

# TIME FLIES

A conversation with  
Max Ferguson



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# SOUL MAN

## A CONVERSATION WITH MAX FERGUSON

Max Ferguson is a 52-year-old painter who is well known for his eerily realistic paintings that often feature older individuals in settings of a vanishing New York: a doll hospital, an old-fashioned barber shop, a used book store, or a small family-run clock repair shop. Ferguson is obsessed with trying to capture and preserve these rapidly disappearing views of craftsmen at work before they have vanished completely from the world, and admits that he is in a losing race against time.

Often categorized as a “photo-realist,” Ferguson disavows the designation. Unlike traditional photo-realists whose work is created through the projection of a single photographic image onto canvas to be faithfully rendered, Ferguson’s paintings evolve out of several photographic studies of locations and models that the artist then composes into a single, usually small-scale, painting. The works are evocative, nostalgic, and affecting, and have been compared to a marriage of Vermeer and Hopper.

“Technique minus soul equals zero,” Ferguson has said. His paintings are rich in both. Each work takes many months to complete through a complex “old-masterly” technique of building layer upon layer of color and detail, using a tiny brush designed for watercolor painting. Ferguson was highly influenced by the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch masters, which he first encountered as an undergraduate while a visiting student in Holland, and he has adopted a style similar to the Dutch school of painting that focuses on faithfully capturing minute detail.

Max Ferguson’s painting *Time* is part of the Crystal Bridges collection and was included in the inaugural exhibition *Wonder World*. While most of his paintings are quite small by contemporary standards, *Time*, at 36 x 36 inches, is for him quite a large painting. It took seven months to complete, and has a particularly fascinating story. In an essay he wrote about the painting, Ferguson describes what he later learned about the model.



Knud Christiansen in Denmark, circa 1940, and as depicted in Max Ferguson's *Time*, 2006.

*As it turned out, his name was Knud Maastrand Christiansen. He had been a member of the Danish rowing team in the infamous 1936 Olympics in Berlin. In 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark, when word got out that Germany was about to round up all its Jewish citizens for deportation to concentration camps, many Danes worked to transport all the Jews on boats to Sweden. Not only was Mr. Christiansen one of those who literally rowed people to safety in Sweden, but he and his wife were the main organizers of the effort. Thousands of people owed their lives to him and his wife. When I found this out, I could not stop shaking his hand.*

The backs of Ferguson's paintings have garnered nearly as much attention recently as the fronts. Obsessed with ensuring the longevity of his work, Ferguson at one time began making careful notes on the backs of the paintings as to his materials and technique, as a sort of guide book for future conservators. Over time, however, the backs have evolved into something much more personal. Part collage, part stream-of-consciousness hastily scrawled in black Sharpie, the backs include everything from scraps of food packages to receipts, photographs, news clippings, snippets of song lyrics, and musings. *Time* is no exception. You can view the back of this painting on the inside front cover of this issue of *C*.

Ferguson divides his time between New York City, where he grew up, and Israel, where he now lives with his wife and three young children.

**I've read that you identify with the craftsmen who are pictured in some of your paintings of shops in New York because they take such pride in their work. Do you feel craftsmanship is disappearing in contemporary art?**

Unfortunately, yes. It's somewhere between disappearing and disappeared. I believe everything sort of began falling apart in terms of craftsmanship—with painting anyway—around the time the whole guild system broke down and the apprenticeship system disappeared. Look, the simple truth is this: painting is a craft, a science, an art; it's many things. And most of my contemporaries really know remarkably little about the craft and science aspect of it. Unfortunately the result is, you have 500-year-old Van Eycks which are in pristine condition and 20-year-old paintings which are cracking and flaking and falling apart because the artists don't know what they're doing.

**I understand that your career path was changed by your exposure to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. What is it about the Dutch Old Masters that so captured your imagination?**

First of all I happened to be in Holland at the time I was getting interested in painting, so that helped. It was partially the technique—just the detail and the technical virtuosity. But more to the point, I think it was the subject matter, because what appealed to me tremendously was the everyday aspect of it and this idea of taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary, taking the mundane and giving it a sort of holy quality, and also that I could simply relate to it. They used women working in kitchens, or craftsmen at work vs. say, the Italian masters where it tended to be more Biblical, celestial images—which were nice, and I could admire on one level, but they weren't things I was seeing every day.



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**With so much detail in your paintings, how do you know when a work is done?**

It's a problem... because the nature of oil painting is that you can, in theory, work on one painting for the rest of your life. You can just keep improving or adding details or adding layers and finessing. So usually I get to the point where I just feel like I've gotten as good as ... I can live with it. To be honest, I've yet to do a painting that I'm 100 percent satisfied with. Usually when I look at my work I tend to see things that I feel could have been better. I get to the point where it's finished and I can live with it, but then again I could in theory spend the next fifty years working on one painting.

**How do you select your models?**

Generally speaking [they are] family members and friends, but sometimes strangers. Sometimes I get very lucky and the right person happens to be in the right place. For example, originally I was going to use the son of the model in *Time*, and then I thought perhaps an older man might work better, and he had mentioned that his father had just retired. I had no idea what he would look like and he just happened to be the perfect person for that painting.

**I know people have said they relate to your paintings, even if they've never experienced anything like them directly. Why do you think these paintings of bygone places appeal to people ... even if they have never seen them, or are too young to remember them?**

I think it's partially the images. Look, ultimately what I'm going for ... I'm going for many things, but one of the goals is a sort of timelessness, a sense of universality. For me what's most important is simply striking a common chord with people from an emotional, psychological point of view. I think ultimately that is what appeals to people. I had this whole exhibition called *Painting my Father*,



*Time*, 2006, oil on panel

and the vast majority of people at the show had never met my father. But I received the most touching, profound comments from people in terms of the degree to which they could relate to it and to some degree saw their father in my father. I think ultimately that's what I'm going for.

**You were born Steven Arthur Ferguson, but began calling yourself Max at the age of 12. Why? Where did that name come from?**

"Max" I sort of pulled out of a hat in terms of the name itself. The reason I started using it initially was...I don't mean to be too mysterious...it was important for me that I remain anonymous, so I needed a different name. Don't worry, it's nothing too bad. Childhood hijinx, let's put it that way. So I started using Max and then the person who I didn't want to know who I was knew it was me, and then he started calling me Max

and so I somewhat adopted that. I'm still officially Steven Arthur, but I've been using "Max" since I was twelve.

**The paintings are so clearly a representation of a moment in a life, with some implied before and after. Are there narratives you hope to trigger in your viewers' minds? Do you have a story in mind as you create the work?**

Not really. I mean there's very little in the way of formal storytelling in the work. I'm essentially aiming toward a mood. Ultimately it's a moment, and as someone once put it to me about my work: nothing is happening but everything is happening. Generally speaking, people are very motionless in the paintings and it's not so much that they're doing something, but they're about to do something or thinking about doing something. That's what I'm going for: that internal thought process.



The reverse of *Time* shows the artist's reflections during its creation.

**You said that you avoid news and current events: Why? Is that a conscious choice or are you just busy with other things?**

Generally speaking, if I watch the news or pick up the newspaper there will be something in there that will invariably make me get depressed or angry, and I don't want to be depressed or angry. It's really as simple as that. It's not so much insensitivity to what's going on, as it is hypersensitivity, and often finding the empathetic pain a little too much to handle.

**The backs of the paintings are fascinating, but clearly not intended for display. Initially they were made up of notations for the benefit of future conservators, but on the back of *Time*, there is no mention of materials or technique. Who is the audience they are created for now?**

It's funny, I have less and less about the technical aspects, which was its original purpose. It has evolved

more into an open diary, scrapbook, messages-in-a-bottle; it's my way of having fun. A friend of mine described it [this way]: the fronts of the paintings are school and the backs of the paintings are recess. The fronts of the paintings are obviously very much intended for public consumption and public enjoyment, and the backs are more for me. At the same time they've been getting more and more attention. Usually at a solo exhibition I'll have a painting or two on a pedestal so people can see the backs. I enjoy them. Most people seem to enjoy them.

**Those notes and images are so personal, like journal entries. Is it hard to let go of that piece of your life recorded on the backs?**

I'm very concerned with documenting the fronts: getting good photographs, recording the sizes, the dates. With the backs it's more of a *laissez faire* attitude. I know they're there, I just sort of send them off into the world, and

where they end up, how they end up, how people interpret them, it's a whole other matter. They do get very personal at times and sometimes if I'm in the room and someone is looking at the back of one of the paintings I suddenly feel naked and vulnerable. In many ways I think they're a more accurate reflection of me as a person than the paintings themselves.

**On the back of *Time*, you've included a news clip about an abduction and murder of a Jewish individual, with a note that it could have been yourself or your own son. You live part time now in a place where violence against Jews is a daily reality. Do you worry about the danger?**

I suppose this gets back to the question about why I don't follow the news. Do I worry about it? Sure. Do I obsess over it? No. Do I feel safe here? No. I was in Manhattan the day of the Twin Towers attacks, so do I feel absolutely safe in New York? No. I'm not sure there's any place that's 100 percent safe. But as you say, it's a reality here, it's not an abstract thing, it's not on the news, it's here. I have two sons who will probably go into the Israeli army someday. The thought of that horrifies me, but you know they could be in America going off to a war in Afghanistan or wherever so... reality can be cruel, what can I say?

**The model for *Time* turned out to be a Danish Olympic rower and war hero who helped thousands of Jews to escape the Nazi regime. Am I correct in thinking that you had no idea of that when you began painting him? When did you find that out?**

When I met him I found out that he was somehow involved with this. But what I found out relatively recently was that he wasn't just one of the rowers, he was in fact the organizer of this whole thing—so [he was] a sort of Oscar Schindler times ten. He lived essentially anonymous in New York for many years until he passed away this February at 97. ● LD