

Art in America

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Robert Feintuch: *Self Portrait with Clock*, 1999, polymer emulsion on canvas, 72 by 45 1/2 inches; at CRG.

Robert Feintuch at CRG

No matter how futile the effort, the desire to defy age persists. What's interesting about Robert Feintuch's latest paintings is how they manifest both futility and defiance. The imagery—clocks, dropped buckets, lost change and anterior views of the artist caught, as it were, with his pants down—suggests a middle-aged man helpless amid the first signs of aging. Yet the very production of the paintings arrests the process. After all, what is art-making if not a bid for immortality?

Feintuch eloquently mocks and limns this contradictory impulse, exploring the limits of his medium with breathtaking finesse. Using casein and polymer emulsion, he captures a luminosity recalling Fra Angelico. In the two large works that depict his full figure (*Himself*, 1997-98, and *Self-Portrait with Clock*, 1999) Feintuch renders his fleshy limbs and back in the most delicate of tones; whisper-thin strokes of ivory, yellow, pink and blue are blended to achieve a buffed, ethereal glow. By contrast, the lines that define his buttocks and armpits are crudely graphic, as are the contours of his rumpled clothes and hair. Along with faint pencil traces, nimbuslike shadows and Photo-Realist glares of light, such variant surface details create a formal beauty that calls to mind Feintuch's earlier paintings of ears isolated in fields of darkness, a body of work that is otherwise quite different.

The paintings are Hopperesque in their austerity, their cinematic use of light and shadow and their symbolic relation of objects to figure. A filmic reference is notable, as well, in Feintuch's repetition of imagery from one canvas to the next. *Out of Pocket*, *Dropped* and *Change* (all 1998) depict the artist

from the knees down, with his pants and shorts crumpled around his feet. Because the cropping tightens from one to the next, their sequential effect suggests successive frames of film wherein a camera closes in on its subject.

Feintuch's self-deprecating, wry humor is most patent in the slumped, doughy figure of *Self-Portrait with Clock*, who stands naked with his back to us. Tentatively holding

a red fire bucket in one hand while another pail, apparently just dropped, lies on the ground, he seems to have suddenly awakened to a disaster. And though ill-equipped and clumsy, he determines to meet what awaits him. Both buckets have the word "fire" painted on them in black but are rendered from an angle that obscures the letter "f" and leaves "fire" as "ire." Like the spilt-milk adage evoked by the sand that has fallen out of the dropped bucket, this ironic wordplay suggests the wastefulness of regrets. Woody Allen once said that "death is an acquired trait"; Feintuch's paintings comically suggest that there is nothing to do about growing old but to face it with wit.

—Jane Harris