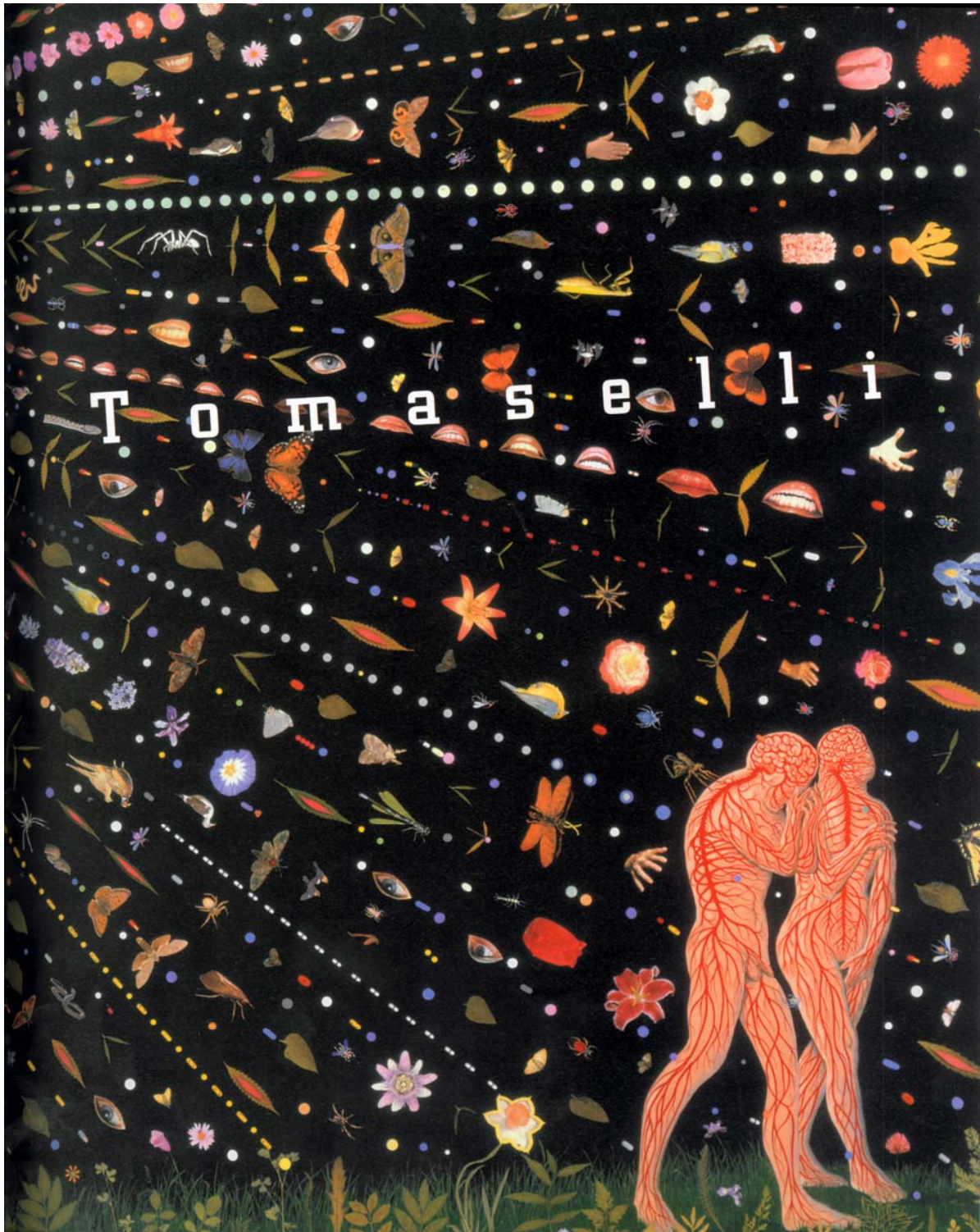


PARKETT



Fred Tomaselli

Through a Window, *Darkly*

DAN CAMERON

One of the most persistent challenges in the history of human society has been the struggle to determine our proper place in the natural order of things. Starting with the Romantic movement in art and poetry in the eighteenth century, the association of creative expression with the unbridled forces of nature became a convenient metaphor, but one that explained very little about the ultimate separation that has befallen humankind since the expulsion from paradise. Throughout the art of the twentieth century, nature is perhaps most conspicuous in her absence, since the most significant artistic movements, such as Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, unfolded in a way that made the outer world seem entirely barren and/or hostile. At the present moment, with the suburban mode of contemporary life now surpassing that of both urban and rural existence, it sometimes seems that all of our scientific and technological achievements have been attained at the cost of transforming our experience of the natural world into a kind of well-behaved topiary display of trimmed hedges and electrocuted mosquitoes. For those

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whose contact with nature is somewhat more direct or at least regulated, the challenge still exists of reconciling everything we know (or don't know) in the postmodern universe with the knowledge that nature is still out there somewhere, and that we are, for better or worse, a part of it.

A painting by Fred Tomaselli usually requires a form of examination that is part aesthetic appreciation and part scavenger hunt. Quite often, the initial encounter involves a purely retinal response to a composition that is easily grasped in a single glance, and heightened by an equally direct approach to color and form. The clarity of his images also seems to point to an engagement with the viewer that sets aside the need for specialization, preferring to communicate across generational and class divisions like few other artists working today. His use of black as background color for virtually all of his paintings also enhances the tendency of his colors and forms to pop out of the background quite vividly. Not until this first impression of total clarity has passed does the necessity of examining the painting more closely present itself, at which point the highly unusual choice and application of materials in Tomaselli's work begin to set out the parameters for a second level of interaction.

While Tomaselli is unquestionably an artist driven by the populist desire to present imagery in its most

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FRED TOMASELLI, OCOTILLO NOCTURNE, 1993, leaves, pills, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 72 x 54" / Blätter, Pillen, Acryl und Harz auf Holzpaneel, 182,9 x 137,2 cm. (PHOTO: JOHN BERENS)



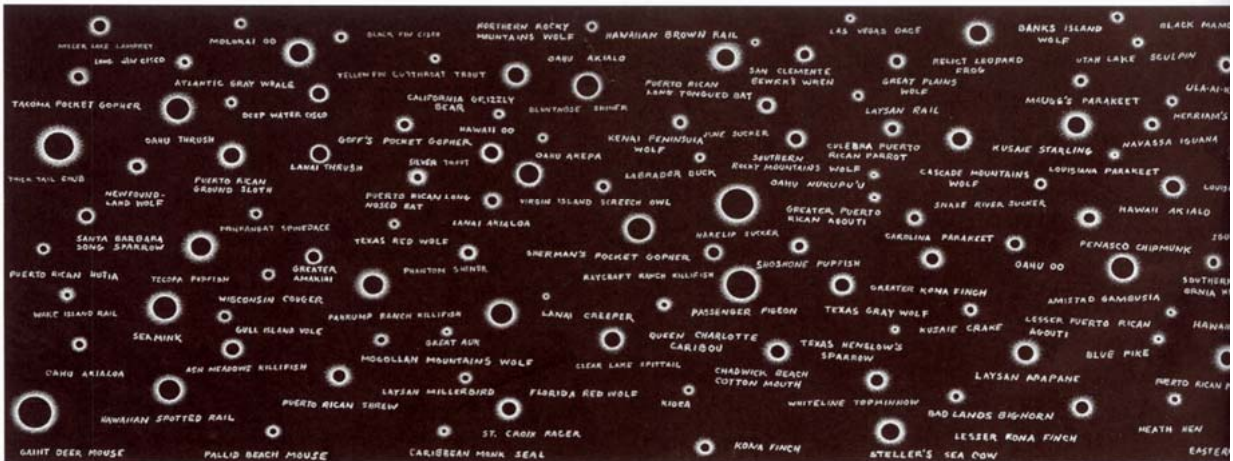
Fred Tomaselli

recognizable form, he is also at heart an assemblag-
 ist, one who eschews the invention of form in favor of
 its laborious construction from pre-existing parts. He
 is generally referred to as a painter in the traditional
 sense of the word, but it is difficult to reconcile his-
 torically sanctioned notions of studio practice with
 Tomaselli's laborious method of developing form,
 since, generally speaking, he does not usually paint
 the imagery that populates his pictures. Instead,
 the works are created through an elaborate tech-
 nique involving the painstaking arrangement of hun-
 dreds (sometimes thousands) of individual elements
 within the picture plane, then holding them perman-
 ently in place through an adroit combination of
 acrylic and resin. It may be closer to collage or furni-
 ture inlay than to easel painting as it is generally un-
 derstood, but Tomaselli's combination of ephemeral
 and highly durable materials, including a sturdy
 wood armature, lends them a durable physical
 presence.

Being embedded seems to be the first material
 condition of Fred Tomaselli's paintings. The sinuous
 lines that play themselves out into graceful arrange-

ments of color and texture could not exist without
 the picture's physical depth, which enables the myr-
 iad individual elements in each picture to float in
 what is subliminally experienced as a kind of amber,
 where they may be seen but not touched. In the
 transparent grip of these bonding forces, they re-
 semble nothing so much as the miniscule treasures
 of a particularly impassioned collector of natural ar-
 tifacts, one who cannot resist the impulse to dupli-
 cate nature's infinite abundance through a kind of
 deliberate iconographic overkill. Yet Tomaselli's ten-
 dency to lock inanimate forms into a frozen transpa-
 rency is also a direct reference to nature's own
 methods of preserving forms over time, so that one
 cannot help but think of fossils pressed into rocks or
 specimens frozen into glaciers, where they may re-
 main undisturbed for centuries.

Through choice of subject matter alone, Fred
 Tomaselli can be readily identified as one of the
 more recent incarnations of a spirit in American
 painting that has long been closely engaged with the
 furthest reaches of geographical and spiritual explo-
 ration. Born and raised in southern California,

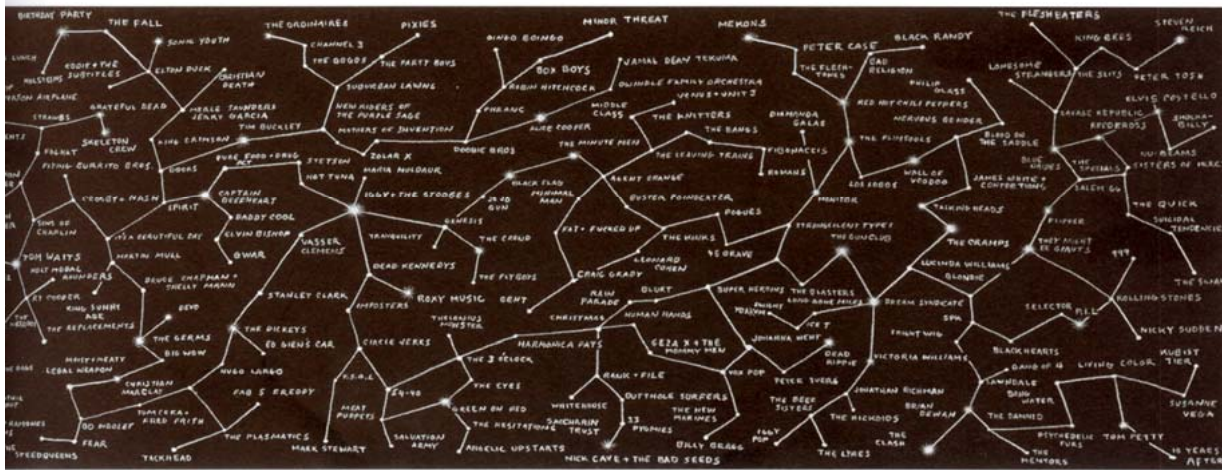


Fred Tomaselli

Tomaselli's art developed in large part out of the post-adolescent urge to derive cosmic meanings from the direct experience of nature. In one sense, all of his works function as landscape, but an early Surrealist influence deflected his powers of observation away from the need to objectively describe the landscape, and inspired him to try to reconstruct the experience of being part of the landscape in pictorial form. This challenge does not differ significantly from those faced by maverick artists like Gordon Onslow Ford and Lee Mullican, Surrealists of the desert landscape who, from the late thirties through the fifties, carried André Breton's legacy into the phantasmagorical territory pioneered in the twenties by Georgia O'Keeffe. Seeking to render the powerful impressions of the desert into tangible artistic forms, they created new forms of abstraction that blended primitivist iconography with intricately patterned fields of blinding color. Like them, Tomaselli's appropriation of the Southwest landscape as a reference point that reappears in various guises signals a desire to present the familiar in a completely surprising way.

Most of Tomaselli's best-known works are immediately recognizable as emerging directly from a first-hand experience of nature. However, some of his paintings from the early nineties are probably better described as landscapes of memory, in which he sets out to render experiences like rock concerts or psychotropic drug use in the form of a cosmic map, linking apparently unrelated events and substances into a celestial manifold of names. These may at first seem unrelated to the more recognizable landscapes, except insofar as they specify Tomaselli's rightful subject as the experience of the individual consciousness, whether verifiable or not. In addition, Tomaselli has rendered these works as celestial maps, so that the act of searching the nighttime sky for recognizable points becomes a metaphor for a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. This strong emphasis on subjectivity sheds light on the degree to which the later paintings, however easily identifiable, are nonetheless bound by an imperative to represent nature not as it exists, but as it appears to be.

One of the most reliable aspects of Tomaselli's art has been the incorporation of actual drugs into the



FRED TOMASELLI, EVERY ROCK BAND I CAN REMEMBER SEEING, EVERY VERTEBRATE THAT HAS BECOME EXTINCT SINCE 1492, 1990, Prismacolor pencil on Canson paper, 9 3/4 x 50" / JEDE ROCKBAND, DIE ICH MICH ERINNERE GESEHEN ZU HABEN, JEDES WIRBELTIER, DAS SEIT 1492 AUSGESTORBEN IST, Prismacolor-Farbstift auf Canson-Papier, 24,8 x 127 cm. (PHOTO: ERMA ESTWICK)

Fred Tomaselli

physical matter of the painting itself. In many works from the mid nineties, this gesture takes the form of an accumulation of marijuana leaves, arranged to suggest everything from brain waves to flocking birds. Equally prominent in the work up through the present has been a numbing variety of pharmaceutical drugs, deployed as much for their size and color as for their medical attributes. However, these pills and capsules, which are generally arranged to describe sweeping arcs or dense clusters of form, also emphasize the direct link between the viewer's state of mind and the landscape experience. While at first seeming to promote the recreational use of mind-altering substances, the pot and pill references have a more innocent aspect as well, which is to remind viewers that the only obstacle between them and a transcendental experience of nature is their state of mind. We literally peer through our state of mind to perceive the nature outside ourselves, and the greater our understanding of the role played by this filtering process, the richer our interchange becomes. One can even extrapolate a bit further, to propose that since the call to nature is in effect an expression of the desire for a type of mind-altering experience, the goal of feeling unified with one's

natural environment is itself a form of mental construction, one that in fact requires neither drugs nor landscape to be realized.

Fred Tomaselli's ability to simultaneously transform our expectations of both landscape and abstraction has placed his work at the forefront of contemporary painting. To the degree that it deliberately embodies the confusion and anxiety surrounding our role within nature, his art seems to address a particularly troubled aspect of our age. Does our tendency to conceptualize our perceptions, to habitually transform the most sublime moments into episodes of language, indicate that we have drifted further from our origins than anticipated, or that we are still, somehow, occupants of that same natural order that we have repeatedly tried to escape and/or dominate with our apparently insurmountable will? By raising such questions not in order to answer them, but to benefit from their asking, Tomaselli probes our deepest spiritual yearnings in a direct and unabashed way. In a sense, he seems to understand that a painting is nothing more than a stand-in for that same nighttime sky that he stood beneath as a child, filled with wonderment at the inexplicable miracle of perception.



FRED TOMASELLI, PORTRAIT OF FRANK AND DAVE, 1996, Prismatic pencil on unique photograph, 20 x 33" / PORTRÄT VON FRANK UND DAVE, Prismatic-Farbstift auf Photograph (Unikat), 50,8 x 83,8 cm.