



MAY 2010

ART+ AUCTION

CULTURE+TRAVEL WHEN IN SYDNEY

94 Where to stay and eat and what to see while you're in town for the Biennale. EXCERPTED FROM INDAGARE.COM

DEPARTMENTS

DATEBOOK

35 This month's cultural agenda: The people and events on our radar.

IN THE STUDIO

54 Fred Tomaselli's meticulous work is a mind trip. BY MEGHAN DAILEY

SOUREN MELIKIAN

65 The ever-expanding TEFAF offered important and rare discoveries.

MARKETFILE

103 Artist Dossier: Bridget Riley
107 Jori Finkel
110 New York Sales Preview
114 Auction Reviews
120 The Connoisseur

The poster Fred Tomaselli in his Brooklyn studio. Photograph by Christopher Sturman. See page 54.

IN THE
STUDIO



FRED TOMASELLI

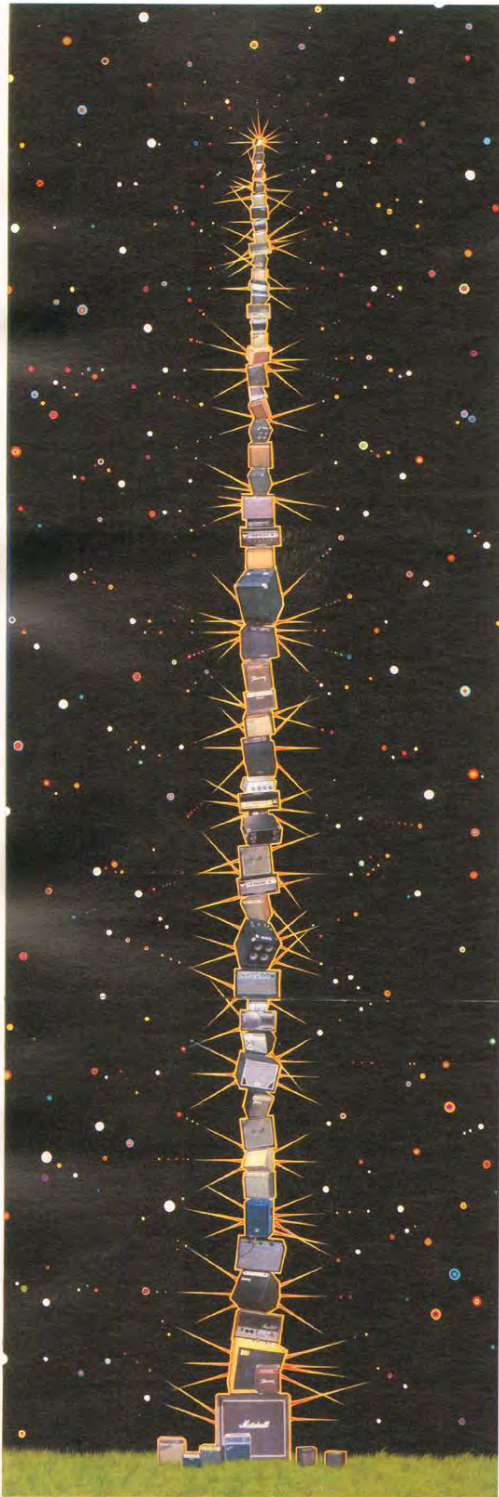
ART+AUCTION MAY 2010 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM



55

Above: Fred
Tomaselli's
Woodpecker, 2009.
Opposite: The artist in
his Brooklyn studio.

THE ARTIST'S OBSESSIVELY DETAILED, KALEIDOSCOPIC
PAINTINGS CREATE WINDOWS TO ANOTHER REALITY.
BY MEGHAN DAILEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER STURMAN



Stack, 2009, incorporates small cutout images of amplifiers. Tomaselli combines real, photographed, and painted elements in works that reference everything from Dutch still lifes to the punk-music scene of his youth.

BEFORE HE TALKS ABOUT HIS ART, FRED TOMASELLI

wants to tell me about a new book he's been reading. "Have you heard of *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, by David Shields? It's all about the age of the copy." In his aphoristic text, Shields suggests that the real is found not in the airtight solipsism of the contemporary novel but in messier, crossbred works derived from the chorus of what Tomaselli calls "the collective commons." It's no surprise that Tomaselli would be drawn to such a polemic because he considers his hybrid painting-collages, for which he uses the Internet as an image source, "as invariably a collective endeavor."

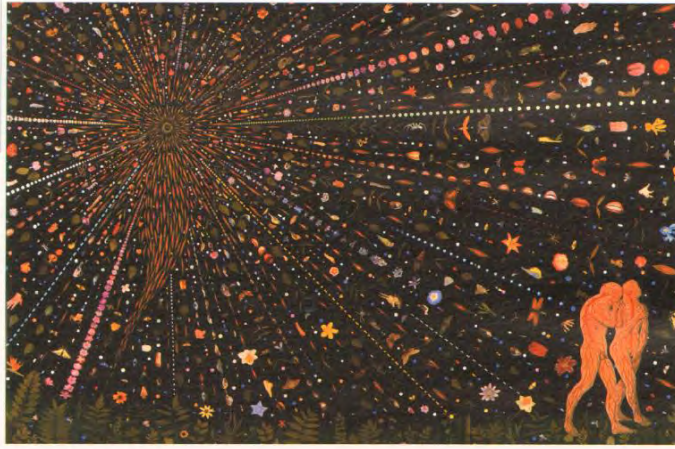
As it happens, Shields is a friend and also a contributor to the catalogue for Tomaselli's current midcareer survey. Organized by the Aspen Art Museum, in Colorado, and the Frances Young Tang Teaching and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, New York, where it is on view through June 6, the show presents the evolution of Tomaselli's oeuvre, in which the real, the photographic, and the painterly cohere into vivid kaleidoscopic landscapes, figures, and abstractions. Embedded in a thick layer of clear resin, like scientific specimens or holy relics, are recognizable objects and images: birds; human eyes, lips, and hands; actual leaves, flowers, and psychoactive plants; and assorted pills, ranging from the benignly curative (aspirin, Roloids) to the controlled (amphetamines, marijuana). He loves throwing all these things together and invoking their associated mythologies. "My paintings are vehicles to take you to other places," he says.

His is an obsessive corpus in which Catholic iconography mingles with abundant art historical references—17th-century Dutch still lifes, Tibetan *thangkas*, Arcimboldo's portraits constructed of flora and fauna—all of which collide with personal references to the drug and punk-music scene of Tomaselli's youth in Southern California. One picture in his studio, *Stack*, 2009, depicts a pillar—composed of small cutouts of amplifiers, like found sculptures from concerts, radiating light or sound—that suggests personal totems and can be read, he says, as the Tower of Babel: "I'm channeling in as much of my interests as possible. There are a lot of things in there that people don't think should be together."

He plans to include *Stack* in the third and final appearance of his survey show, at the Brooklyn Museum, where it arrives on October 8. It will be a homecoming. Tomaselli, 53, has lived in the Williamsburg section of the borough since 1985, putting down stakes long before the neighborhood became a magnet for recent art-school grads seeking cheap rents (now a lost commodity). Although lately he's been considering upgrading to a bigger and brighter space, he has kept the same modest studio for much of his time here. "I don't like change," he admits. "I'm such a methodical person, so the chaos of moving 20 years of stuff freaks me out." Besides, the present location is just a 15-minute walk from the house he »

ART+AUCTION MAY 2010 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM

IN THE STUDIO



shares with his wife, a writer, and their 12-year-old son.

Tomaselli is dressed in what one suspects is a uniform: black T-shirt and sweater with dark cords and bright green New Balance sneakers. He is affable and open and often amusingly deadpan about his past—"My work references my own history of substance abuse." Only a few pictures hang on the walls. He explains that he has just sent selected pieces to Sydney for the 17th Biennale, opening May 12, and that others are about to go to Switzerland for a summerlong show at the Kunstmuseum Thun.

Besides serving as a workspace, the studio is his materials archive. Several drawers are stuffed with plastic bottles of yellowing pills and expired capsules. Shelves lining a section of one wall hold notebooks containing transparent envelopes that store cutouts—of eyes, sorted by size, color, and species; of lips and hands; of mushrooms, gemstones, and butterflies—as well as specimens of real vegetation: pea pods, roses, chrysanthemums, and pot leaves, much of which he grew himself. A bird watcher, he's fascinated by what he calls the "Darwinian struggle for survival" demonstrated by the birds in his backyard, who devour everything. His painting *Migrant Fruit Thugs*, 2006, refers to the avian marauders of a beloved fig tree. "The shape of nature is a very real thing for me," he says.

It wasn't always quite that way. Tomaselli grew up in Orange County, California, in the shadow of Disneyland. His Swiss mother and Italian father, both recent immigrants, raised six kids in a typical working-class neighborhood of the early '60s: tracts of neat stucco homes interspersed with well-ordered commercial citrus groves. Nature may have been close by, but "the hand of man was all over it," Tomaselli says. He recalls insecticide-spraying trucks driving by as he and his friends played in the street. And he shares another, often told anecdote: At age 14 he was on a hike with his friends and saw, for the first time, an actual waterfall. He did not believe it was real. "I was under the impression that people made them for their own amusement. I thought, 'Are there pumps running this thing?'" I started looking for a conduit. It was like Thomas putting his hands in the wounds of Jesus."

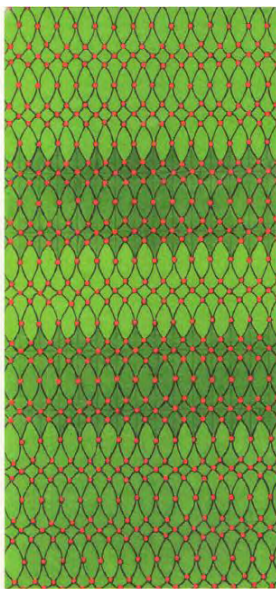
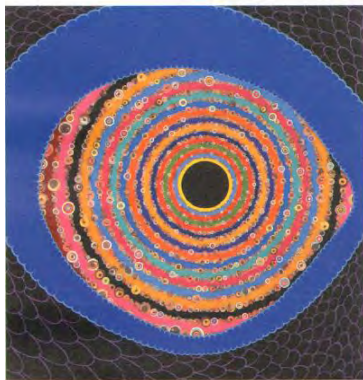
"The shape of nature is a very real thing for me," says Tomaselli. Clockwise from above: *Untitled (Expansion)*, 2000, directly references Masaccio's famous 15th-century fresco; in the studio, Tomaselli looks at images of birds' eyes, downloaded from the Web, that will make their way into his work; and *Tower of Peace Towers*, 2008.



Tomaselli brings that same skeptical, inquisitive attitude to art. He majored in the subject at Cal State Fullerton. "Most of the teachers were alcoholic Minimalists," he says, but concedes that "a couple of them were great, like Eileen Cowin," the photographer, whom he credits with "opening up my head a little bit, allowing me to think about what art meant and how it functioned." By the time he graduated and moved to downtown L.A., in the late '70s, he was acquainted with new media and performance art. Chris Burden and Bruce Nauman made a big impact, he says, and James Turrell "blew my mind."

It was a heady time. Modernism was dying, and "the hippie dream was ending in disco and cocaine," he notes. "Both were rubble-strewn landscapes that I had to wade through." He abandoned painting "because of the burden of history." »

IN THE STUDIO



60

Clockwise from top left: *Eye*, 2009; *Odalisque*, 1992, employing red Sudanese tablets in its pattern; *Guilty*, 2005, the first of an ongoing series of prints Tomaselli creates using front-page images from the *New York Times*; and the artist applying elements to form owl eyes on a painting in progress.

The New York Times

OL. CLIV. No. 8155 NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 2005

Ex-Chief of WorldCom Is Found Guilty in \$11 Billion Fraud

Ebbers Has Become Highest Executive to Be Convicted

By Ken Belson

Bernard J. Ebbers, the former head of WorldCom, was convicted of conspiring to defraud investors of more than \$11 billion in the largest securities fraud in U.S. history. The conviction, announced in federal court yesterday, is the highest level of conviction for a former chief executive of a public company since the passage of laws in 2002 that tightened the rules for information disclosure to investors. The conviction also marks the first time a former chief executive of a public company has been convicted of a crime involving securities fraud. The conviction is the first of a series of convictions for former executives of WorldCom, which filed for bankruptcy protection in 2002. The conviction is the first of a series of convictions for former executives of WorldCom, which filed for bankruptcy protection in 2002. The conviction is the first of a series of convictions for former executives of WorldCom, which filed for bankruptcy protection in 2002.



Bernard J. Ebbers and his wife, Krista, left Federal District Court in New York yesterday after he was convicted of securities fraud, conspiracy and other crimes of filing false reports with regulators.



BEHIND THE SLICK, ALMOST INDUSTRIAL SURFACES, EVERYTHING IS HANDMADE AND THE PAINTERLY TOUCH IS EVIDENT.

Instead he created installations that commented on escapist culture by simulating the conditions of theme parks; having a viewer enter a darkened space and navigate corridors to exit, for instance. He began to realize that what he was doing—creating points of access to another reality—linked to the tradition of painting. Before long he began making pictures again.

Each of Tomaselli's panels is a psychoactive event. Initially, he required that the pills he incorporated be consciousness-altering, but he realized that objects acquire this attribute once they become part of the artwork anyway: By arranging them in unfamiliar contexts, he transforms viewers' perception. Behind the slick, almost industrial surfaces, everything is laboriously handmade, and the painterly touch is evident. This is particularly true in recent works, such as the 2009 *Woodpecker* and *Big Raven*, with their scumbled backgrounds and abstract flourishes. Paint is applied on top of the resin layer as well as beneath it, producing a depth difficult to capture in a mere reproduction.

Because he completes just two or three big paintings a year, his gallery shows tend to be widely spaced in time. (His longtime dealer in New York is James Cohan; he also exhibits in London with White Cube.) This is partly why he's turned to printmaking, which enables him to get his ideas out into the world more quickly. His prints are based on front-page photos from the *New York Times*—post-Katrina New Orleans; U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. "I don't think of these works as really political," he says, "but there's the buzz of the world in there." The first print he did, *Guilty*, 2005, riffs on a photo of Bernie Ebbers, the disgraced WorldCom CEO, grasping his wife's hand after being found guilty of an \$11 billion securities fraud. Tomaselli was obsessed by the image: "Despite how horrific the guy was, there's something very human about the way they're clutching hands," he says. It also reminded him of Adam and Eve's banishment from paradise, a subject he had treated in a spectacular large-scale painting from 2000.

Tomaselli is hoping to finish a picture of an owl in time for the Brooklyn Museum show. It is under way in his studio, where his assistant is busy cutting out images of birds' eyes, downloaded from the Web and printed on sheets of archival paper. Tomaselli will apply these to the panel to form the eyes, which are the exact size of vinyl records. "I was thinking about the sounds that owls make at night," he says.

As the show is traveling, he's been able to reflect a bit. "I could not have imagined in 1990 that I'd be doing this kind of work," he says. "I'm happy that I found ways to go that I never could have anticipated. But seeing 20 years of work is making me feel like I need to push it someplace else." ▣

ART+AUCTION MAY 2010 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM