



A still-life master FOR OUR TIME

Scott Fraser combines the traditional and the contemporary in his new classics

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

QUIRKY. WITTY. Innovative. Surreal. These are words observers often use to describe Scott Fraser's thought-provoking still-life paintings. But if viewers want a deeper understanding of Fraser's work, the first thing they need to know about the painter is that he is a passionate student of art history. Sprinkled throughout Fraser's tableaux are visual references to artists and artistic styles that may reach back 500 years to the Dutch masters or be

as recent as works by American modernist Georgia O'Keeffe.

On a chilly winter afternoon, Fraser settles into a chair in his studio and discusses his admiration for prominent artists throughout history, such as contemporary British painter Francis Bacon. On an easel nearby, there's a work in progress that references Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. For the past several years Fraser has been working on what he calls his Icon Series of 12 paintings that pay homage to favorite artists, which he eventually hopes to present in a museum show. As this story was going to press, several works in the Icon Series were on view at Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco in a solo show of Fraser's works titled



◀ **Reign**, oil, 82 x 76.

representation

Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, CA;
Gallery 1261, Denver, CO; **Pismo Fine Art**,
Aspen, CO.



Peeled, oil, 27 x 8.



Francis B, oil, 22 x 18.

Outside the Box. “His works reflect the simplicity and perfection of old-masters paintings,” says gallery principal Karen Jenkins-Johnson, adding that the artist pushes traditional still-life paintings into the post-modern era by rearranging classical tableaux in contemporary settings, often with whimsical flair. “His paintings are full of humor, mystery, and layers of meaning,” Jenkins-Johnson says.

Although Fraser is nationally known—his paintings are held in the collections of prestigious institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—he is content to make his home in Longmont, CO, about 30 miles northwest of Denver, and shows no apparent need to inhabit major art meccas. “I love living in Colorado—the light, the climate, and being so close to the mountains,” Fraser says. This prominent midcareer artist isn’t necessarily aligned with any movement, although he meets with a small cadre of friends every Friday for a life-

drawing class, a group he co-founded 20 years ago.

Fraser’s spacious, airy studio was built onto his Victorian-style home in 1994. Large windows across one wall face north. Around 11 o’clock in the morning, warm sunlight floods the space—the artist’s treasured slice of time to paint. Colorado’s blue skies, high altitude, and about 300 days of sunshine a year help maintain a consistent bright light, which he says accounts, in part, for the luminosity in his works.

A hallway separates his studio from his wife Bronwyn’s studio, where she teaches clarinet lessons. On occasion, depictions of sheet music pop up in the artist’s still lifes. In fact, another thing a curious viewer should know about Fraser’s work is that he is fond of portraying objects that hold personal meanings, from his grandfather’s favorite chair to his children’s snack of choice when they were toddlers: Goldfish crackers.

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THE STUNNING centerpiece of Fraser’s show at Jenkins Johnson Gallery is a 7-foot-tall painting titled **REIGN**, in which he blends both the historical and the personal. The painting is worth dissecting in some detail because it brings together many of the artist’s signature elements. On top of the table sit everyday objects from the artist’s kitchen cupboards—a teapot, cups, and saucers. He has painted them in a traditional, old-masters fashion, and then he adds an element of surprise by suspending arrows and pieces of china in mid-air.

Under the table sits a second still-life arrangement featuring objects with more

personal or autobiographical meaning. These items appear sheltered and protected, like small children playing under the table while parents dine above. The old-fashioned suitcase belonged to Fraser’s father, who passed away recently. The artist recalls fondly how his father used to pack up flowers, silverware, and food in the suitcase and then take his mother on surprise picnics. His son, Ian, made the paper chef’s hat in elementary school. The toque sits atop a skull that Fraser’s friend, fellow painter Dan Sprick, gave to him as a wedding present 25 years ago. A white plaster hand holds an image of a woman’s face that is taken from the

painting **THE FORTUNE TELLER** by French Baroque artist Georges de La Tour. The young gypsy woman is a recurring image in Fraser’s work. The plaster hand, which is cast from Fraser’s own, is a key part of paintings in his Icon Series.

Another theme in Fraser’s recent work reflects his ongoing interest in catenary curves—the curve a hanging chain assumes under its own weight when supported at its ends. This artistic design element has been used by artists as far back as the 16th century and more recently by contemporary artist Jasper Johns. Curves and spirals have always intrigued Fraser, he says. In **REIGN**, an undulating snake



Mt. Desert Spiral, oil, 31 x 49.



graces the lower left edge of the painting, and a wavy tape measure flanks the right edge. On the tabletop, an orange peel spirals downward and points to the second still-life under the table.

The painting's title, *REIGN*, is a play on words, according to the artist, and is meant to be a humorous comment on the art world—arrows flung by today's "reigning" art movements "rain" down on the classical still life on the tabletop. On one side of the tape measure, there's a timeline of art history. "Often I feel like an outsider realist," Fraser says. "This is a conscious choice. There are two camps, and I have a foot in each of them. One rep-

resents the desire to revive the traditional painting of the old masters and embrace beauty and craft, while dismissing everything post-1913 Armory show. The other camp is modernism and all its forward-moving, don't-look-back trappings. This is the more forceful of the two. It is fast-paced, born of concept, theory, influence, and high-stakes bidding."

REIGN took eight months to paint with little else on Fraser's agenda. For this and other works, the painter studies art history books, doodles, and sketches tirelessly in preparation. Since he often suspends objects to create the sense that they are floating in space, he also spends time

hanging items from the ceiling or gluing objects to a studio wall. Such touches not only evoke a dreamlike sensibility but also provide a certain wit and whimsy. Fraser describes his sense of humor as "subversive, dark, and a little twisted," akin to Monty Python.

Fraser also explains that his humor springs from his childhood growing up in the Chicago area. His parents valued a good sense of humor, and there was a lot of laughter in the household. It was also his parents who introduced him to the world of art on regular forays to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he came to appreciate works by Winslow Homer and

Edgar Degas. Fraser says he realized back then that he could become an artist someday, too. He had a difficult time as a student because, as he now knows, he had a learning disability, dyslexia. "I think art saved my life," Fraser says. "It was the one thing I could do. I was the kid in the class who was always drawing."

His parents supported his decision to attend the Kansas City Art Institute, where he immersed himself in a combination of modernist and academic principles. But it was a yearlong trip to Europe in 1985 that drew him out of his comfort zone, he says. During his time abroad he started to develop his own vision as he



▲ *Goldfish Arc*, oil, 22 x 22.

◀ *Jiffy Pop*, oil, 27 x 39.

studied works by artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys. He also began to work from life and shift his focus from figures and landscapes to still lifes—an artistic path he has been on since then.

THESE DAYS his wife accuses him of having an "art brain," and Fraser admits he is guilty as charged. He often has an idea flash in the middle of the night, and he can't sleep because the ideas nag and won't let go. "I don't have an 'off' switch. I wake up at 5:30 in the morning thinking about art," Fraser says. "I love what I do, and I can't turn off my art brain."

Fraser says that the most interesting imagery and ideas started permeating his "art brain" after his children were born. Ian and Sonia introduced a new level of joy and humor to his work. Indeed, his fam-

ily has been his inspiration throughout his career—in good times and bad. Years ago, when his wife's doctor found a tumor the size of a marble on her brain, Fraser conceived a still life that featured a skull shrouded in plastic bubble wrap, representing his attempt to shelter Bronwyn's head from harm. A glass marble sits next to the skull. The tumor turned out to be benign, but the anxiety and fear were real. "I think art is at its best when it functions as a way for the artist to work out the joys and pains of living," Fraser says. ♦

Bonnie Gangelhoff is senior editor at *Southwest Art*.

See more of Fraser's paintings at www.southwestart.com/featured/fraser-s-apr2013.