

Los Angeles—The Hammer Museum presents an extensive career retrospective devoted to the work of the groundbreaking painter and musician Llyn Foulkes (b. 1934 in Yakima, Washington), on view from February 3 to May 19, 2013. One of the most influential yet underrecognized artists of his generation, Foulkes makes work that stands out for its raw, immediate, and unfiltered qualities. His extraordinarily diverse body of work—including impeccably painted landscapes, mixed-media constructions, deeply disturbing portraits, and narrative tableaux—resists categorization and defies expectations, distinguishing Foulkes as a truly singular artist. LLYN FOULKES is organized by Hammer curator Ali Subotnick and will travel to the New Museum in New York (June 12 to September 8, 2013) and to the Museum Kurhaus Kleve in Germany (December 2013 to March 2014).

“A retrospective for Llyn Foulkes is long overdue and we are exceptionally pleased to be organizing it,” says Hammer director Ann Philbin. “The work is raw, haunting, and at times shocking but deeply moving and personal. Llyn is an enigmatic figure with a complex history in the L.A. art scene, and we hope this exhibition helps to preserve his influence and legacy.”

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

LLYN FOULKES features approximately 140 artworks from public and private collections around the world, some of which have not been seen publicly for decades. The exhibition will be presented in Galleries I and II as well as in the Hammer’s Video Gallery and will include a loose restaging of the artist’s 1962 solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum. Arranged chronologically, LLYN FOULKES explores the entire scope of the artist’s career: early cartoons and drawings; his macabre, emotionally charged paintings of the early 1960s; the epic rock and landscape paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s; his “bloody head” series of mutilated figures from the late 1970s through the present; and his social commentary paintings targeting corporate America (especially Disney), which include his remarkable narrative tableaux combining painting with woodworking, found materials, and thick mounds of mixed media, seamlessly blended into the painted surface to create a remarkable illusion of depth.

“The first time I went to Llyn’s studio and met him and learned about the work, I was totally blown away by its originality and rigor, and I knew that I had to do this show,” says exhibition curator Ali Subotnick. “Working on this show with him for the last few years has opened my eyes to the range and depth of his practice. The work is wholly original and fierce and dynamic—like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. His versatility, vision, tenacity, and raw talent distinguish him and his work. He’s hard to pin down or categorize, and seeing all the work together will no doubt be a

revelation to both the uninitiated and those familiar with it.”

WORKS FROM THE EARLY 1960s

Foulkes served in the US Army and was stationed in Germany during the late 1950s. During this period he traveled throughout Europe, immersing himself in its rich cultural heritage while also being exposed to the destruction wrought by World War II, which would later deeply affect his work. After being discharged from the army, Foulkes enrolled at the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), where he studied alongside Ed Ruscha, Laddie John Dill, and Joe Goode. He received student awards for painting and drawing, but after two years Foulkes left school, feeling that he had gleaned all he could from the academy.

Once he left Chouinard, Foulkes began reflecting on what he had seen in Europe. The memories of charred cities and devastated landscapes literally colored the work he was making: paintings incorporating tar, burned newspaper, scorched wood, dead animals, and thickly built up textures that gave an aged and worn patina to the objects.

Foulkes began exhibiting at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1959 and had a solo exhibition there in 1961. By age thirty he had had one-person exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum (1962) and the Oakland Museum of Art (1964).

ROCK & LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

Not long after his exhibition in Pasadena, Foulkes began making paintings of rocky western landscapes as well as works inspired by tourist postcards, using his signature technique of employing a rag to add and subtract paint, achieving an exquisite texture resembling worn denim or human flesh. He was interested in the texture of the rocks, not just the effect of making a picture of a rock; the craggy surface of the rag-painted rocks reminded him of skin, and he painted rocks that resembled figures and human profiles. In 1969 he exhibited several monumental rocks painted in washy monochromes of pink, light blue, acid green, and lavender. These paintings are even more figurative than his earlier rock paintings and feel like giant rock creatures about to leap off the wall, evoking his early interest in surrealism.

“BLOODY HEAD” PORTRAITS

Although his rock paintings were a great success, Foulkes grew dismayed that his work was

becoming formulaic and was increasingly frustrated by the flatness of the paintings. He turned to a self-portrait in the studio and in a bold move obscured his face with a shocking pool of dripping red paint. The painting, *Who's on Third?* (1971–73), is the first in a series of “bloody head” portraits featuring disfigured or obscured faces, which Foulkes continues to make today.

Foulkes's paintings from the 1970s were often framed with found materials—stamped and stained wood and recycled frames, an iron grate, boards with nails sticking out, and chipped corners.

These frames extended the work beyond the canvas and signaled his return to dimensional paintings. He often incorporated real objects that appear to be *trompe l'oeil* effects. He also began to defy the confines of the frame structure, with arms or ties extending past the edge of the frame.

TABLEAUX WORKS

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foulkes began to push the constructed paintings even further, treating them as a stage, building out and deepening back, creating an illusion of infinite depth within the picture. His dimensional paintings incorporated items such as clothing, road signs, and household objects, which were integrated seamlessly. By manipulating shapes and creating real shadows, he transformed two-dimensional paintings into vivid, diorama-like pictures. The works are unlike anything else that was being made at the time (or has been made since) and pop off the wall and into space. These tableaux pieces include self-portraits and satirical images of politicians, Mickey Mouse, and Walt Disney. In his monumental work *The Lost Frontier* (1997–2005), Foulkes achieved the ultimate illusion of depth. The picture, arguably his masterpiece, is a bleak depiction of Los Angeles that appears to stretch beyond the horizon for miles, yet in reality the painting is only eight inches deep.

MICKEY AND DISNEY AND CORPORATE AMERICA

In the late 1970s Foulkes's former father-in-law (one of the head animators at Disney Studios) gave him a copy of the *Mickey Mouse Club Handbook* from 1934, and Foulkes read the letter inside detailing how the club would teach children to be well-behaved, polite citizens. Dismayed by Disney's attempts at brainwashing, Foulkes developed a skepticism and distrust that have remained with him ever since. A few years later he began to take his paintings in a new direction, and Mickey Mouse became a recurring character. The seminal work *Made in Hollywood* (1983) features a copy of the letter from the *Mickey Mouse Club Handbook*.

THE MACHINE

Music has been important to Foulkes since his childhood, from his junior high school days lip-synching Spike Jones's big band songs to his later explorations of jazz, and he has always produced art and music simultaneously. In 1979, after participating in various bands, he began constructing his Machine, a magnificent multipart instrument featuring horns and cowbells, a bass, organ pipes, percussion, and more. He practices daily and regularly records his songs, which take up many of the same themes that are developed in his paintings. The exhibition will feature a new documentary video by Michael Gregory of Foulkes playing the Machine. Foulkes will perform with his Machine at the Hammer Museum in February and again toward the end.

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