

Fred Tomaselli Talks Back to the *Times*

BY *Alexa Lawrence*

Dazzling colors and swirling abstractions mix with weighty world politics in Fred Tomaselli's New York Times series

For his ongoing New York Times project, Fred Tomaselli has created something more stern and overtly political than the psychedelic abstractions and pill-adorned collages for which he is best known. The series is the subject of a new book published by Prestel, and a traveling exhibition scheduled to open at the University of Michigan Museum of Art in October 2014 and the Orange County Museum of Art in February 2015.

In a conversation at James Cohan Gallery before the closing of his recent solo show, Tomaselli explains how his morning routine of coffee and the newspaper, and his frustration with the state of the world, inspired the almost ritualistic body of work.



"I was thinking a lot about Miró's 'Constellation' drawings when I was making these," Tomaselli says, studying a New York Times front page onto which he has painted skyscraper-studded planets orbiting an orating Obama. "Those were done during World War II, and so Europe is burning and Miró is doing his most trippy and cosmic work. In a funny way, the quiet politics of that, to me, seems to be that the world is going to hell, but culture needs to happen. I need to make art."

Make art Tomaselli did. The *New York Times* series, begun in 2005, comprises over 80 individual works, each inspired by and featuring a scanned-and-printed front page of the *New York Times* onto which Tomaselli paints and collages mesmerizing patterns in pulsating palettes. "They have to speak to me," he says of the front pages he selects from his now extensive archive. "My only rule is that an original part of the photograph has to be in it and has to be placed within the frame of where it originally was. But sometimes hardly anything is left."

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Whether replacing Newt Gingrich with a cartoony circus animal or burying Bin Laden in a twisting sea of blues and greens, Tomaselli transforms these front pages of the “newspaper of record” into his own surrealist creations. Still, ever a collagist, he describes the series as a “collectivist enterprise.”

“In these interventions, I become another editor in this sort of hybrid mind of the news world. And, with the fact checkers, the writers, the photographers—there’s a lot of people—in some funny way I get to let them have their bylines.”

Yet it often seems as though the people named in the bylines are being implicated rather than credited; these works are in fact very critical political statements on news media—in particular the *New York Times*.

“The *Times*, more than any other paper, presents itself as this sort of objective reality,” explains Tomaselli, “but we all know that it is very subjective, that they choose to spotlight the things that they want you to see and ignore the other things they don’t think are important. And they piss me off sometimes!”



It is a frustration to which many can relate, even while admitting, as Tomaselli does, to reading that paper every day.

For Tomaselli, this love-hate relationship lead first to doodling, sometimes angrily, on the newspaper front pages over breakfast, and eventually to his full-blown collages. The *Times* series, he says “comes out of talking-back to this thing I have a relationship with that’s kind of dysfunctional.”

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

His retorts are often explicit: Republican presidential candidates are painted into red-eyed reptilian knots, while shots of political protest are amplified with shattering explosions of color.

But there are also scenes of snowfall in Central Park, and sunbathers in Stuyvesant Town. In these, the kaleidoscopic abstractions, ecstatic bursts of color, and trippy riffs on nature offer gentler messages. "I'm an Occupy Wall Street, lefty kind of guy," he concedes, "but my politics aren't underscored in every work. In some respects it's hard to locate the politics, I think. Sometimes it's just the absurdity of the world, or a completely formal intervention."



"What I really like about it," he says, "is that it keeps me off balance. I have to respond to the image for what it wants me to do, and I'm not quite sure what it wants me to do a lot of times, so I make a lot of false starts."

Occasionally he really surprises himself. "Sometimes I had no idea that the thing I wanted to see was the thing I ended up making."