

MASTER WORK

New York painter Max Ferguson puts violin makers on canvas

By Rory Williams



The Violin Repair Shop by Max Ferguson

Max Ferguson fondly recalls when he and his brother discovered his father's fiddle in their basement in New York. For a closer inspection of the label, they did what any inquisitive kids the south side of six years old would do: pry the top open with a screwdriver. Now at the age of 54, he's grown a bit more considerate of the delicate structure of a violin and greatly appreciative of the workmanship behind its creation.

The latter is reflected in *The Violin Repair Shop*, left, the artist's rendering of violin maker and restorer Gregory Wiley in his workshop near Lincoln Center in New York City. "I try to put the same amount of care and craftsmanship into my paintings as a good luthier puts into his work," Ferguson says during a phone interview from Israel, where he and his wife raise their two young sons and daughter.

His paintings often are mistaken for photographs, since Ferguson's style is realism with a nod to Vermeer and 20th-century American realist painter Hopper. And, indeed, the angle of soft light pouring down on Wiley, the subtle specs of dust on the lamps, the grain of the table surface in the foreground do recall the work of the Dutch master. "Hopper more in terms of subject matter, aesthetics, urban alienation, et cetera, and Vermeer more in terms of technique, composition, color," he says of his influences. "The fact that Vermeer was painting these domestic scenes versus an allegorical, biblical scene, I could relate to that subject matter better," he adds.

The Violin Repair Shop was displayed at Gallery Henoeh in Chelsea in a December 2013 exhibition exalting artists who capture the energy and spirit of New York.

Ferguson earned his bachelor's degree at New York University and honed his style at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Other institutions that have displayed his work include the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum in London, the Albertina in Vienna, and the Reflex Museum of Contemporary Art in the Netherlands.

The city has been Ferguson's faithful muse, but he has also gravitated heavily toward older models, such as master craftsmen in clock repair and tailor shops and his belated father who he celebrated in the *Painting My Father* exhibition, which included some of his most popular works, at the Hebrew Union College Museum in New York. "In one sense, it is the father figure," Ferguson says. "My father was 47 when I was born, so by the time I came of age, I thought of him as this older guy."

The Violin Repair Shop took eight months to complete. It was a departure that allowed him to contemplate his relationship with classical and pop music, much of which can be found pasted on the back of the painting. It's a habit that started out as documenting mediums and pigments for future restoration work and has "evolved into open diary, scrapbook, message in a bottle. Now, it's completely out of control," Ferguson admits. "A good friend of mine says that the front of the painting is like school and the back is like recess."



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On the back of the painting, clippings from the sleeve of a Budapest String Quartet CD and Leonard Cohen's *Old Ideas* are dropped in the middle of a collage that includes photos of his children, his father, instruments, Sam Cooke, Albert Einstein armed with a violin, and original and borrowed quips and quotes. "The difference between my paintings and photorealism is the difference between having sex and making love," he scrawled in black ink.

The tamer (front) side contains renderings of roughly 200 objects. "Wylie was extremely cooperative and nice in terms of posing for me and moving stuff around," Ferguson notes.

Ferguson also included a copy of *Strings* on the right cabinet as well as an iPhone on top of a blue box of tissues in the left corner of the bench—two important contemporary touches.

"Most people looking at my work might think, 'Oh, he's nostalgically looking backwards.' It's not that at all," he says. "It's more about looking to the future and trying to preserve things. I don't try to make faux 19th-century scenes—I don't shy away from the contemporary."

Music will soon find its way back into Ferguson's work. He paints from photo studies, and recently took pictures of violin maker Sam Zygmontowicz in his Brooklyn shop. He also plans to use retiring New York Philharmonic Orchestra concertmaster Glenn Dicterow and the Steinway piano factory in Queens as subjects for his artwork.

"I will no doubt feel a sense of obligation to make my work on par," Ferguson concludes. "Painting is nice, but you can't dance to it." ■

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