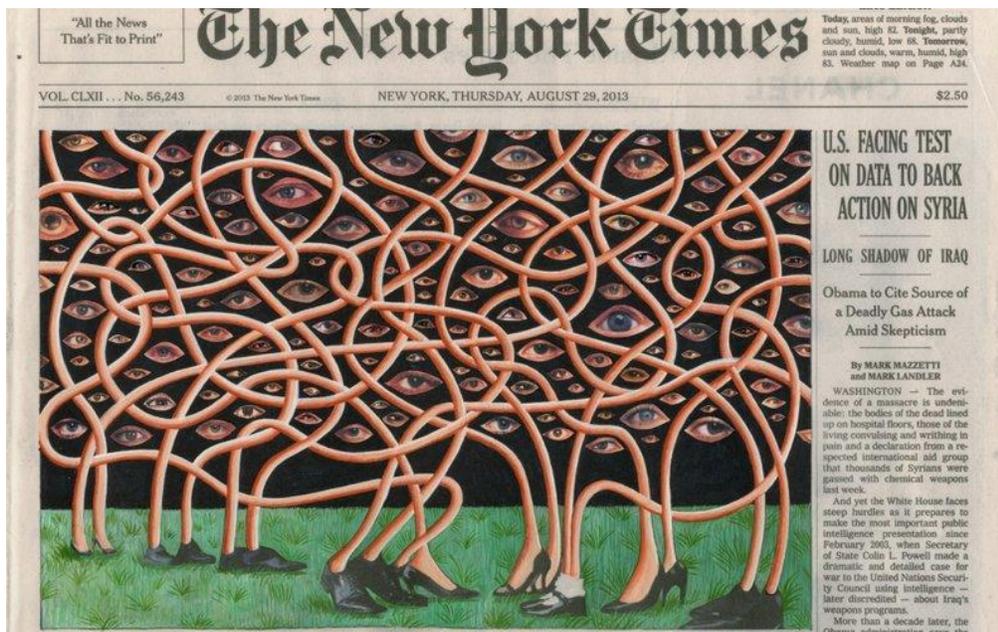


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THE DAILY BEAST



The Gray Lady Gets an Artistic Makeover

Artist Fred Tomaselli was so struck by the front-page image on The New York Times one Wednesday that he used it to create a new piece. Nine years later, his news series is still going.

On Wednesday, March 16, 2005, The New York Times front page read "Ex-Chief of WorldCom Is Found Guilty in \$11 Billion Fraud" and featured an accompanying photograph of Bernard J. Ebbers, the convicted CEO, and his wife, Kristie, leaving the Federal District Court House in New York City.

Like millions of others that day, New York-based artist Fred Tomaselli began his morning ritual, coffee in hand, of picking up his paper and reading the news. But, on this particular day, the artist couldn't help but be distracted by what he had seen.

Returning to the image again and again over the next few hours, Tomaselli felt that Ebbers's clutch on his wife's hand humanized him, and also evoked a resemblance to Italian Renaissance artist Massacio's depiction of Adam and Eve in *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. So, he did what many other artists would do when something keeps drawing them in—he sat down and started manipulating the image.

"I was dealing with empathy for a villainous person because there was this humanity coming through," Tomaselli told The Daily Beast. "I couldn't reconcile those feelings." He added layers

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of different shapes onto the photo, until an explosion of color erupted from Ebbers's face and out into the background.

From then on, headlines of natural disasters, economic turmoil, war, and political scandals continued to appear at Tomaselli's front door. Each image printed on the front page gave him more and more inspiration for his spontaneous project that evolved into a series of works titled *The Times*, which is currently on display at James Cohan Gallery in New York City.

Tomaselli, 57, is a spawn of sunny Orange, California—something you wouldn't immediately recognize given his edgier East Coast persona. After graduating from California State University at Fullerton in the early 1980s, he moved to downtown Los Angeles and began to cement his place in the art world. The three decades that he spent in Southern California resulted in a lifetime of influence on his future work. "I had some real seminal experiences in [California] ... I was a weird kid and it was a weird place and it just fit."

But his move to New York in 1985 was when he began to recognize the effect his time on the West Coast had on his artist practices.

"When I came to New York, it started to occur to me how weird L.A. was. Just to have some perspective with a kind of an older kind of culture that was based on ethnic tribalism in different neighborhoods—that just didn't seem to be what was happening in L.A. I mean, you had these large sectors of hyper segregated areas like South Central and East L.A. and Westside, which are huge areas of monocultures, but in New York it's a lot more mixed up and I really responded to that."

The works that Tomaselli became predominantly known for were his large-scale resin pieces inlaid with prescription pills and plants (including marijuana and hallucinogens). "For me, having grown up in this sort of 'land of the unreal' and culture of escapism seemed really germane to the shape we were in. My work was an attempt to explore that, and I used drugs to talk about the manipulability of reality." Because of this, Tomaselli was quickly labeled the "drug guy" as an artist.

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Nov. 19, 2013, 2014 (Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai)

The label stuck so hard that it was all anyone wanted to discuss with him. So, in 2005, he decided to take the vast majority of psychotropic substances and prescription pills out of his work. “My interests have always been more towards perception. I try to create a multiplicity of experiences within the works so that I can hit the viewer on a variety of levels. I guess one of the reasons I took the drugs out of the work is because that’s all people talked about.”

It just so happened that Tomaselli’s rebellion from the materials he came to be known for coincided with the depiction of Ebbbers on the front page of The New York Times. Thus, his new series, *The Times*, was born, and has lasted almost a decade.

“They keep me off balance because I have to respond to the specificity of the image and to its context of the surrounding news. So each one kind of has to be dealt with somewhat differently and ... I have to respond to the specificity of the particular images.”

In *December 27, 2012*, the front page featured a piece on the changes in electronic factories in China. After Tomaselli finished altering, re-shaping, and layering the cover image, the original photo of an assembly line at a Hewlett-Packard plant in Chongqing no longer showed hardware and microchips being pieced together. Instead, slightly mangled bodies of injured soldiers and citizens appeared, slowly being put back together.

Not all of Tomaselli’s works are this gruesome. The cover story on *October 4, 2009* dealt with an outbreak of E. Coli in ground beef—a flaw in the inspection system left 22-year-old Stephanie Smith (who appeared in the front-page photograph) comatose for nine weeks and paralyzed for

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the rest of her life. The image published in the *Time* showed Smith, photographed from above, lying on a quilted bed while a nurse helped pose her body. Tomaselli's interpretation of the photo resulted in a pixelated pool of various color squares covering the majority of her face and body, leaving only her hands crossed over her stomach visible.



Penetrators (Large), 2012 (Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai)

“There’s something jewel-like, a transformational thing that’s occurring,” Tomaselli says of the photo in *Fred Tomaselli: The Times*, out later this month. “I think it’s actually one of the prettier ones I’ve made. And I do feel that by occluding her face in that percolation of color, by not having the eyes—her eyes, her face—I’ve removed that element of voyeurism, of being entertained by the suffering of others. Which I really try to avoid, except when they deserve it.”

Such was the case for Bernie Madoff. When the news of Madoff’s Ponzi scheme continued to make international headlines on December 18, 2008, Tomaselli took the facial profile of Madoff that appeared on the front page and completely transformed the financier into a collage of gemstones and jewels with a multiplicity of eyes shooting across the picture plane. Teardrops flow between the eyes as a flame emanates from the outline of his body.

“With him, I was somewhat less generous, I suppose. I remember somebody saying that Bernie Madoff was a sociopath who couldn’t cry. And I decided that I was going to make him cry—with a vengeance. So, I turned him into a real weeper. I was having fun at his expense.”

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Maybe Tomaselli's interventions on the front pages are just "one more editorial decision in an army of editors"? Maybe he is just "shooting the messenger"? Whatever the case, his New York Times series comments on our current and past global culture and forces viewers to reflect on each major event, while also serving as a time capsule for future generations.

Fred Tomaselli: *Current Events* is on display at James Cohan Gallery, 533 West 26th Street, in New York City until June 14. In conjunction, a new publication, Fred Tomaselli: *The Times* (Prestel, May 2014) will be available for purchase later this month.