

MAX FERGUSON

A Realist Paints His Father

BY PETER TRIPPI



Although he exhibits his work regularly, now is a particularly good time to focus on the artist Max Ferguson (b. 1959). From April 16 through June 29, Manhattan's Hebrew Union College Museum will present *Painting My Father*, a show that concentrates on Ferguson's numerous depictions of his late father, who was born a century ago, on May 8, 1912. And for those headed to Alice Walton's new Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, look for the Ferguson painting recently acquired for the museum's permanent collection.

Having grown up in suburban Long Island, Ferguson enrolled at New York University to study animation. (This was in the era before

digital technology eliminated the need for animators to make thousands of drawings for even a short film.) Ferguson's life was changed during a junior year abroad at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. There he visited the Rijksmuseum almost every day, falling in love with the technical virtuosity of Vermeer, Rembrandt, and other Dutch and Flemish masters. Ferguson also admired their uncanny capacity to make

My Father in Katz's
2005, Oil on panel, 16 x 20 in.
Collection of the artist





My Father on Fifth Avenue

2011, Oil on panel, 9 1/2 x 12 in.

Collection of the artist

“ordinary” subjects look and feel significant, even sacred. He brought that inspiration back to NYU, where his attention shifted to painting under the guidance of Robert Kaupelis (1928-2009).

As one might expect of an artist smitten with the Dutch Old Masters, Ferguson is best known for painting in oils on relatively small panels that offer the hard sheen he seeks and respond well to the fine sable brushes he uses to capture every detail. Requiring two to four months to complete, the resulting images are intensely realistic, yet “some of my favorites,” he notes, “are the ones which, if reduced to

purely abstract forms, would still work.” With an eye on the future lives of his pictures, Ferguson enhances their reverses with a veritable palimpsest of notes indicating which materials he used, poems, photographs, newspaper clippings, and other ephemera that relate to the picture’s subject and history.

Given his Old World role models, some viewers might be surprised to learn that Ferguson takes photographs to use as references in the studio. “My preference is to work from life,” he explains. “Unfortunately, that is somewhere between impractical and impossible. The photographic studies are merely a jumping-off point; I often combine elements from many different ones and modify them. I then draw a number of studies until I have the final life-size cartoon.” At this point, he sets to work on the actual panel.



Time (Clock Repair Shop)

2006, Oil on panel, 36 x 36 in.

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

SUBJECTS THAT REALLY MATTER

Given this painstaking process, it makes sense that Ferguson often portrays other skilled people at work, be they clock repairers or tailors. He very often presents figures from behind, drawing us into the scene so that we can better identify with them. And like another of his historical heroes, Edward Hopper, Ferguson turns regularly to melancholy, depopulated urban settings, be they the faded arcades of Coney Island, the Art Deco facades of Miami Beach, or the barren subway platforms and elevator lobbies of Manhattan.

A crucial aspect of Ferguson's subject matter is his changing view of Judaism. Raised in a Reform household where he did not learn Hebrew, Ferguson was living with a Gentile woman in Germany in 1991, when he heard news of the violent clashes between African Americans and Orthodox Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights. Three days of rioting revealed a seam of anti-Semitism that has taken two decades to transcend, and suddenly Ferguson was challenged to revisit his own ethnic and religious identity.

"I spent the first 30 years of my life as perhaps the world's most self-hating Jew," he says. "Since then I have returned more and more to my *Yiddishkeit*, and have become increasingly observant." Soon he began painting scenes of bagel bakeries, delicatessens, the Lower East Side, and other dwindling sites associated with Jewish New York, and today he and his Israeli wife commute with their



My Father at Mount Sinai

2011, Oil on canvas, 36 x 52 in.

Collection of the artist



children between New York and Jerusalem. Looking toward his artistic legacy, Ferguson declares, “I do not want anyone ever saying about me, ‘Oh, I didn’t know he was Jewish.’”

The fraught issue of personal identity — addressed often in postmodern art but rarely among contemporary realists — has taken powerful form in Ferguson’s ongoing depictions of his beloved father, the retired attorney Richard Jacob Ferguson, who died in 2005 at age 92. He had started painting his father regularly in 1982, stumbling first on the fact that the older man’s Jewish features did not fit conventional norms of beauty. (In fact, Richard Ferguson looked like many other American men his age, and as a Reform Jew, he did not wear such distinguishing accessories as a prayer shawl or

My Father in Palm Beach
2003, Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in.
Private collection, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida





My Parents in Their Living Room

2011, Oil on panel, 12 1/2 x 18 in.

Collection of the artist

skullcap.) After the Crown Heights riots, Ferguson began to depict him reading Yiddish-language newspapers (for example), projecting his own developing concerns onto his father. (The same can be said about paintings of his mother.) Richard Ferguson's heroic patience is epitomized by *My Father in Palm Beach*, for which the artist convinced a gallery to put an earlier portrait in its window, then persuaded his father to admire it from the sidewalk while wearing the same clothes.

The exhibition at Hebrew Union College Museum this spring presents the best of Ferguson's depictions of his father, who, in the opinion of the distinguished art historian Gail Levin, became "every man, a stand-in for all of humanity," and also for the artist himself. In this series of episodes drawn either from the sitter's actual life (e.g., riding the subway) or from the artist's imagination (father and son playing pool together), Richard Ferguson also functions as a mirror of life's transience, as we see in Will Barnet's images of his wife, Elena, made over many decades.

The hardest image to examine will surely be *My Father at Mount Sinai*, based on photographs taken at Mount Sinai Hospital during

Richard Ferguson's last illness. The artist concedes, "It was five years before I could even look at the photographs," but the wait was worth it. "I wanted to kick people in their solar plexus," he says, and indeed the picture does. In the evolving field of contemporary realist art, which only recently has been able to make Americans focus again on simply beautiful images of flowers or meadows, it is equally important that our best artists help us face the tougher, sadder aspects of life, too.

Almost seven years after his father's passing, Ferguson continues to paint him, and may never stop. He notes that the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy exhort readers to honor their fathers: "I guess this is my way of honoring him." This season's exhibition offers an ideal opportunity to reflect upon their profound and truly timeless relationship. ■

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Information: Hebrew Union College Museum, 1 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10003, 212.824.2298, <http://huc.edu/museums/ny/>. Those who cannot visit the exhibition can order its catalogue, which contains an insightful essay by Gail Levin. Max Ferguson is represented by Gallery Henoch (New York City).

All images courtesy Bridgeman Art Library