

Ke Francis: A View from America

Because of his amiable, easy-going manner, Ke Francis strikes one as just plain, down-home country-folk from Tupelo, Mississippi. But first glances can be deceiving for he is a most prolific artist with an abundance of nervous energy. Serious and thoughtful, he is fully cognizant of all the latest art-world theory from Structuralism to Poststructuralism to Deconstruction; yet, he is still an artist in the traditional sense of someone who continually makes things.¹

As the works in this exhibition attest, Francis is capable of making a great quantity of things and of negotiating a wide variety of materials and media - he is not only a painter, but also a sculptor, printmaker, storyteller, writer, and book artist. This might not seem like much since many artists work in several media; for instance, many painters also make prints. However, most painters who make prints go to print workshops like Crown Point Press in California where specialist technicians do the actual printing of the images they design. Not so with Francis. He designs and prints all his own images using a host of different techniques including woodcut, lithography, and etching; he also writes and illustrates his own artist books which he then publishes through Hoopsnake Press, a limited-edition press which he founded and still runs single-handedly from his studio.

While Francis can be described as something of a Renaissance artist because of the range of his skills and interests, his work is clearly about the contemporary world. In this sense one must consider him a Postmodern artist. His works certainly feature many of the traits typical of Postmodern art making. For example, he usually layers images one on top of another without apparent regard for their scale or proportion in real life.² Thus in his work the large is often rendered small and the small large so that a kitchen funnel may be represented the size of a human figure, a rabbit trap the size of a dog kennel, and a musical tuning fork the size of a public monument.

Furthermore, many of the images Francis uses as part of his visual vocabulary are not invented by him, but are more or less taken whole from a multitude of different sources. These sources cover numerous historical periods - some come from the ancient Classical world while others come from modern works of art; some are even "lifted," as it were, from popular books and illustrated manuals that could have been published anytime from the beginning of the last century to the present.

All of the images he "borrows" - as well as those he invents - are rendered in different artistic styles and techniques. Some are illusionistic with careful modeling and shading to suggest three-dimensional form; some are simply two-dimensional line drawings; some are painted to look like engravings found in books; and some are treated in a more Modern, up-to-date Cubistic style. Rendering images in such diverse styles makes his compositions appear as if they were collaged or "pasted" together. The result is that generally within any single composition there is a noticeable lack of stylistic consistency from image to image making it all the more apparent to the viewer that the whole is constructed of disparate parts, parts that obviously range across historical time and space as well as high and low cultures.

When traditional fine art images and styles get mixed with those from popular and folk art sources, odd combinations are forced together in a sometimes uncomfortable, but always-complex visual situations. The up-shot of this is that Francis' works are seldom simple affairs for the mind or the eye. If they're to be considered representational works of art, they aren't of that seamless, coherent visual world we typically expect to see. This is apparent in the large painting *Nike and Flying Fish*, a work from 1998. In this composition, the wings of what looks like a woodblock print of a statue of *Nike*, the ancient Greek Goddess of Victory, overlap a linear diagram of an industrial-sized funnel. Facing *Nike*, eye-to-eye, is a painted version of an early 20th century black & white engraving of a flying fish; apparently borrowed from an old book, this illustration hovers above a geometrically conceived rabbit trap. All of these elements are contained within a turbulent, painterly seascape.

This approach to image making (or should we say image assembling?), by relying on dislocated sources, seems to echo the Postmodern sense of discontinuity found in contemporary society. Images refusing to cohere into consistent, meaningful narratives is simply a reflection of the mass culture and mass society in which we live. We are constantly bombarded by a stream of repeating images promoting every imaginable product. Though such repetition is primarily an instrument of electronic media like TV, it has had a ripple affect throughout the larger society--images of every kind and type

are now being dislocated from their historical contexts. In mass culture and mass society, images are being emptied of their resonance, reduced, literally, to little more than one-dimensional props without any of the weight or density originally intended by their authors.³ Slowly, they are depleted of whatever serious meaning they might have had.

For example, in the minds of many people today the goddess Nike has been reduced to little more than a pair of running shoes. Like other images used for commerce, it has been exploited to generate a "lifestyle" image, a recognizable, pre-formed look that one can adopt as a self-image. In this way it acts as an easy substitute for the arduous task of building an autonomous self from real-life experiences. Thus, in this virtual world of "lifestyle," pre-teen girls dress in sexy clothes to emulate a certain pop singer whose only existence for them is as a media image. This is troubling enough, especially for parents. But even more troubling are twenty-year olds who sport retro-50s leather jackets and greased-back hair and thirty-somethings who wear 60s Capri pants in order to affect a lifestyle about a period they probably know little, if anything, of significance. One doubts if Joseph McCarthy, the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, let alone Vietnam, compute as part of a 50s and 60s lifestyle. In this sense their idea of lifestyle is so one dimensional it has neither the virtue of a historical reconstruction nor the sentimental value of nostalgia.

Serious contemporary artists like Ke Francis can't help but confront this situation. They recognize that we are living in a world in which the early Modernist search for a perfect and timeless utopian moment has proved to be overly optimistic, even naive. Such a world, a hallmark of avant-garde painters like the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian and the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich, sought utopian perfection through ideal forms. Such was the power and metaphorical weight of pure geometry for them that in a pamphlet written in Moscow in 1916 on the eve of the Russian Revolution, Malevich argued that a carved geometric form such as a "pentagon or a hexagon would have been a greater work of sculpture than the *Venus de Milo* or *David*."⁴ And four years later in Paris, Mondrian declared that "Logic demands that art be the plastic expression of our whole being: therefore, it must be equally the plastic appearance of the non-individual, the absolute and annihilating opposition of subjective sensations. That is, it must also be the direct expression of the universal in us..." He went on to write that "The universal thus understood is that which is and remains constant: the more or less unconscious in us, as opposed to the more or less conscious – the individual, which is repeated and renewed."⁵

Clearly these artists were unrealistic and naive in their hopes that art would, or even could perfect mankind and create a universal, ideal world. However, to reduce their quest to an infatuation with the momentary so that living in the present erases any sense of the past and precludes any sense of the future is something else. Dislocated images in the service of consumption do much to determine how we see and value the world. And such images, more often than not, project a sense that time exists outside of history, that living in the eternal present is all that matters. However, regardless of how much we would wish it to be so, we can't live as if the past never existed and tomorrow will never come. Have fun, enjoy yourself, BUY SOMETHING!! If recent events have taught anything, it is that history does exist and is palpably real for many people - if one tries to escape history, one does so at ones peril.

This, it seems to me, is exactly the point of Ke Francis' work. This is where he parts company with those who would argue that the Postmodernist condition is necessarily one circumscribed by images devoid of historical import. Francis insists that his images have weight and density, that they not float away into the ether. In the literal sense this means that he is an object maker and his works are real, tangible things that even occupy space. His mixed media *Tornado Whirlygig* sculptures, for example, are made of painted wood, steel, and clay and often have parts that rotate when a handle is cranked. Moreover, many of his works are quite large. The mixed-media work titled *Manic Moon* is 8' x 9'; the painting *Crystal Burn* is 6' x 10'; and the print *Reconstructed Visions: Swimmers*, is 4' x 5', very large for a woodcut. Even some of his books are big and weighty - *Dixie Compass Book* is 2' x 2' x 8" and is made of plywood with brass hinges. Such works cannot help but exert their physical presence upon the spectator because of their sheer size and weight, if nothing else.

But the feeling for weight and density in Francis' work is about more than just pounds and square footage. His works display a seriousness of intent that is reflected in the way he insists on the physical presence of the artist as an active force in their creation. Francis refuses to be a passive agent

in this world. He insists on standing between the viewer and the work, on declaring the work an embodiment of a set of ideals and beliefs that he holds as important. This is why his works are never mechanically or industrially produced and their surfaces are seldom, if ever, meticulously finished or highly polished - they don't seek perfection through ideal form, as do the works of Mondrian and Malevich. As Francis would readily admit, perfection of this kind is impossible today; the Postmodern, Post-Industrial world is just too messy and complex a place. Avoiding the clean, pristine look of industrial production guarantees Francis' works won't appear as more meaningless, depleted relics, as anonymous, dis-embodied objects made somewhere in a factory in some unnamed place. He insists that they be understood as coming from somewhere, a somewhere symbolized by the presence of the hand of the artist.

Toward this end his paint is usually fluid and drippy and visibly layered on the surface of his canvases; the labor of the artist's hand must be evident in the material itself. In paintings like *Compass/Nike* and *Crystal Genesis*, both from 1998, the acrylic paint is brushed and layered in transparent, gestural strokes across the canvas. In doing this, something of the history of the artistic process, that struggle in which material substance is laboriously worked into recognizable form, is captured, frozen, and displayed as part of the work. The time, labor, and thought expended on the work is its and the artist's historical moment and must be there, clearly visible for the spectator to see.

Struggling to work material substance into artistic form also gives a certain pleasure, a feeling of actually having made some thing, not a virtual thing, but an actual thing. This pleasure in accomplishment through skilled physical labor, is probably one of the reasons why Francis is drawn to the woodcut process. With the woodcut process the viewer can actually sense the physical exertion and manual skill needed to cut into the wood. Making a woodcut image come into being is hard and intense; a multi-colored image like *Tuning Fork and Injured Figure*, a woodcut from 2000, or *Injured Figure and Snake Spirit*, a woodcut from 2001, requires several blocks of wood to be carefully aligned and cut, one for each color to be printed. But while woodcut is physically demanding as a process, it is also one in which the traces of the process are inherent in the final image. Like battle scars, these traces survive in the nervous, course lines of the image and betray the struggle of the artist against the resistance of the wood.

Even in Francis' etchings, which are among the subtlest of his works, the artist's hand finds ways to declare itself. This is especially so in the recent multi-panel etchings which are arranged as a kind of narrative sequence featuring the Nike figure and several abstract shapes. In these etchings traces of words (scratched like graffiti into the metal plate) and etching acid (splashed and dripped in various areas) emphasize the non-mechanistic nature of the etching process. Something similar is even found in many of Francis' artist books as well. When he uses his old letterpress, the kind which employ movable lead type and require the text to be assembled by hand and in reverse, the type actually creates a depression as it presses into the paper. Once again, process and material remain in the forefront of the work as a reminder of the maker and the physicality of material and process.

The sense of being there, of the artist actually being present in the work through material and process has serious implications in Francis's work. It is a way of physically and metaphorically locating oneself, of grounding oneself in the "here and now" represented by the work as object and as image. This may sound much like the Postmodern condition of living in a moment devoid of history, of living in a present suspended in a vacuum without a past or a future to shape it. For Francis this simply is not the case. The "here and now" seen through his work is a complex moment intentionally infused with history, myth, religion, geography; it is a moment that reverberates with a sense of wonder at the surrounding world and an appreciation of how life is actually lived as the leading edge of a long sequence of personal and historical events that shape it. In this sense it is totally opposite a one-dimensional way of understanding and being in the world.

A good example of this historical sense of being is the way a compass with all points marked South repeatedly surfaces in Francis' work. It is prominently featured in *Dixie Compass Book*, the etching *Dixie Compass/Nike Muse* (c. 2000), and numerous other works including paintings like *Compass/Nike* (1998). Obviously the compass refers to the South and as used in these works can be seen as a witty, humorous, even prideful reference to the artist's home region.⁶ The South is certainly that place from which Francis' work springs - stories and myths connected to the South are a rich vein that

he has consciously chosen to mine for many years.

However, as with most stories, the success is in the telling; what is embellished and where the inflection falls has much to do with the meaning created. Convinced that history is essential to any concept of place, the title *Dixie Compass* is subtly inflected to not only recall the South generally as a geographic and cultural place, but also to reference that old South of the Confederacy and slavery. As Francis himself tells it, when a slave was sold to a plantation farther south and deeper into the heart of Dixie, he or she had the feeling of despair, of being sold “down river” to a place farther from possible escape and freedom in the North. Thus what on the one hand seems a humorous curiosity or possibly a statement of Southern pride of place, also takes on a psychological dimension as a symbol of lost hope and a reminder of a particularly dark chapter in American history.

Francis is not about to romanticize the past. Just because history can be a heavy weight upon the psyche, a destructive force like a tornado, does not mean it should be dismissed as if it never occurred. The recurrent tornado motif in his works is meant as a reminder of the destructive events of history. But, like uncontrollable forces of nature from which we must re-build, even the weight of historical events can be counteracted. The tuning fork motif symbolizes harmony - both physical and psychic - and the funnel, in the way it echoes the shape of the tornado, becomes a device to channel energy for constructive ends.

What Francis seems to be implying with these symbols is that one needn't be trapped by history, by the past, or by geography. Our cultural background is not destiny; it doesn't fate us to a pre-ordained end. We can move forward and shape the “here and now” into a life of real, meaningful possibilities – the figure of Nike, as a muse of art and Western Civilization, represents the possibilities of the creative self to do this. But we can only do this if we have a sense of those conditions that have brought use to the point at which we find ourselves.

This brings us back to the issue of the layering of images in Francis' work. For him this device is anything but an attempt to empty images of meaning. It is an artistic means to bring us face-to-face with the complex psychological space of the human mind; it is an attempt to represent, to visualize the condition of living with and in history, with and in an awareness of our circumstances. From this point of view, his “injured figure” motif presents a mental image of our inner being underscoring the idea that our heads are filled with stuff – not just the Freudian stuff of sexual energy, but of history, feelings, thoughts, even memories that take the form of vivid images. Collectively, Francis' work can be seen as an attempt to represent that psychic landscape that is the mental space of the human mind; it is an attempt to show that while it is littered with trauma and pleasure, despair and hope, through the creative will anything is possible.

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, information about the artist comes from several interviews conducted in the last two years and a personal visit with Mark M. Johnson to the artist's Florida studio in early May of 2001.

² The clearest example of this way of layering images is to be seen in the work of New York artist David Salle beginning in the late 70s and early 80s.

³ If this seems farfetched, one has only to think how the overture to Rossini's opera *William Tell* has been wrenched from its historical and operatic context by being repeatedly played as the theme music for "The Lone Ranger" television series. If at all possible, it would take a tremendous amount of mental discipline to disassociate it from the Lone Ranger and re-insert it into its original context.

⁴ Kasimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematicism: The New Realism in Painting*, reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 169.

⁵ Piet Mondrian, *Neo-Plasticism: the General Principle of Plastic Equivalence*, reprinted in *Art in Theory*, p. 287.

⁶ According to Geraldine Prince, Director of the Centre for Continuing Studies at Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland, it is an "economical and witty device that indicates the centrality of the home state of his childhood and maturity, where all roads lead from the implied Rome of a wider world to a locale whose rich inheritance of language and culture can support the attempt to extract the epic, mythical and universal that underpins Francis' work."