

Painting My Father – Richard Ferguson 1912-2005

Max Ferguson

“You call this art? My kid could do this!’ ‘Yes, I know dad.” At least that’s what I wrote on the back of one of my paintings of my father. One of about thirty I have done so far.

The first time I painted my father was in 1982. I had just begun a series of paintings called *Subterraneans*, depicting people in the subways. I wanted a generic businessman as a model, and asked my father to pose on the 28th Street IRT platform. My father had taken the subway almost everyday of his life and seemed like as good a model as anyone. The painting came out great, and then I did another one of him, and another, and then began using him regularly.

My father, Richard Jacob Ferguson, attorney at law. My father, born in 1912, the year the Titanic sank. My father, born six years before women could vote and sixteen years before talkies. My father, who was playing tennis regularly up until his 92nd birthday, and honestly thought there was nothing unusual about a 92 year-old man playing tennis (I loved playing tennis with him, but did he have to play *better* than I?). He fit right in with my paintings of New York, focusing on nicer, older aspects of the City; remnants from another time that were rapidly disappearing (Coney Island, the Jewish Lower East Side, etc.).

Gradually, as I painted him more, he became iconic within my body of work. A leitmotif, almost prop-like popping up in pool halls and office building lobbies, and later in Florida, where he and my mom retired (yes, I paint her too). People familiar with my work often think that anyone roughly my father’s age in my paintings must be him. And to some degree

they are right; they are extensions of him. At my gallery openings, people often delighted in seeing “the man in the paintings.” It was always one of my great vicarious thrills to show my father a new painting of him. In retirement, with more time on his hands, he returned to an old hobby; painting. He even did a portrait of me. I told him it was fine with me if he painted, as long as he did not change his name to “Max.”

Many of the scenes I have painted are now gone. The Times Square building in which my dad shared an office with his father-in-law has, too, like so much of the City, evaporated.

And now he’s gone too. Just five weeks after my mom passed away. The year in which they died, Mother’s Day fell on May 8th, which would have been his 93rd birthday as well. I was once speaking with a friend whose father had recently died. She told me she wanted to do something to honor her father, but wasn’t sure what to do. “Honor your father.” It stares back in black and white from Exodus, and for good measure in Deuteronomy as well. I guess this is my way of honoring him. In many ways my father had some bad breaks. His father had fallen on hard times when my dad was a child. Despite graduating with honors from N.Y.U. Law School, it being the depths of the Depression, he had trouble getting work. Or, as he once explained it to me, “I was offered five dollars a weeks as a law clerk. Some offered no pay; just for the experience.”

The year before he died, I became the father of a son, Daniel. Who knows, perhaps he will paint me some day. In the mean time, I continue to paint my daddy.