

ASPEN, CO

Fred Tomaselli

ASPEN ART MUSEUM

The buzz around Fred Tomaselli's meticulous painting-collage hybrids frequently centers on the work's more loaded materialsephedrine, aspirin, saccharine, an assortment of brand-name pharmaceuticals, marijuana, and other psychoactive plants-which Tomaselli assembles into kaleidoscopic patterns and scenes; looking at his pictures, one might infer that "using" a drug as a raw material should constitute or symbolize "being on drugs." Although he is acutely interested in depicting altered and alternate perceptual experience, Tomaselli has also employed these substances (or rather a simple reference to them) to surprisingly lucid or even sober ends. By foregrounding such lesser-known efforts, the artist's recent midcareer survey, curated by Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson and organized by the Aspen Art Museum with the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York, effectively demonstrated the depth and complexity of Tomaselli's practice of the past two decades.

Among the forty-one works in the show—which included twentyeight of the artist's dazzling large-scale panel paintings-were three understated black-and-white photograms, all produced in 1995, that exemplified the artist's most restrained representations. Relying on astrology and the fallible logic of memory, Tomaselli rendered these nonfigurative portraits by carefully placing pills on photo paper to resemble the constellations visible in the sky at the time of the sitter's birth. After exposing the arrangements to light, he named each pill's resulting imprint according to substances the subject could remember ingesting. Accordingly, Portrait of Laura (a "likeness" of the artist's wife) depicts the stars in the sign of Sagittarius with words like CHOCO-LATE, COCAINE, VALIUM, and PEPTO BISMAL written next to each white. astral spot. At once esoteric and arrantly candid, these simple, systemically generated portraits attempt to quantify an individual or person-

ality through confessional recollections. And unlike Tomaselli's acclaimed eyecandy paintings, they bluntly employ language (versus contraband), or rather the act of nomination, to subversive ends. The idea of using language, and its rigid semiotic systems, to unsettle meaning was also present in a later series of collages that, camouflaged in the basic composition of charts from ornithological field guides, presented bird bodies fashioned from images of jackets clipped from catalogue pages.

Order Passeriformes Families Chloropseidae, Irenidae, Laniidai, Pityriasididae, 2004, for example, toys with the rationalist impulse to name and classify the world in order to understand its otherwise abstract beings.

In many ways, Tomaselli's survey was also organized with taxonomic approach. While the museum's downstairs galleries featured his most notable figurative paintings-lithe bodies laced with features composed, Arcimboldo-like, from butterflies, bugs, plants, and paint—the upstairs galleries exhibited the artist's cosmically patterned abstract compositions, with a small room dedicated to his photograms.

Fred Tomaselli. Portrait of Laura. 1995, Prismacolor on photogram, 16 x 20".

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One cannot discount the fascination with Tomaselli's illicit materials; perhaps their multiple meanings are easier to swallow when carefully categorized, as they were here. As organic and political entities, drugs exist both inside social control (by the government, pharmaceutical companies, religions) and outside the law (through experimentation, abuse, and the black market). That Tomaselli's practice conjures both these extremes simply through his choice of materials is significant. We must remember, however, that his images are not staked on political discourse—a utopian imagining—but rather on dreamy impressions of the world around us. And as Avital Ronell reminds us in her brilliant philosophical text *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (1992), "Drugs, it turns out, are not so much about seeking an exterior, transcendental dimension—a fourth or fifth dimension—rather, they explore *fractal interiorities.*" This might serve as one practical interpretation of Tomaselli's art as well.

-Catherine Taft

