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Mermaid's Story, 2003, oil on canvas  
31 1/2 x 43 1/4 inches

## INTERVIEW WITH THE PAINTER ALAN FELTUS

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Alan Feltus was born in Washington, D.C., in 1943. He studied at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and later earned a bachelor's degree in fine art from Cooper Union in New York City and a master's degree in fine art from Yale University. Since 1987 he has lived in Assisi, Italy, with his wife, the artist Lani Irwin. Feltus has had one-person gallery exhibitions in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Boca Raton, Wichita, and Washington, D.C., as well as in Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans and Rome. In 2007 the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art staged retrospective shows of Feltus's and Irwin's work. Forum Gallery in New York City ([www.forumgallery.com](http://www.forumgallery.com)) represents him. To see more of his work, visit [www.alanfeltus.com](http://www.alanfeltus.com).

TMR: Mr. Feltus, your paintings remind me of the saying: "The silences speak loudest". How do you achieve this effect in your works?

Alan Feltus: When I was an art student, I became aware of the tendency I had to make very quiet paintings. It was more clear when I was in graduate school because that was when I began painting mostly from within my self rather than painting from observation. In undergraduate school, we all worked from the model or still life. When painting what I observed, my work was in direct response to what I was looking at. On my own, I instinctively painted quiet paintings. I saw there was a clear difference between the earlier paintings made from observation and the new ones. I realized also that I was most interested in quiet paintings by other artists, throughout the history of art. I have to paint quiet paintings. It is who I am. My paintings go through many changes before they are finished. They start quietly and they become more quiet as I find relationships that are right for me and as I refine things toward the last stages of any painting. The quality that I require of my work is largely about this silence.

TMR: What makes an artwork a masterpiece? What is hidden, technically and spiritually, behind the magic of true art?

A.F. We all have differing ideas about what great paintings are. For me there are many things that are important in painting. Composition is very important to me. There are many kinds of composition. If I don't see an order that exists apart from the narrative or subject matter in a painting the painting is not a good painting. In other words, there is an abstract structure underlying any good painting, as I see it. What interests me is often more an intuitive composing, as my own composition is, rather than a geometric framework that holds the painting together. Color and light have to be beautiful for me to love a painting. Magic is more difficult to come to grips with. What makes one painting extraordinary above others can be one of many things. Often I don't really know what that quality is. It might be a kind of rendering that is far more perfect in every way than what I am capable of doing. Or it might be a kind of poetry that I see in a painting that eludes any clear explanation.

TMR: Before you start a work, do you see the image and the message, or it appears later?

A.F. I usually begin a painting without any idea what the painting will be about or what it will look like. However, after many years of painting some things are going to be present in any painting I start. That has to be. So I might begin with some tentative marks with a pale color directly on the white ground of a canvas. I often start with two figures. A few lines set something in motion and I take it from there. It is about how two figures fit within the edges of the canvas. How they relate to one another and the space of the canvas. Everything moves in the first hours or days of a new painting. Actually, things continue to move throughout the painting of any painting. But those first marks set up what continues to be a play with directions and intervals and spaces. Shapes of two bodies and shapes between them and between their contours and any other line in the painting. I might put in a horizontal line that divides wall from floor, and maybe a vertical that is a wall edge. A chair might come in. Those are enough to stay with for weeks. They shift and change and very often are painted out and some thing else brought in. Most changes are small but they can be as large as taking out a figure or moving a figure to a new place in a painting. One such change triggers many others.



The Poet's Dream  
2002  
oil on linen  
43 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches

TMR: In an interview you said, "In art as in human nature, there is no progress." What do you mean?

A.F. Great art has been made in all periods, in all cultures. There are cave paintings from Lascaux that depict a cow or a horse that are as sophisticated as a cow or a horse by Picasso or anyone else working in our period. A Cycladic sculpture of a head or a figure is as beautifully abstracted as a Brancusi sculpture. The best of the encaustic Fayum portraits dating back to about 160 AD Egypt are as fresh and beautiful and painterly as any portrait painted in any century. A Roman marble portrait can be as fine a realist portrait as any that followed. A Pompeiian fresco might be as wonderful as a Renaissance fresco. And few frescoes made in our times are anywhere near as beautiful. Ife sculptures from what is now Nigeria were seemingly way ahead of European sculpture from the same century, and are as fine as anything done today. I can't see that art has improved in quality from prehistoric and ancient times to our time.

What does change in art might be the use of new materials, or different ideas, but the quality of art doesn't improve with the passing of centuries. That is very clear to me. Human nature has made no real progress from ancient times to today, it seems to me. War shows that to be so. Our film and TV entertainment is not very different from the entertainment of the gladiators in the colosseum. We are basically the same as ever before. Progress can be seen in technology. Airplanes fly, telephones and computers enter the scene. Illnesses can be cured. Armies have bigger bombs.

TMR: The objects must be illuminated (by light) in order to be seen, René Descartes says in his "Optics." As an artist, how do you understand this idea?

A.F. Light is one of the most important elements in paintings. Nothing can be seen without light. Some art is heard and some is understood through touch but in painting nothing is seen without light. Light in the room allows us to see a painting. Light within the painting, as painted by the artist, allows the viewer to understand form. In paintings light can be the primary subject or a very central part of one's work or it can be one of many elements a painting is made from. Light and color are interdependent. Light has a color that influences all the colors, all the parts of a painting. Light can carry a mood as well.

TMR: Are your works autobiographical?

A.F. A painter's works should be autobiographical. We make what we have to make. Each of us makes art that is different from that by anyone else. I think we can't help it. And the art that is made from deep within the artist can't be other than about what that artist is about. Of course, self portraits are more directly autobiographical by definition than other paintings, yet we are identified as people also by what we paint and how we paint what we paint. There will be some artists whose works are more personal and more about their own thoughts or experiences than others. So someone like Frida Kahlo painted more biographically than Mondrian, however, we can say that Mondrian was very much like what he painted. Only in a different sense.

Because I paint using mirrors, observing parts of myself rather than models, I might say that all my paintings are to some degree self portraits.



The Green Pencil  
2003  
oil on linen  
29 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches

TMR: What is the place of the solitude in the life of the artist?

A.F. Not all artists work alone, of course. I value my solitude. In my studio I am surrounded by things that feed me. Books and reproductions, objects. I need to have my own space and a kind of quiet. I might listen to radio while I paint but I am not in conversation with anyone other than myself. It minimizes distractions. I view the solitude of the artist's studio as a luxury. We are fortunate who can choose our work in all respects and create in the privacy of our own work space.

TMR: The works of which writer or poet correspond best to the style of your paintings and who are the influences in your art?

A.F. Ah, I can't answer that question. I don't know that writers influence my paintings. I can tell you that Cormac McCarthy has for years been the writer I like best and that is because I love the richness of his language. He describes a place more beautifully than other writers I have read. His writing reads like seeing with a beautiful focus on what it around us at any given time. His writing has an influence on my thoughts but I don't know that it has changed my painting.

TMR: You are Americans, why did you choose life in the Old World, and why Assisi?

A.F. This is a long story. In brief, Lani and I had spent time in Italy before we met each other. We loved Italy for the art and architecture and many aspects of life here. When in 1984 I decided to give up a tenured teaching position at American University in Washington, to have more painting time, that was the first time in my life I could freely choose where I would live. Where we might live. Before then, both of us had lived where our families lived when we were children, then where we did our schooling if that was a new place, and then where we found work. We moved to Italy in 1987 because we wanted to live in Italy. For the art and the for the place. And to give our two sons the experience of living abroad, that had meant so much to both Lani and me in our younger years. It seemed a good decision. We both had galleries representing us and we could move anywhere so long as we could get our painting to the galleries. Total freedom to choose where we might be fed best as painters and where our children could grow up as international citizens and not so easily be influenced by the materialism and competitiveness that we saw all around us in the States.

Assisi is a place we loved. The Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi is possibly the most wonderful church in Italy.

TMR: What are the differences between European and American art today?

A.F. I don't keep up that well with contemporary art anywhere. But I don't think that in our times there is a real difference between American and European art. The artist today can be influenced by art from any country and any time. Artists can travel. Books and now the internet allow any of us to see art from anywhere. Both American and European art museums have large and important exhibitions that bring in works from far lands. We are basically exposed to very similar influences no matter where we live if we can get to those museum shows and can find good libraries or collect art books.

TMR: Thank you, Mr. Feltus.

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<http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Alan-Feltus.php>