

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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Robert Feintuch

CRG Gallery through May 29

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BUSTER KEATON IS ALIVE and well, or so it would seem judging from Robert Feintuch's new paintings which provocatively fill the CRG gallery. At the opening while looking at *SELF PORTRAIT WITH CLOCK*, 1999, a nude representation of the artist from behind, I jokingly asked the artist's wife, "What does the other side look like?" She didn't answer, and on second thought it was probably more than I wanted to know anyway. Feintuch's figure appears burdened by a sense of futility, and yet he is simply heroic at the same time. But it is so much of what is not known or seen that makes these neo-Baroque works communicate a complex psychological enigma which is at the core of Feintuch's subject matter, and just like in Baroque art, the subject matter of art is the human experience.

This painting seems to represent an important crossroads in Feintuch's career. The figure occupies the mid-ground, presumably contemplating something which we are unable to see. He holds one pail (Fire), while a second (Ire) has been knocked over and its content spilled. A clock with an indeterminant time hovers abstractly above creating a wall upon which to hang where none exists. His stance - one foot in front of the other - reminded me of Cézanne's famous *BATHERS*, 1886 at The Modern, a painting which similarly represented a crossroads in Cézanne's life.

But, oh, those buckets. We all carry them around with us for life. How often do we get caught between the "Fire" of libido and the "Ire" of aggression, one or the other spilling out. Feintuch has recently (within the

last couple of years) experienced the traumatizing effects of a serious car accident, and his recovery was no doubt slow and painful. But this painting seems to say such is life, and the harsh reality is we have to deal with whatever comes our way, with whatever bucket we have in hand at the time. The figure's nudity adds to the narrative because it equates the figure with classical and neoclassical traditions in which the subject of the work was symbolized through the activity of the nude. But there is humor in these buckets as well. Who can forget the scene in Mel Brooks's *History of the World Part 1* where Brooks plays both the piss boy who carries around the bucket and Louis, the king, who become interchangeable characters? Such is the draw of life.

The other self-portrait included in the exhibition, *HIMSELF*, 1997/98, gives off even more of the Buster Keaton effect. Here he is literally caught with his pants down (or half way). It is really hard to appear regal and heroic in this position, and yet the figure here is just so compelling. Everyone must be able to relate to the predicament, and the ridiculous way one feels when caught like this. This, of course, is exaggerated by our own fantasy self-image which is almost never found looking so ridiculous until, of course, we're caught in the act. There is an honest, ironic quality to these self-portraits which Feintuch has captured with such aplomb.

Of the smaller paintings here, the one I found the most effective is *CHANGE*, 1998. I think Feintuch is at his best when he actually includes part of the figure (himself). Here he has been foreshortened so that he almost looks like the bottom of a dwarf. (I thought of Velazquez or Goya.) Once again there is irony and humor in the way he has inadvertently spilled the change from his pockets.

Feintuch is an extremely capable painter. His large self-portraits are beautifully infused with subtle variations of color which create the effect of a space out of nothing. The figures themselves have almost a surreal aspect, and I found myself drawn to the areas of the "cracks" under the armpits and the behind. In all, I found these paintings infused with the kind of humanity which addresses how within the serious scope of life, there is ample room for self-reflection with a humorous and ironic twist.