

Robert Feintuch

HERO: ROBERT FEINTUCH'S RECENT WORK



Fig. 1. *Heirloom*, 1995
84 x 50". Polymer emulsion on
canvas.
Private collection, New York

The evolution of Robert Feintuch's art over the past seven years has had a cinematic unfolding in which each work peels away a layer of his subjects' physical and psychological defenses to expose an ever-deepening level of vulnerability. This progression creates a loose narrative that lays the conceptual groundwork for his most recent series of paintings depicting knights and cloudy skies.

With his figurative compositions, Feintuch underscores the viewer's voyeuristic perspective by showing his subjects from behind and in isolation. In *Heirloom* (fig. 1), an armored knight stands in classical contrapposto within a timeless ether of gray mist. Visor drawn down and armor clean and polished, he is a universal soldier; a fine specimen of valor and fortitude. A year later, Feintuch paints this same knight in *Hot Seat* (fig. 2). Set within an equally ambiguous atmosphere of white light, he is dressed in the same armor and strikes an identical pose. In this painting, however, he is a knight in shining armor on a rescue mission. Clutching a pail labeled FIRE, he steps courageously forward on his way to extinguish the flames.

Beginning with *Himself* (fig. 3), Feintuch's works take a dramatic psychological shift. Taking the same stance as the knight in *Hot Seat*, this time the artist is his own model. Wearing no armor and with bucket in hand, he too is en route to put out a fire. What was in earlier works a suggestion of idealized bravery has now become a comedy of errors as the protagonist's pants and underwear have fallen down around his ankles. Faced with a task requiring the valiant efforts of a hero, the trappings of his own follies immobilize him.

Stooped (fig. 4) once again depicts the artist in a state of helplessness. This time Feintuch focuses on the entanglement of his pants and underwear. En-

tering the frame from above, a listless hand reaches down to grab an array of coins that have spilled out of his pockets onto the floor. The figure is struggling with his own impotence, as he seems incapable of commandeering the simplest of acts. It is as if the armor that protects the fantasy of male invincibility has been removed to reveal an internal struggle waged between the desire for unmitigated success and the more fragile realities that characterize the human condition.

In Feintuch's most recent works he conflates the themes of earlier compositions by placing himself in the knight's armor. Continuing to represent the figure from behind, he introduces a half-naked *Large Knight* (2000) whose bare-ass shines from the back of an ornately decorated armor typically reserved for royal pageants. He is an errant knight who stands shoeless and flat-footed upon a floor that is either at a precipice or against an expansive blue wall that rises uncomfortably close to him. Unlike the isolated figure in Caspar David Friedrich's romantic *Monk By the Sea*, who stands with his back toward the viewer in metaphysical contemplation of a stormy seascape, Feintuch's knight is more creaky Tin Man from Oz than Arthurian crusader. Having put his manhood in question, Feintuch seems to want us to ask where is he and what is he looking at. Is he on a ledge? Is he about to jump? Or is he standing before a wall, like a class dunce sent to the corner? The setting brings to mind the staged photograph of Barnett Newman standing with his toes to the wall while gazing at his own abstraction *Cathedra*. While Newman attempted to illustrate the transcendent nature of the viewer's experience before his works, the unknown void in *Large Knight* is probably more mundane drywall than ethereal atmosphere. His naked presence suggests he is less a protector than in need of protection, as he stands frozen like a deer caught in the headlights of oncoming traffic.

In *Sunset* (2007), Feintuch's protagonist returns, a fully clad warrior. This time he stands in the magical setting of a smoky sky of golden clouds. Elevated and well armored, he appears ready and willing for duty. The ground upon which he stands is firm. It is a base from which he gazes into infinity, surveying the world from on high like a superhero looking down upon the city of Gotham. Compared to *Large Knight*, he seems more worthy and capable of exhibiting the mores of courage and self-realization that characterize the pomp and circumstance of the myth of the hero.

What makes these paintings so compelling is the way we are brought into their respective scenarios. Facing in the same direction as the knights, we can't help but consider what they are looking at. And like the vicarious experience we share with Friedrich's Monk, we cannot help but identify with the complex psychological dilemmas that confront Feintuch's subjects. By placing himself in the Knight's role, the artist invites us to consider our own emotions when called upon to perform a heroic deed. Would we be so sure-footed on our way to an emergency without succumbing to the comic



Fig. 2. *Hot Seat*, 1996
84 x 50", Polymer emulsion on canvas.

Collection of the artist



Fig. 3. *Himself*, 1998
73½ x 47", Polymer emulsion on canvas.

Collection of Marc and Livia Straus, Chappaqua, New York



Fig. 4. *Stooped*, 1999
17 x 27". Casein and polymer
emulsion on honeycomb panel.
Collection of Ruth and Jake Bloom,
Marina del Rey, California



Fig. 5. *Saint*, 2000
17 x 25½". Polymer emulsion on
honeycomb panel.
Collection of the artist



Fig. 6. *Cloud*, 2000
28 x 42". Polymer emulsion on
honeycomb panel
Collection of Alan Dinsfriend,
Boston, Massachusetts

pratfalls that confound the rescuer in *Himself*? The success of Feintuch's paintings lies in the way they deflate the illusions of infallibility, thereby leaving us to mull over our own abilities, nobilities and insecurities when facing ordinary and extraordinary challenges.

We are given respite from the psychological distress we feel from seeing his figures struggle with the heroic and mundane in Feintuch's depictions of clouds, which he has been painting concurrently since 2000. Works like *Saint* (fig. 5) in which we see a pair of clean-shaven legs afloat in the clouds and *Cloud* (fig. 6), a smoky bramble of white, blue and gray cottony textures, may not be Valhalla but they offer a place of emotional and spiritual tranquility, be it in the future or in our dreams.

In the paintings in this exhibition, the juxtaposition between earthbound armored knights and ethereal skies is exploited even further. While several earlier paintings combined clouds with elements of the figure, implying a heavenly place of rest, in the current works each of these images retain a stronger degree of autonomy.

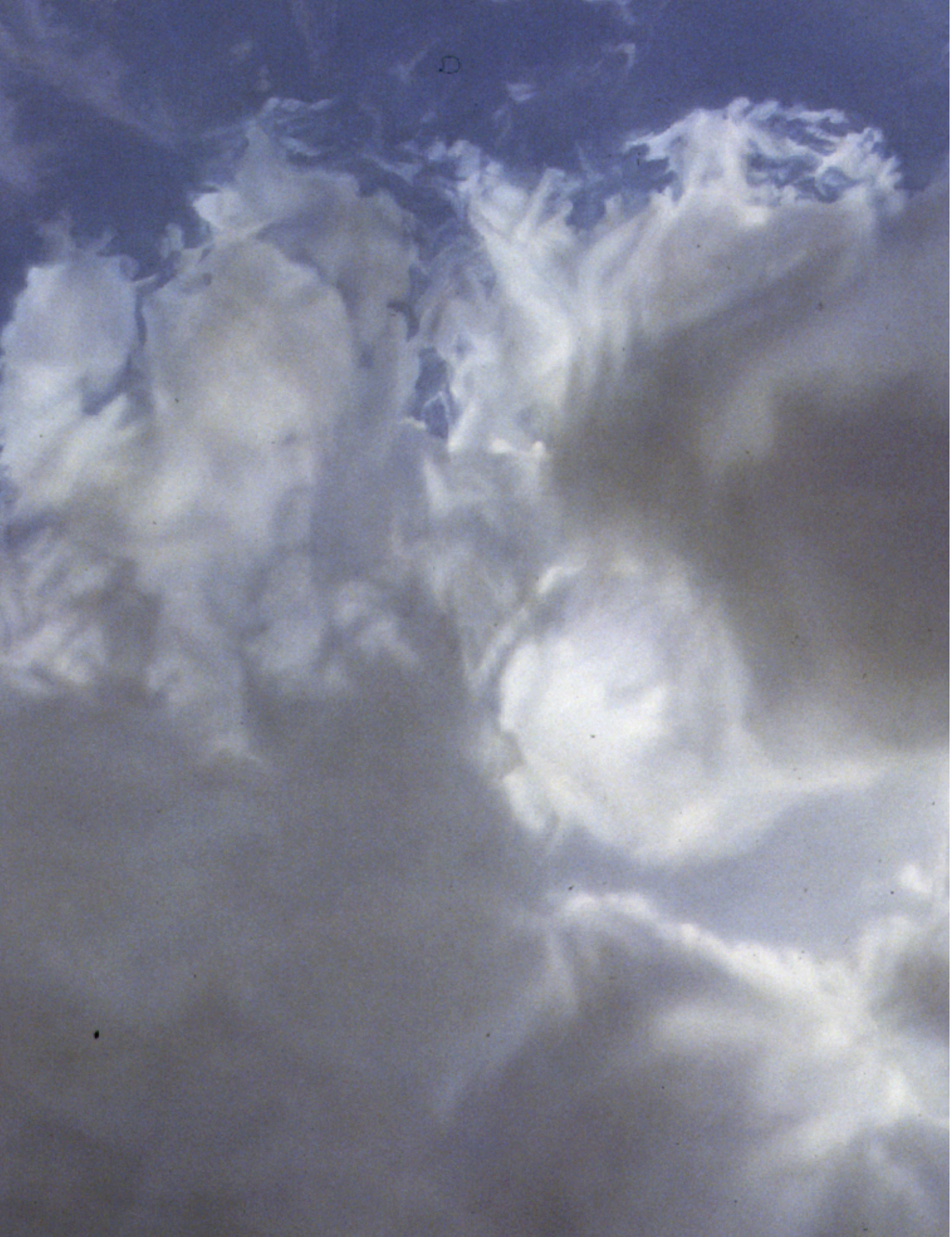
The cloud paintings have the meteorological realism of John Constable's famed cloud studies. As immaterial objects, clouds are also inherently abstract. Feintuch handles this duplicity by conjuring a naturalistic appearance from a wide range of painterly brushwork and textures. The effects enable the paintings to operate on a variety of levels in which the degree of illusionism increases and decreases as the viewer waltzes back and forth before them. Imbued with the frailty and vulnerability of his figures, they share a common conceptual fabric that meets somewhere in the psychic nebula of free association.

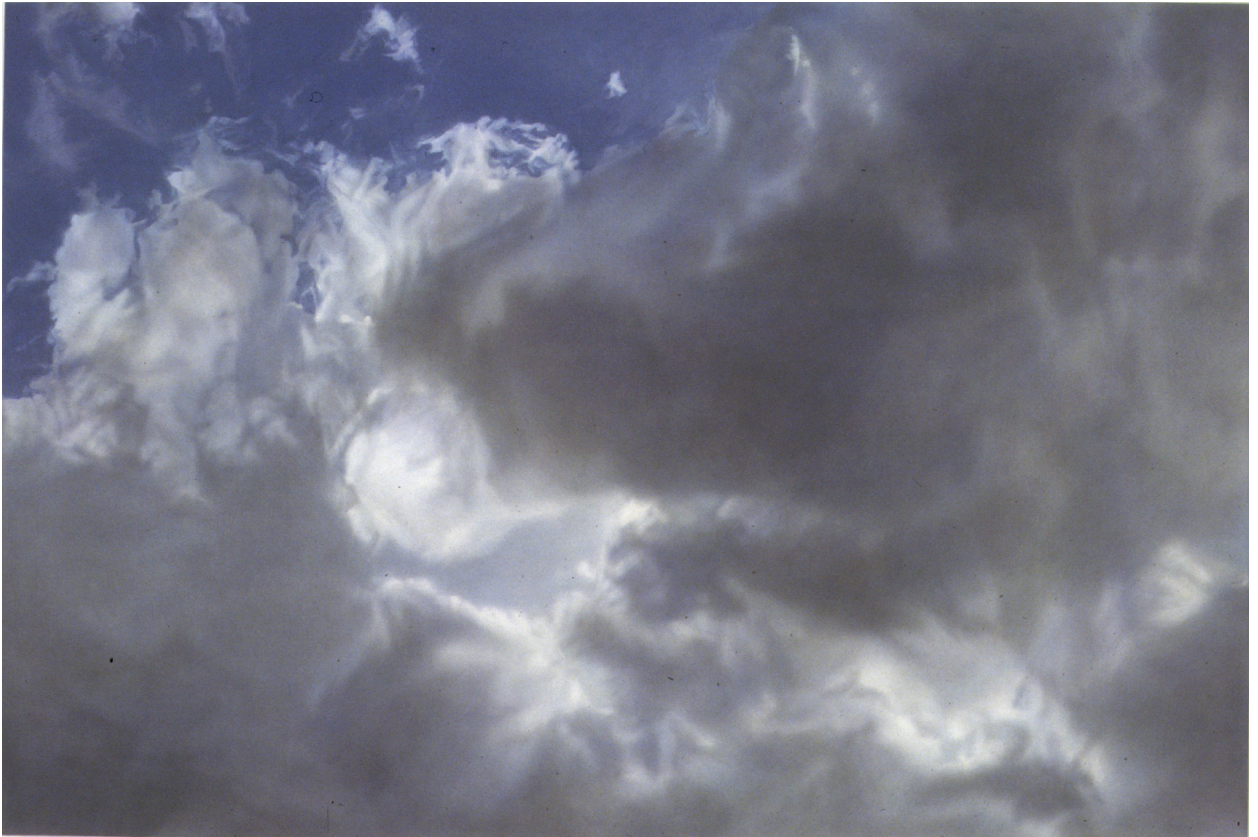
Feintuch's oeuvre recalls Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents* where photographs of clouds were typically paired with an image of an everyday scene or object. The combination enabled Stieglitz to emphasize the abstract form found in them and, by extension, in the more easily identifiable subjects of people, places and things. Feintuch's paintings also create equivalences. However, what distinguishes them is that the clouds are contextualized by the quixotic figurative works. Like an elusive mist, the clouds' ephemeral nature evokes the physical and psychological struggles we endure when summoned to act with the skill and fortitude that our idealized selves ultimately desire.

As the thread of this filmic series continues, Feintuch's works settle inside us like sedimentary deposits that build up and fortify us. Coming around full circle, it is as if we have been given the mettle to step forward into the world with the same self-assurance his shining knight exudes upon the precipice of the setting sun.



1. SMALL SUNSET, 2002





2, 3. CLOUD, 2001



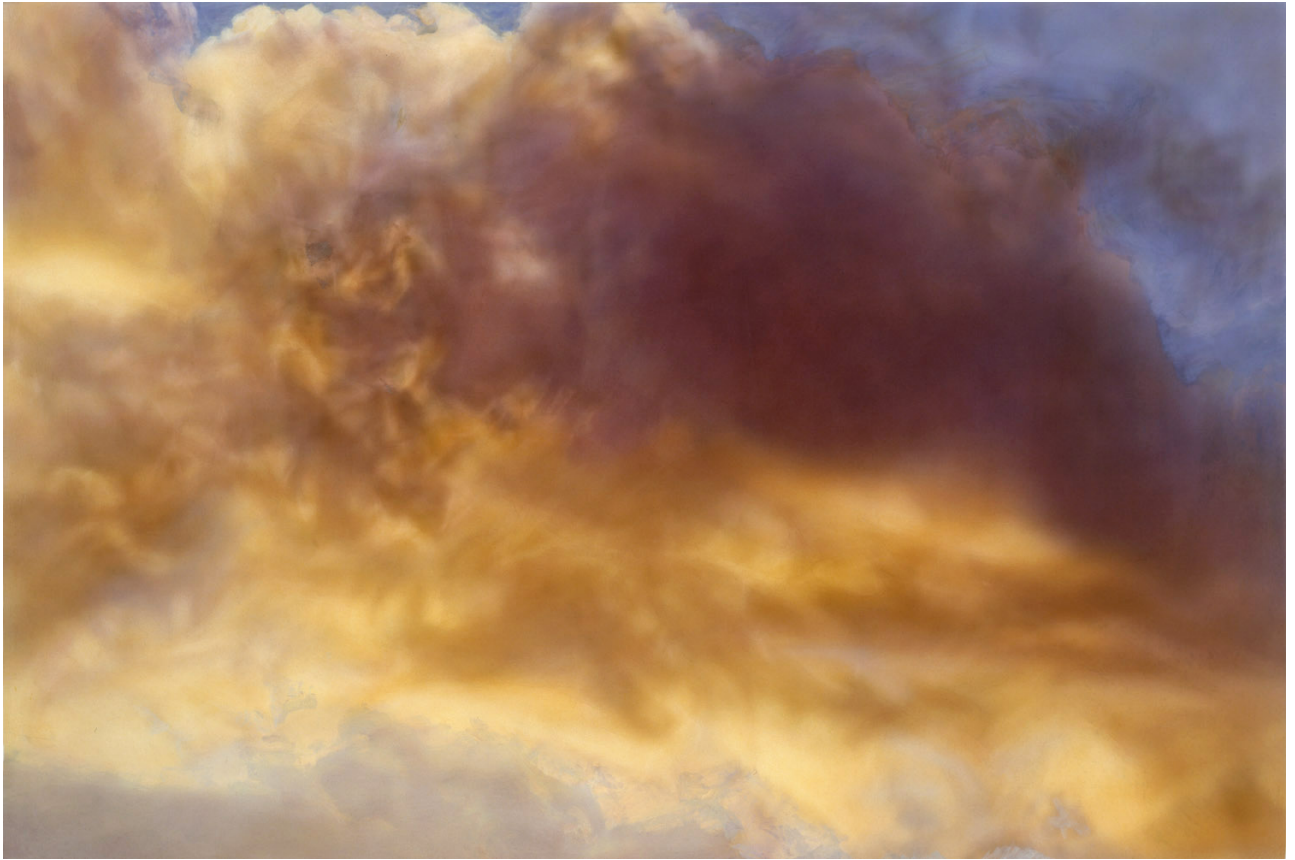
4, 5. LARGE KNIGHT, 2000





6. SMALL CLOUD, 2001





7, 8. SUNSET, 2001



9, 10. SUNSET, 2001







11, 12. RAIN, 2001



13. SMALL SUNSET, 2002