus asymmetry or verticality versus horizontality in your body, how all of those things have physical effects on viewers. Like I said, I learned a lot from my teachers but I had to get over them too. I knew there was stuff I was missing. I knew I wanted to do something else.

Rail: You mean an inner calling that had yet to be realized?

Feintuch: Yes. Around '72 Dore brought Guston to Cooper to give a talk about his work. I already loved his abstract paintings, but I hadn't yet seen the figurative work, which totally knocked me out. For me, what was really important was what those Gustons said about

what painting could do. It could address more than its recent history. Painting could be about more than itself.

Rail: That's interesting because 1972 was the year that Guston left Marlborough Gallery and didn't even show his work again until the survey show of his drawing at the Met in 1973.

Feintuch: I only saw those shows at David McKee, from 1975 on. I still remember walking into the office, which was hung with all those beautiful little paintings, asking David—I had just gotten an N.E.A. grant so I had some cash—"How much are these?" He looked at me and said with some irritation, "Who are you? One of Philip's students?" because it was inconceivable that anyone else would be interested then. As soon as I left Yale I started experimenting with more referential shapes, and with putting imagistic elements into paintings that were still pretty abstract. In hindsight, it seems like the options at the time were limited. At Yale, there were exceptions, but it seemed like if you were a figurative painter, you made paintings like Vuillard, Bonnard or Fairfield Porter. Or you painted some relatively severe geometric paintings. I went toward a kind of severe geometry, and probably because it was new to me it was very exciting. I was absolutely convinced by it then. It's so funny how you change across time. A lot of the things I despised as a kind of purist then are so important to me now.

Rail: Even if I didn't know that you had gone to graduate school at Yale, the following would suggest that you may have: One, your paintings are painted with full intention and thoughtfulness; two, they make use of structuralist language, as they are about mediating personal images that are driven to justify the balance between figuration and abstraction—I mean, there's a serial tendency in the way that you perform the body with restraint, which was predominantly the idiom of the '70s; three, they offer no apologies for referencing art historical sources, and bringing them into a personal discourse as well as a contemporary context.

Feintuch: I always looked at historical work and eventually it became a really important source for me. Even though I was working with figurative elements, it took another decade for the figure to fully emerge in my work.

Rail: In the late '80s.

Feintuch: Yes. For me, working with restraint with a few things at a time helps make it possible to find meanings. Images mean a lot to me, the way they suggest meanings. I look for things that seem suggestive, somehow funny or rich. Once I find something that seems to hold possibilities I tend to work with it across time. I always have the idea that I can get it better, sharper, or clearer, maybe more complex. Form means a lot to me too, all of the physical stuff helps make meaning too, but I don't see them as separate. I think form is psychological and I look to get the form to support the images. Yes, there has been a lot of talk about the body across the years and I was definitely affected by it. But for me theories of the body are less interesting than the ways that gesture, posture, and physicality continue to be filled with meaning. It's how we operate in the world; I'm looking at your posture right now—maybe to see how I am doing. I can't help but try to read it. So eventually I came to think, simply, "I'm a figurative painter."

Robert Feintuch, "Another Assumption," 2014. Polymer emulsion on honeycomb panel, 19 × 23.75 in. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery and the artist.

That realization opened things up for me. I found myself looking at stuff I couldn't bear when I was younger. Living with Rona, I've spent my life looking at sculpture and small figurative bronzes that used to give me headaches have become great sources for me. Rona has worked with the body for a long time and she gets every millimeter of her form to have psychological intensity. I've learned a lot from her work.

Rail: And as you mention in one interview, it was a gradual, slow arrival to this realization.

Feintuch: Yes, I worked pretty much in private for 10 years after I came back to New York from Yale. I would only show what I was making to Rona and a handful of artist friends. It was interesting because some of those painters from the '60s and '70s made drawings that were figurative in private, but they would show abstract paintings in public. I think I felt some of that constraint. It just took me a long time to accept what I'm interested in.

Rail: I remember once talking to Rackstraw Downes, who like you when he was at Yale was making large geometric painting, in the manner of Al Held, and it took him until 1971, ’72 to accept that his greater desire was to paint from direct observation. But what Rackstraw said he had learned from being an abstract painter was how to generate the movement of paint across the canvas surface. What was gained in your case?

Feintuch: A lot of things, like scale, or how to make formal tension, how to make form that does something or form that you feel. Many of these questions cross back and forth between abstraction and figuration. I was always very interested in bodily and psychological feeling, even when my work was very austere and pure. When I began working from objects in my studio I knew I didn’t want to make paintings that were primarily observational, but I very much wanted them rooted in lived life. What I loved about those Guston paintings was the way they seemed deep and filled with contradictions, like real life.

Rail: You once told me that when Guston came to Dore’s class, he lamented the loss of the image in painting. And that remark stayed with you forever. In other words, things that you might have registered at first may take a long time to digest, until they come back in a full circle, to fruition.

Feintuch: That was how it was in my case. I tend to have things in the back of my mind for years before I can access them. Some of the paintings in the show at Sonnabend are related to images from a group of paintings that were shown in Boston about 14 years ago that have re-emerged. I’m surprised they came back. [Laughs.]

Rail: All sorts of images from Guston’s early figuration paintings—such as the light bulb, the ropes, Klansman, etc.—came back into his late paintings. All the references of early childhood, a psychological domain that the unconscious somehow seemed to welcome more freely once Guston was more accepting in dealing with his memory and more—

Feintuch: Actually, when you came to my studio last, we talked a little bit about the unconscious, and I’m interested in it.

Rail: Which is great timing because Ann McCoy, the guest critic for the Critics Page this month, is dedicating her editorial to the legitimacy of the unconscious.

Feintuch: Terrific. The surrealists and the New York School seemed to have this idea that you had to trick the unconscious out onto the painting, but I think it’s with us and operating all the time. In my case, I just sort of mull over certain things in an unfocused way for a long time, and then they eventually show up in the paintings.

Rail: Did you happen to see Guston’s infamous show at Marlborough in 1970 when you were a freshman?

Feintuch: I had just gotten to New York, and I was way too intimidated to go see shows at galleries that first year.

Robert Feintuch, “Feet Up,” 2013. 23.75 × 19 inches. Polymer emulsion on honeycomb panel. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery and the artist.

Rail: Whatever Guston had gone through, especially in the mid-'60s, when unlike most of his peers—particularly the second generation Abstract Expressionists—were threatened by the emergence of the Pop art, Minimal art, Conceptual art, he was a bit disturbed, but he took them all in. He would devour, digest, and then mediate them to his need, as he knew how. You remember the period right after his show at the Jewish Museum in '66? He did nothing but make simple, bold line drawings with ink or chalk, and sometimes it would be just one or two lines without revision whatsoever!

Feintuch: Yeah, right on the edge of figuration, those drawings.

Rail: Yes. But I don't think they were possible without really being aware of minimalist gesture.

Feintuch: Absolutely, and I'd say the same; the work I make now probably wouldn't have happened without the influence of Minimalism.

Rail: Guston also loved Piero [della Francesca] for the same reason—luminous restraint but packed with subtle emotions.

Feintuch: That's something Guston paintings said clearly: work can have subject, and that really matters to me. All the Minimalists loved Piero, too, but they loved him because of the mathematical geometry of the work. But Pieros tell stories that are deeply moving. Sure, on the surface there is geometry, but the geometry is there to support the subject, the stillness in his work—it is very moving and monumentalizing at the same time. They're also filled with small incidents that affect the narrative in ways that make them very human. Those incidents matter. I also love Otto Dix. I look a lot at Northern Gothic painting and he was very influenced by it. Cubism didn't just come from Picasso; it had roots in Gothic painting, where bodies and interiors are often seriously distorted in ways that support the narrative emotionally. It is really a kind of emotional cubism. When I look at works of art from the past they seem very contemporary, partly because of all the psychological implications in them. In historical museums you see hundreds of paintings, mostly of men, holding things that tell you about their power. Allegorical and religious paintings were often made to show how powerful the patrons were too. That really interested me. As soon as I began to paint a full-scale figure, one of my first questions was, "What am I going to put in his hands?"

Rail: When you say his hands, you mean your hands.

Feintuch: Well, they happened to be mine. That started as a matter of convenience.

Rail: When did you in fact remember first using yourself as the model or the subject of your painting?

Feintuch: Quite late, probably around '95. I had been working in black and white for about eight or ten years, gradually moving towards painting things that were around me, or that I brought into the studio, like clocks, ladders, and buckets. When I decided I wanted to paint a full figure my first thought was, "I'm gonna paint a suit of armor," because I had figured out how to paint buckets and a suit of armor is basically a big bucket with lots of seams. So I went up to the Met and began drawing in the Arms and Armor wing and looking through photographs of armor. Eventually, I found a photo of an empty suit of

armor, seen from behind, which made it weirdly depressing, with the ass buckled in, which I thought made it weirdly funny. That was the first full-scale figure I painted. I was also painting the backs of canvases and fire buckets set up in my studio, and I stuck a fire bucket in the knight's hand. As I was making a transition to working in color, I painted myself taking the same pose as that suit of armor, in the nude and holding a bucket. I'd worked on that painting for about six months and I was close to finishing it, when I spilled paint on the ass. So I decided to paint underwear over that part of the ass to cover the spill, which actually made the ass a little more noticeable. That was the first time I used myself overtly. I want my work to ask for interpretation like novels do. I always imagined, maybe overly optimistically, people spending time in front of paintings, looking at them more than once, thinking about them. I should add that almost every time I've had shows, people came up to tell me their own interpretations, saying what they saw, and it never seemed wrong to me. I'm drawn to images where interpretation is provoked, even when it's embarrassing. I made a painting of my pants dropped along with my underwear down around my ankles, with the pocket pulled out and coins on the floor, and I remember thinking that's an image of poverty: I'm gonna be piss-poor for the rest of my life. But it also seemed like an everyday kind of thing, where you get undressed and money falls out of your pocket. It had a kind of slapstick feel that I liked a lot.

Rail: Can you identify the beginning of your interest in slapstick humor?

Feintuch: Well, I love the cartoons of my childhood, like Tom and Jerry, which is about 20 years of a cat and a mouse trying to obliterate each other. After one runs the other over with a steamroller, they pop back up like a resurrection. When the characters in those cartoons got hit, their legs went up over their heads and they got knocked up into heaven. I see lots of unconscious desires represented in those cartoons out in the open—the lust for power or lust for erotic adventure—all kinds of desires. All of those images really appeal to me. They seem very lifelike.

Rail: In spite of the psychological reading, as you've just described of your self-portrait, there's a sense of stillness, quietness, which appears heightened by your use of soft colors. Where did such choice of colors come from?

Feintuch: It probably began with one of the first trips Rona and I took to Europe in the mid-'80s. When we saw Fra Angelico's frescoes at San Marco in Florence I was really moved by them. They looked absolutely modern to me. They had broad expanses of color that looked as if they were going to disappear. I like to make images that look like they're going to disappear.

Rail: Fra Angelico didn't have any constraints tied with wealthy clients like Masaccio with the Brancacci family, for example, so he could commit a greater sense of devotion to his love of God or humanity or whatever. So there was a much greater amplification of spiritual communionship as a result.

Feintuch: Yes, but I don't have any devotional or spiritual feeling. One of the things I love about Fra Angelico is that there's a kind of beauty even in the scenes of torture like the "Mocking of Christ." I'm moved by things that are beautiful but have enough discomfort in them to seem real. I like paintings that have both positive and negative emotions and want that in my own work. I never understood why paintings had to be one thing.

Rail: When I look at Fra Angelico, one of the most magnificent features in the color is the mauvish pink, and an endless use of dull green in relationship to remarkable placements of black and white. There is hardly any use of red and blue.

Feintuch: If you read letters from patrons at the time they specified as part of a contract how much color you could use, especially red and blue, because they were precious pigments. Amazing.

Rail: What about your sense of scale?

Robert Feintuch, "Two-Fisted," 2014. Polymer emulsion on honeycomb panel, 19 × 23.75 in.
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery and the artist.

Feintuch: I think I'm generally drawn to a moderate scale, which is probably about something between humility and humiliation. For me, size is a function of subject. When I paint things larger than life-sized they feel monumental in ways that seem grandiose. When I looked at those Myron Stout paintings, they were a revelation about how much intensity he could pack into a small canvas, and in those little pencil drawings, too. The thing about small paintings is that they ask people to come up and put their nose practically in them.

Rail: That's what Tom Nozkowski's intention was, after his discovery of Sienese paintings in 1971, in addition to his political desire to have his paintings accessible.

Feintuch: Tom's paintings ask for it. I want my paintings to be looked at from up close, not just from far away. The scale of what happens inside my paintings is important too: what the figures are doing to each other, what they have in their hands, how they stand, how proportions change across the bodies, how big they are relative to the space they are in—

Rail: Was there a specific reason why you chose to work with acrylic rather than oil?

Feintuch: I worked in oil for a while, but luminosity is everything to me. I make a very white ground, and in some areas I work in thin layers trying to get some of the luminosity from underneath, almost like watercolor. I can't do it with oil paint. In acrylic I have ways to really dilute the pigment so that I can work in lots of thin layers.

Rail: I noticed when looking at your surfaces that, in addition to carefully painted edges with tiny, very soft bristle brushes or possibly Kolinsky sable-hair brushes, on some occasions you must have used a tight roller to spread the paint out more evenly?

Feintuch: I used to put the ground on with a roller and sand it. I stopped doing that years ago, but honestly I have so many ways of putting the paint on and they're all relatively eccentric. I use thin paint, some paint with more body, small and wide brushes, I draw and erase, I sand, and I even paint with three-hair brushes. There are parts of it that are sprayed, and so on.

Rail: I also remember us talking about how those early de Kooning paintings of men from the late '40s like "The Glazier" (1940), were inspired by the Boscoreale frescoes that he and Gorky often went to see at the Met.

Feintuch: Those early paintings meant a lot to me when I was a student, and later the late ones too, "Queen of Hearts" (1943 – 46) especially because all of his revisions were visible and they all felt psychological.

Rail: Can you talk about the genesis of the feet image?

Feintuch: It began with a couple of paintings I made of feet in clouds in 2000. One of those paintings is called "Saint." I put a Band-Aid on the toe because I thought you have to

Robert Feintuch, "Room," 2012-13. Polymer emulsion on honeycomb panel, 47 × 35.25 in.
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery and the artist.

suffer to be a saint. The idea for the recent paintings came, in part, from a reproduction of Hans Holbein's painting "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb." About five years ago I cut his body in half at the waist, turned his legs up and glued it back together. That brought me back to those cartoons from my childhood. I also like a lot of Spanish Gothic painters, especially the anonymous ones, where you see the influence of the Northern Renaissance in the naturalism, but where they get it wrong by Northern standards, and there is a lot more caricature. I love those paintings of Jesus and Mary and sometimes God, too, going up to heaven, with their feet sticking out of the clouds. As I was working on the new paintings I thought, "What a beautiful fantasy to be up in this still, misty place. By being pious you get to be up above everyone else, looking down on them. I thought it seemed really grand and ridiculous, so I started playing with it. I painted my feet up like I was dead. Then I thought the relationship of the feet to the viewer could be interesting. What if they're looking at the bottoms of my feet, like in the painting "Another Assumption" (2014)? And there is one of me up in the clouds, naked, with my legs up over my head. [Laughs.]

Rail: "Feet Up" (2014) is comical alright. They have a stick-like elongation. Which brings me to my last question: What is the relationship for you between drawing and painting?

Feintuch: It's really important to me, and as I get older, more and more so. I sometimes make 10 or 15 drawings for one painting, most of them the same size as the painting. I also like to take parts from one drawing and put them in another to see what happens. I start by making freehand drawings in sketchbooks, and if I like them enough I try to redraw them bigger. The larger drawings are on Mylar so if I get something that works the Mylar makes it easy to transfer things from drawing to drawing, or to see what happens when things overlap, what flipping or reversing them does. I often use drawings or parts of drawings more than once. Artists used to do that all of the time. I heard a curator say that when Rubens died he left his drawings to his son-in-law who was a painter. He didn't want anyone else using them. I like drawings as things themselves. But for the most part, I'm drawing on the way to painting.

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