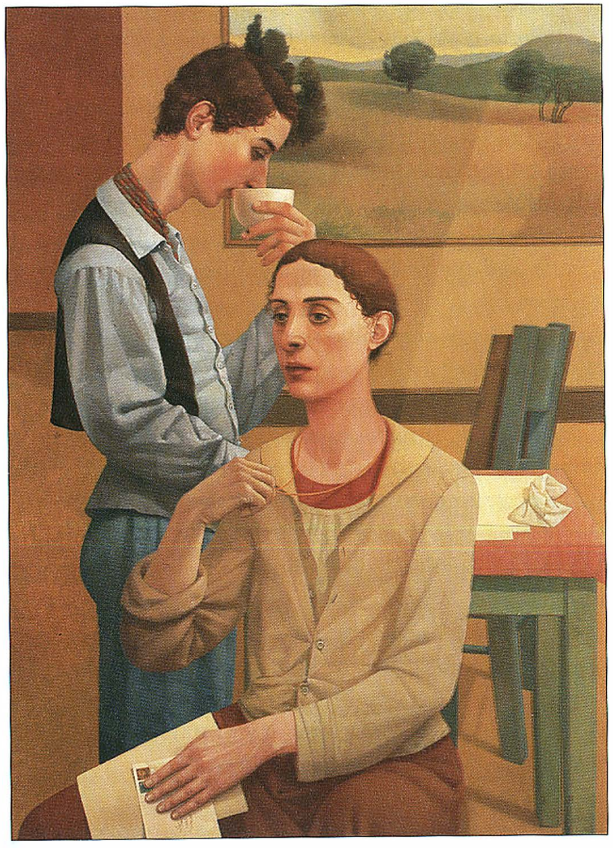
Alan Feltus

Alan Feltus's contemporary classicism is rooted in his love of the Italian Renaissance, but his paintings are tinged with a melancholy that seems both modern and timeless. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1943, he has lived in Italy since 1987. His subjects are figures—most often but not always a pair—in simplified interiors, which are stripped down almost to the point of geometry yet retain a hold on the conventions of illusionistic space. Faces, male or female, have a stylized family resemblance, often with dark hair, downturned mouths and sideways glances; limbs are almost sculpturally smooth and characteristically bent into intriguing puzzlelike patterns. New oil-on-linen paintings exploring formal and psychological permutations of this milieu are on view at the FORUM GALLERY in New York City, October 21–December 3, 2005.

There are hints of myth and allegory in some of the work in the current exhibition. The trio of women in *Le Sorelle* (2005)—the title is taken from the Italian for sisters—could be muses or Norns or fates. They are more tightly



Alan Feltus
Morning Mail, 2004
COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Alan Feltus
Le Sorelle, 2005
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grouped than usual in Feltus's work. The darkest haired of the three women, seated on a low couch, leans on a table with folded arms and tilted head, like a pensive Jane Morris in a Rossetti painting. But the composition's spatial ambiguity makes it look as if she were sitting in the lap of the woman behind her, a configuration familiar from Leonardo's *Madonna and St. Anne* (c. 1503–13). The third woman, sitting spread-legged on a chair beside them, holds a sheet of paper in each hand; she could be a kind of annunciatory angel. The duo in *Mute Sirens* (2004), sitting not quite side-by-side in rudimentary chairs, suggest two aspects of an enigmatic quality, like Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514). Feltus is drawn to these enigmatic dyads, which suggest uncanny doppelgangers or relationships with complex backstories. Here, one woman is bare-legged and wears a simple white shift; the other—in a long-sleeved red dress, green stockings and brown shoes—holds a tightly folded piece of white paper.

In Feltus's paintings unspecified narratives hover in the air, and the inhabitants seem lost in their own separate worlds of memory. Elaborate iconographic schemes provided a context for Renaissance art work. Feltus's fictional spaces are closer to the domestic arrangements of the twentieth-century painter Balthus. The title *As Though by Themselves* (2003) exemplifies the intimate yet distanced relationships he likes to depict. One woman sits on a chair, a manuscript in her hand; the other crouches on the floor, her arms on a low

The Composition of Paintings: An Artist's Perspective

Figurative paintings, like abstract or nonobjective paintings, want to work in formal terms, quite apart from their image and their associations, suggested meanings, narrative content, and so on. A painting may be about a person sitting on a chair in a room, or a table with objects sitting on it, but it is also a complex fitting together of shapes that can be appreciated as such. However, composition is a difficult aspect of art to discuss, since there are many kinds of composition. Because the underlying structure of paintings has interested me for so long and because I believe it to be poorly understood, I would like to try to organize some thoughts on the subject.

I am a figurative painter. I paint figures, people, in groups of two or three, and also singly. They are usually in interior spaces, sometimes in the landscape. I make up these figures and their surroundings. I don't paint from models and rarely refer to objects in the studio. What I paint comes from within myself. I use mirrors to observe various parts of my own face or body to understand structure. Occasionally, I find some part of a photo or a painting in a book that will be helpful. One gets better at understanding anatomy, but generally one never knows enough to rely entirely on memory, though that also would depend on the kind of painting one makes.

My paintings are fairly carefully rendered, to a degree realistic, while at the same time they are altogether invented images with all manner of visual distortions or unreality. My compositions are intuitive by nature, rather than based on any kind of imposed system where placement of forms is governed by a geometric framework. Certainly, there are endless ways paintings have been organized by geometric or mathematical systems. Medieval paintings were often based on these methods of organizing the image, but you see examples in all periods. Symmetry is the primary organizational principle in some early Italian paintings of saints. Golden Section rectangles, rabatment, and many other less obvious systems were used throughout the history of painting.

A painting that is organized intuitively is not based on systems of any sort, but rather is arrived at by instinct, maybe quite unconsciously. I like painters whose compositional structure is as apparent, as readable, as the subject they paint, for example, Piero della Francesca in the fifteenth century and Balthus in the twentieth. Often painters whose images are less realistic or lifelike are balancing structural organization with rendering in such a way that neither is easily seen. However, it is not that simple. Ingres's people all have uncommon anatomical characteristics, long sloping shoulders and clear, smooth skin. What fools us into thinking they are realistic is the refined and detailed manner in which these distorted figures are rendered. When a painting achieves a balance between the structural language and the subject matter, I find it more compelling.

What are the aspects of intuitive composition? First of all, the need to find a balance must be central in such a discussion. We relate to balance in an image as we do in real life. Things in equilibrium are stable and not disturbing. I like quiet paintings. My paintings have to be stable and quiet in order to work for me. Some painters need disquiet. Compare the seventeenth-century paintings of Vermeer and Jan Steen, painters from the same culture yet totally different in this way. Balance is intuitive. We achieve it automatically as we paint, each of us having our own kind of balance. Things adjust in position until they are within equilibrium. This can be accomplished with placement, with size, and with color and value.

Another crucial aspect of composing is how elements relate to one another and to the edges of the canvas. Paintings should not look like randomly cropped pieces of something that continues beyond the edges of the canvas. A painting is an object, complete and unique unto itself, different from the world around us. A painting is a transformation of something observed or invented, made personal by a particular artist. This transformation is necessary.

To understand the relationship between composition and the recognizable subject, think of Picasso's Cubist paintings. What we see is an abstracted image, which might portray some objects on a table in a room, but is above all a collection of shapes and colors and textures that reflect, or relate to, the vertical and horizontal edges of the picture plane. It is a construction that is very much about underlying structure. We assume that music and poetry have such underlying structures. As children we learn about the way words and notes are organized to create form. Paintings are also based on such structures.

We don't refer to Cubist paintings as realist. Realism, in any of its guises, tends to lose this balance between formal structure and image. It is therefore important to understand how composition functions in a painting, for the viewer to be aware of its presence. Too often we read the image and miss the painting.

Completely abstract paintings, in which there is no figure, landscape, still life or other subject, are about composition itself. We see the paint as paint. We see the color and texture and value and the way paint was applied, the gestural touch of the painter's hand. And that is what we should see.

I think of myself as choreographing figures and objects when I make a painting. A painter has complete control over the precise relationship between forms. Everything can have an exact position and character that will remain forever unchanged. In theater, in contrast, visual relationships are constantly changing with the movement on stage; in sculpture a slight shift in the viewer's position puts things in motion, and what is seen is different from what it was a moment before. Fixedness is unique to painting (and photography). And because this is the nature of painting, I want to find the most perfect visual arrangement of form I can find. When a painting is finished, the painter should no longer change any element. Nothing can be moved, nothing added, nothing taken away without upsetting the whole of the painting. The careful fitting together of shapes—objects or spaces between objects, fragments of objects or the totality of the work—should be well constructed. The painter should not be haunted by inadequacies. Of course, this is a near impossibility. We struggle, we do our best.

If every element in a painting is a part of the composition, then any line or color, any object or any space between objects, has been positioned, and then adjusted and adjusted again, to work in a precise way with everything else. This holds true for the division between floor and wall, the shape of a cast shadow, the presence of a book or a teacup. If I paint a piece of drapery or a piece of paper on a chair, that element is there because it has a compositional purpose. It might serve to continue o visual line across the painting's surface, establishing a relationship to those several parts that now line up in a particular way; at the same time, it might help define the way space reads in the painting. A piece of paper painted in perspective becomes a tipped plane. Placed on the floor, such a shape can hold an otherwise ambiguous area of color down as a floor and thus define the space. If the feet of a figure or the legs of a chair are not within the edges of the picture and are therefore not seen touching the floor, the space behind or next to the figure might read as wall—unless we place some shape there that would hold it down as floor. We can create a whole complicated patterned floor drawn in perspective, or we can paint, in effect, one square of a checkered floor that serves the same purpose. Of course, spatial ambiguity is sometimes desirable. Wall can read as wall and at the same time as floor and not wall. Any element, such as the piece of paper on the floor, can serve many purposes. It will also be given a gesture. In terms of the narrative within a painting a tipped plane may be an envelope or a letter, introducing associations that would not be there if that something were a small piece of cloth. In my work, these letter shapes may represent newspapers, or they might be undefined color shapes.

Every form in a painting is given a gesture. Gesture does not belong exclusively to faces and body language. A piece of drapery, a book or a chair or a piece of floor seen between the other objects can be said to have gesture. An artist makes forms as he makes gestures. He can't help it. In fact, it is this quality that allows us to recognize the hand of a particular artist in a small detail from an unfamiliar painting.

We are who we are as artists because of what we paint and how we paint it, but we are also defined by our limitations. It matters what we want to make and what comes forth as we work—intentions informed by knowledge and desire, subject to our best abilities and our limitations. I see my limitations as part of my identity as a painter, and I know the struggle involved in the making of any painting is necessary. I often consider paintings that seem to have been made without struggle to be suspect. Painting is very difficult work, requiring endless patience in the studio.

—Alan Feltus

table covered with papers. Together, the zig-zag shapes of bent knees and elbows coalesce into a strong formal shape, yet there is no eye contact. Perhaps this disconnect is a reminder that, however close the relationship, the privacy of individual thought is inviolable. The theme is continued in *Morning Mail* (2004), where a man stands drinking coffee while a woman, seated, turns away, a letter in her hand. The Italian countryside framed behind them commands a doubletake; it's a painting but suggests a window view.

Feltus's allusions to the artist's life occasionally become explicit. *Studio Days* (2004) initially appears to depict an artist and his nearly nude model. Yet he does not look at the woman who is folded with elegant gaucherie across the foreground; instead, he applies paint to a canvas seen as a sliver at the far edge of the image. His arm and brush are as straight as the line bisecting the two-color wall behind them. The woman holds a pencil, as if to write on the scrap of paper held against her thigh; a second sheet rests under her other hand. A landscape painting on an easel plays Magritte-like tricks with our perceptions. The naked and the clothed appear again in the 2004 *Summer* (2004), where one figure reclines on a low divan while the other, seated, holds a white cup. The matching saucer and a companion cup rest on a chair. The seated figure carries another of those mysterious notes ubiquitous in the artist's work. The sparse furnishings—plain green or brown chairs, the divan draped in neatly pleated white cloth, the truncated form of a wardrobe door open at an angle—function as perspective scaffolding. The two figures gaze off in opposite directions, regarding something beyond the edges of the canvas, lost in their own imaginations. Feltus is an artist of interior life, in both a physical and a psychological sense. The clarity with which he outlines his shapes, the soft harmony of his colors and the formal logic of his compositions veil human emotions as deep as they are still. Forum Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10151. Telephone (212)355-4545. www.forumgallery.com

San Francisco Galleries

During August HACKETT-FREEDMAN GALLERY in San Francisco presented a selection of recent still-life paintings by James Aponovich, as part of the traveling exhibition "James Aponovich: A Retrospective," organized by the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. Aponovich's paintings combine saturated, vibrant color with an almost-Platonic vocabulary of forms. In search of what he calls "true essence," he approaches objects through a "kind of meditation." The objects he depicts—ceramic vessels, opulent flowers and fruits, swags of patterned drapery—belong to a genre tradition that stretches from the Italian Renaissance and the Flemish Baroque to Cézanne. The fact that he sets his arrangements against a backdrop of cerulean sky and symmetrical landscape and townscape elements contributes to their historical resonance. Every successful still life is a carefully calibrated formal composition, however casual or inadvertent the arrangement appears at