

PROFESSIONAL artist

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**Learn to Price
Your Artwork**
page 5

**Make Your Mark
in the Art World**
page 6

**7 Steps to
Financial Savvy**
page 16

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SHOE REPAIR SHOP by Max Ferguson

Borrowed Time: The Paintings of Max Ferguson

BY LOUISE BUYO



Time, 2006, (oil on panel), Max Ferguson / Collection of The Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art/ The Bridgeman Art Library International, 36" x 36"



Strand Book Store, 2010 (oil on panel), Max Ferguson / Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library International, 16" x 22"

MAX FERGUSON has made a career of haunting the hushed corners of New York and capturing the solitude he finds within them as inspiration for his paintings. In a city (or an age) where a normal pace is nearly lightspeed, the 51-year-old painter is determined to make people pause and contemplate the unrelenting passage of time.

At 19, Ferguson spent a formative year living and learning to paint in Amsterdam. Ever since, he has been influenced by the Dutch masters. Drawn to the quiet interiors of Vermeer and the urbanism of Edward Hopper, Ferguson creates a bridge between the two. Each painting is a series of layers rendered with exquisite detail, taking months to complete.

For most of his career, the city has been Ferguson's muse — its quarters and inhabitants his subjects.

"Most of my work, not all but most, tends to focus on New York — specifically older imagery that is rapidly disappearing."

Things change and life goes on, Ferguson observes. Neighborhood businesses close and family members grow old as he fixes them in his paintings and records their transitions. Aesthetically, he finds age and history to be compelling.

"When my fellow art students were painting nudes of young women, I was painting octogenarians with canes," he jokes. "I like my work to be beautiful. If I'm going to be staring at a painting for 12 hours a day for several months, I want it to be visually pleasing. I love antiques and old buildings. I prefer an old piece of furniture

with a patina and cracks."

Ferguson is careful to keep his gaze honest and affectionate, but not overtly sentimental. He does not reminisce.

"It's not nostalgia because I'm not so much concerned with the past as I am capturing these things for future generations.

"These are treasures. I think it would compound the heartbreak for them to be forgotten," the artist explains. "A remarkably high percentage of things I've painted are gone. The buildings were tore down and the businesses closed. It's very crushing to realize this. In a sense, I think of myself as a documentarian and anthropologist, trying to preserve these things.

"Beyond the initial appeal, I'm conscious of a sense of urgency. I realized recently that if I had been born 20 years later, I would never have painted many of these subjects because they'd be gone."

In his work, Ferguson hopes to obtain a measure of immortality for his subjects and himself.

"In a way, I am trying to stop time," he admits. "It certainly is about freezing things. I won't delve too much into my psychology, but I've always been aware of the brevity of life. Suspending time and holding things still is one element of my work."

With a career spanning 30 years and artwork in museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum, Ferguson's focus has shifted subtly over time, moving away from the city as an environment and concentrating instead on its

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Interiors, 2009 (oil on panel), Max Ferguson / Collection of the Artist / The Bridgeman Art Library International, 30" x 42"

inhabitants. Likewise, his compositions and treatments have become more complex. Still, Ferguson considers all his work to be autobiographical on some level. Because his artistic process is painstaking and technically meticulous, he has deep respect for other people who labor in the same careful and deliberate manner: bakers, cobblers, tailors, etc.

"I can relate and identify with the people who I choose as models. I feel an affinity with craftsmen and people who love their work and want to do their work as well as they can."

Ferguson has often been labeled as a photo-realist in the media, but does not agree. Although his paintings are astonishingly lifelike and have often been mistaken for photography, he feels there is a fundamental humanism that sets his work apart. He strives to work by one of his favorite maxims: "The more personal the art, the more universal you become."

"I'm put into different boxes: photo-realist, hyper-realist, etc. However, I find a lot of photo-realist work to be on the cold side and somewhat devoid of the human

element. I like to think of my work as warm and personal.

"A close friend of mine once said that in my paintings, 'Nothing is going on, but everything is going on.' There are a tremendous amount of things going on visually, but there is virtually no movement.

"Almost all my figures in my paintings aren't looking out, but looking in; both into the scenes, and within themselves. It is almost as if they are at prayer."

If not exactly a contrarian, Ferguson rebels against trends he feels are fashionable in the art world, preferring to defy fads in favor of personal vision. As a reaction against heroic scale, he purposefully creates detailed work at an "approachable size" to encourage viewers to come closer and enter a dialogue with the paintings.

"The louder and larger the work of my contemporaries grows, the quieter and smaller my paintings become. I prefer the smaller scale for several reasons. When I work large, I can either work for five years on a painting or not do a very good job.

"Still, there is a monumentality to them. When people see them in re-

production, they think they're huge and they're quite surprised when they see them in life.

"I am less concerned with the visual aspects of my work than the visceral. My paintings are generally populated by a solitary figure. In one sense, it is a soliloquy but there is someone else involved, the viewer, so it is more like a dialogue. It is the silent emotional *pas de deux* between the two in which I am most interested." **PA**

Max Ferguson will have a solo exhibition in spring 2012 at Hebrew Union College Museum in New York, Painting My Father.

To see more work by the artist, visit his website at www.maxferguson.com.

A former art consultant and curatorial assistant, Louise Buyo is the Managing Editor of Professional Artist. To see a portfolio of her writing and her black and white photography, visit her website at www.louisebuyo.com. Louise can be reached at lbuyo@professionalartistmag.com.