

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Immortalizing a Life in the City

By SAMEER REDDY

The popular perception of contemporary art often involves a conceptual caricature that can leave a viewer scratching his head. (See the Whitney Biennial and New Museum Triennial for current examples.) But a new exhibit by Max Ferguson at the Hebrew Union College Museum on West Fourth Street, "Painting My Father," shows that fans of hyperrealism haven't been altogether forsaken.

A fourth-generation New Yorker, Mr. Ferguson has painted more than 200 hyper-detailed canvases grounded in Old Masterly technique during his 33-year career. The paintings, many of which capture New York City's fading, old-world character, straddle the past and present by documenting a city that is perpetually erasing itself. "Painting My Father," which opens Monday and runs through June 29, showcases 23 works featuring the elder Ferguson, whose twilight years serve to illustrate the artist's central theme, which he described as "a hyperconsciousness of time passing, and [an awareness] of the transience of life."

"He was not only my father, but my main muse," said Mr. Ferguson, who is 52, of his father's significance to his art. "While he was alive, I painted him over a 23-year period, so I saw him aging. I suppose, in a sense, there is a Dorian Gray aspect. I'm freezing time and immortalizing him through the paintings."

Where the elder Ferguson inspired much of the emotion in his work, Mr. Ferguson has found his artistic motivation in 17th-century Dutch genre painting, his technique echoing masters like Jan Vermeer and Gerrit Dou.

"Max uses old-master painting techniques, but combines these processes with his own photographic studies, so that he is at once both traditional and contemporary," said Gail Levin, an art historian at Baruch College who contributed to the exhibit's catalog. "When so many artists today employ assistants and fabricators, it is very special to have a painter who values and practices his craft with such meticulous attention."

Mr. Ferguson, who initially



Max Ferguson/Bridgeman Art Library (2)



studied film animation at NYU's film school, grounds his approach to painting in the hard realism of the city, often depicting solitary figures plying their trades—a barber, a busker, a clockmaker. But that unflinching observational style also conveys a desire to evoke the lives that

Above, Max Ferguson's 'My Father in Katz's' (2005). At left, his 'Skee Ball' (1990). Both paintings are on display in the exhibit 'Painting My Father' at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum.

are lived below the clamorous surface of the city.

"I would like to believe that there's a subtle, quiet emotion to my work," he said. "There's an irony in how crowded and overpopulated New York is, yet I so often paint people alone. What I'm showing is that there's a real sense of quiet and tranquility to be found."

"Painting My Father" includes some poignant work—a 2011 piece, "My Father at Mount Sinai," depicts Richard Ferguson on his deathbed at Mount Sinai Hospital—but the majority of the work on display captures the meaningfully mundane moments on which lives are built. In "My Father in the Empire State Building" (1998), Richard Ferguson awaits the arrival of an Art Deco elevator. "My Father in Katz's" (2005) immortalizes a lunch in the Lower East Side deli.

"I love the one of my father in Katz's as a painting, but it was also the first that I created after he died," Mr. Ferguson said. "It has great emotional importance

to me. I kept asking myself, 'Is this my way of dealing with his death or not dealing with it, by trying to keep him alive?'"

Mr. Ferguson is known to use the rear of the canvas as a kind of scrapbook, assembling quotations, photographs and notes that relate to the genesis of the work. The newest painting in the exhibit, "Shuffleboard" (2012), includes a note that he found while clearing out his parents' house, written by Richard Ferguson and describing his own childhood, along with other photos of the artist's childhood.

"On a certain level, it's crushing knowing that things I've painted have gone. And at the same time it's gratifying that I've preserved them two dimensionally in paint," Mr. Ferguson said. "Ultimately New York is about its soul, and it's disturbing to me the degree and speed with which it's changing. Like all New Yorkers, I mourn for things that were here and are no longer. But certainly, in terms of cities, it remains my great love."