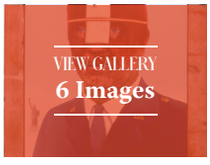
IN THE STUDIO: LLYN FOULKES

By Ross Simonini September 29, 2011 12:56am



*For more than 50 years, the Los Angeles painter and musician **Llyn Foulkes** has decried both art world careerism and trends in popular music. At 76, he remains a dissenting voice. Often left out of histories of art, he refers to himself, bittersweetly, as the "Zelig" of contemporary art, referring to the Woody Allen character, a pervasive and influential figure ultimately uncredited for the role he played in 20th-century history.*

After attending Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), Foulkes began showing at Ferus Gallery in 1961, joining Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, Ed Kienholz and Ken Price, many of whom had been his Chouinard classmates; he parted ways with the gallery the next year. His early, multipanel paintings often incorporate found objects. A Pop phase, in which he created well-received landscape paintings, lasted several years before he denounced Pop art's flatness. After abandoning the studio for a time, Foulkes began to create portrait-style paintings that frequently include collage elements and depict either actual persons or types such as businessmen; their disfigured faces, often recalling those in works by Francis Bacon, form indictments of modern emptiness, corruption and greed. Since the 1980s, Foulkes has broadened his social

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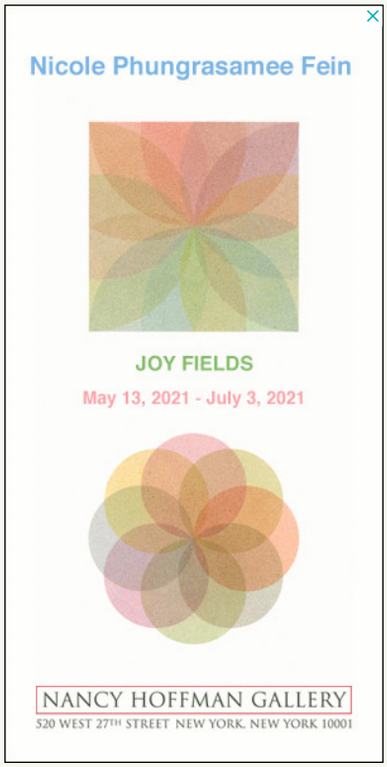

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satire, targeting commercialism and war and various aspects of the human condition. Writing in these pages in 1997, Michael Duncan observed that Foulkes articulates "a dark vision of American culture in trouble." Since the beginning of his career, Foulkes has made larger, "dimensional" paintings, sometimes 8 feet tall, which may combine woodworking, found materials, dead animals and thick mounds of modeling paste built up into relief; they often require theatrical lighting in a darkened room to convey their full effect of shadowy depths. Many of Foulkes's works include his own likeness, sometimes antagonized by Mickey Mouse, a symbol of the Disney corporation, which he loathes.

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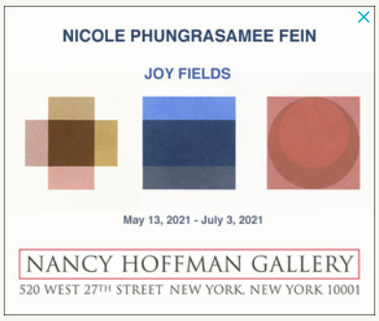

As his eyesight fades, Foulkes concentrates more on his music, another lifelong pursuit. In reaction to the increasing loudness of '60s rock, he founded The Rubber Band (active 1973-77), a combo featuring banjo, accordion, tuba and his own "machine," a sculptural mass of musical instruments the size of a small automobile. He now plays the machine as a one-man band. Like something out of a steampunk cartoon, the artist, squatting behind his instrument, honks on old car horns, taps cowbells, dances a walking bass line with his toes by plucking a single string attached to a plank of wood, blows into various handmade wind instruments, foots a hi-hat, and sings into a headset microphone. The sound of the one-man band is full and resonant, suggesting what pop music might have become had jazz, not rock 'n' roll, been the dominant form.

In the next two years, Foulkes's art and music will see considerable exposure: several of his paintings are included in the Venice Biennale; a solo show goes on view at New York's newly reopened Kent Gallery late this month; he will give a series of "machine" performances at Documenta XIII, in Kassel in 2012; and a full retrospective is scheduled for 2013 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Foulkes and I spoke this summer at his Los Angeles workspace and residence, tucked within a compound of warehouses near Chinatown. Downstairs, the high-ceilinged studio is filled with half-finished artworks, drawers containing tiny portraits, and slabs of wood covered in animal hides and upholstery. The balcony, where he lives, is a vast cabinet of antique wonders and dusty bones. Adjacent to his studio is a room he calls the Church of Art, his private performance venue and rehearsal space, housing the machine, a PA system and a few dozen folding chairs. During our conversation, Foulkes was impassioned and wild-eyed. He often answered questions in song, improvising wildly on three instruments at once.

ROSS SIMONINI Can you talk about your relationship with the current state of art?

LLYN FOULKES I've had a problem with corporate art since the beginning. I had my first exhibition nine months before Andy Warhol showed his soup cans. I just walked in and said, "Oh, that's cute." It's like a joke. That's all I could think of it. I'm looking at the paintings and, well, anybody could have done them. No reason to treat them with any value as a painting. And yet, I knew that one of my huge paintings which had recently been on display and took seven years to complete would sell for far less than one of his soup cans.

SIMONINI Should price be in proportion to the amount of work someone puts into a painting?

FOULKES Yeah. There should be work put into it. Great jazz players have to put a lot of work into their art. I respect that. I believe in the process.

SIMONINI But so much new art doesn't hold to that set of values, right?

FOULKES What gives an artist the right to act this way? I know it comes from the whole Duchamp tradition, but suddenly any old piece of shit has value. I get tired of that. And then in the '70s, because of this whole thing, they declare painting dead! Then all this installation art comes about. And it's still all going that way. I heard from people who went to the Venice Biennale that the majority of work was installation art. I get tired of installation art because it takes up a lot of room. So many artists can't show their work because of one installation.

SIMONINI I would say that your work, like *Pop* [1990], which I saw at the Geffen [at L.A. MOCA], was a kind of installation. It was in a room with a particular lighting and particularly dark cinematic environment. Isn't that what an installation is? Controlling the whole environment of a work—not just a framed square on a wall?

FOULKES It did not start as an installation, but considering its complexity
it ended as one.

SIMONINI That's an important distinction?

FOULKES Of course! I remember when I went to the Claremont schools and visited all these artists in their studios. There was a girl with all feathers in a room. That's too easy. That's not right.

SIMONINI Because it's easy?

FOULKES Anybody can think.

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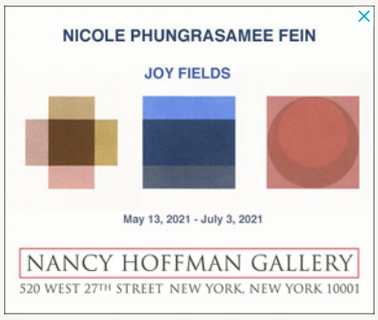

Anybody can imagine. Not everybody can do it.

SIMONINI Couldn't you say the same thing about painting?

FOULKES Did I say all paintings are good?

SIMONINI Well, you're making a claim about the overblown profundity of installation art. But it's also true of every kind of art, including painting.

FOULKES I just don't think the art world is open enough to artists these days. It should be open. I'm lucky —the only reason I'm showing new work is because the curator at the Hammer [Ali Subotnick] showed my work [in the 2009 exhibition "Nine Lives: Visionary Artists from L.A."] and it caused a stir. I've never had someone stand behind me like she has.

SIMONINI I saw some of those Hammer pieces. They looked great.

FOULKES No you didn't.

SIMONINI Not in person, but . . .

FOULKES Well, you have a three-dimensional painting like *The Lost Frontier* [1997-2005]. You stand in a black room and look at that thing and you say, "That's the deepest painting I've ever seen." That's important. You don't get that in a photo reproduction, like you saw.

SIMONINI So do you think reproduction serves your work poorly?

FOULKES You can see the image, but not the dimension, not the light. There's just a big difference with seeing these works in person. [Documenta XIII curator] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev visited my studio and after seeing my new work in progress along with the machine asked me immediately to participate in Documenta. I don't know if that would have happened from just seeing reproductions.

SIMONINI What was your connection with the artists who showed at Ferus Gallery?

FOULKES My only connection to the people at Ferus is that I went to school with them. Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode. Robert Irwin started to teach at Chouinard. Ed got into Irwin's class. Emerson Woelffer was influential. Richards Ruben had two shows at Ferus, but was totally ostracized after I was kicked out. He was the one who got me in. I had taken some drawings over to Ferus that had won me some prizes and I got into a group show with Kenny Price. Then I had a one-man show in 1961 which included the burned blackboards and chair now owned by the Norton Simon Museum. I never got along with Irwin. Because Ferus was changing. Ed Kienholz left because Irving Blum took it over. So, really there were *two* Ferus galleries. It eventually became more of a Light and Space gallery. So many artists left, including me. I was kicked out because Irwin, Bengston and I did not get along. But I was at a different place then. I was painting with tar and even had a painting with dead possums in it—real dead possums. All that will come back out again, though, with the retrospective.

SIMONINI How do you preserve those pieces with carcasses?

FOULKES I had to throw that painting out.

SIMONINI You have a dead cat in your very large, mixed-medium painting *The Lost Frontier*. Did you preserve that?

FOULKES I soaked it in salt, dried it all out and then plasticized it with acrylic medium. In fact, I almost thought I'd lost it. It was stiff and then it got all limp and soft and wrinkled. But I saved it. It's weird because the way I positioned it, it looks like a cougar.

SIMONINI Is that a reference to the mountain lions that roam Los Angeles County?

FOULKES Yeah. It's a Southern California thing. So are all the rocks I depict. Los Angeles used to be known for its rocks.

SIMONINI Can you talk a little about the dimensional aspects of *The Lost Frontier*?

FOULKES I consider it a painting but using all different kinds of materials. Canvas is one thing, but I wanted more dimension than oil on canvas would allow. These dimensional pieces start more like paintings and then I work with the surface, pushing and pulling it to create the illusion of a deeper space. Every element of a painting has dimension and finds its place in the end.

SIMONINI How deep are you talking?

FOULKES A few inches out, a few inches back. When people see it, though, they think it's a lot deeper.

SIMONINI You achieve that with lighting?

FOULKES Yes, particularly in *The Lost Frontier*. Everything's based on shadows, but there're no painted shadows.

SIMONINI Do you use particular lights?

FOULKES Mostly 65-watt tungsten. And each painting should be in a room by itself. People always see pieces in this way and they say, "Wow, how big is that? Sixteen feet?" Well, no, it's eight feet. But that's what

the lighting does—it makes the piece expand. I'm stretching the painting out by forcing all the light in.

SIMONINI It's not something you decide afterward, right? You're working with light the entire time?

FOULKES I work with light from the beginning.

SIMONINI When I saw *Pop*, there was a viewing line you couldn't cross.

FOULKES I don't let anybody get too close to the paintings. Not only do I not want people to touch them, I want them to experience the whole reality of the space.

SIMONINI You are depicted in both of these works.

FOULKES That's right. It's a younger version of me in *The Lost Frontier*. In *Pop*, my daughter is putting her hand on my shoulder. To the right of my son is a calendar with the date they bombed Hiroshima. . . . Let me show you the machine now. [*We walk into the Church of Art.*]

SIMONINI Can you travel with this thing?

FOULKES They're going to ship it to Germany for Documenta. It comes apart. When I travel with it, the horn section is detachable and fits on my front seat. The rest of it fits in the back of my van.

SIMONINI You've been building this over the years.

FOULKES Yeah, but the horns are all the same as when I started. I added a few more bells.

SIMONINI Where do you acquire all these old parts?

FOULKES I started collecting them when I formed The Rubber Band. I'd go to old automobile swap meets. I could find an old horn at the bottom of a pile of rusty auto parts. Some of these bells are from when I was 11 and I'd go to the Chicago Junk Company in my hometown to search for different parts. I got these three at a hardware store in 1948.

SIMONINI What is this instrument here?

FOULKES It's an octavin. They don't make them anymore. I got it for $150 from the Recycler. They used to use them in symphony orchestras. [*Plays the instrument, whose sound has a reedy, pitch-bending quality, and sings*] "There is a ghost in Hollywood. I see him every night. He walks alone. He's made of bone and skin all shiny white. I am told he's very old indeed. He's really quite a sight. He shakes his head, his eyes turn red. Whoooooooooa. I have no name, I have no fame. I did not make it. I am ashamed. But as a ghost you'll hear me boast that I'm the toast of Hollywood."

SIMONINI Do you ever play jazz standards? Your songs have that quality.

FOULKES No, I play songs about L.A. and songs about myself.

SIMONINI Your art and your music have a particularly American flavor.

FOULKES I think when I go to Germany they will definitely appreciate the American aspect of my music. I'm very American but I'm not a capitalist. There's a difference between capitalism and democracy. We're beginning to think they're the same thing. No! Who's a better capitalist now? The Communist Chinese!

SIMONINI A lot of your work has an anti-corporate and specifically anti-Disney message.

FOULKES It all started when I read the first page from the Mickey Mouse Club handbook written in 1934. They talked about how they implant things in children's minds so they absorb them almost unconsciously. It's very far-reaching. I had a show called "The Legend of Mickey Rat" in 1996 here in Los Angeles. A local critic, in the L.A. *Times*, accused me of McCarthyism for going after Disney. I wrote a letter back and said I was concerned about children and what it was doing to them. I included the page of the Club booklet that talks about how they implant ideas. But the *Times* deleted that part. Why? Because the *Times* supports the whole Disney operation. Everybody's brainwashed by Disney. Go into a 99-cent store and it's all plastic, packaged Hannah Montana and Disney crap. All made in China! In my art, I've used three things like these: Disney, Superman and Lone Ranger! That's what America is. A Lone Ranger. And now it's getting to us, right? [*Sings*]"My father told me if I ate my vegetables and clean my plate, that I could be a cowboy, just like the Lone Ranger. My mother told me if I took my medicine and read my book, that I could be a cowboy, just like the Lone Ranger. I got a rifle. I got a pony. My mother said I could play outside if I finished my macaroni. I shot the postman in the head. I rode away 'cause he was dead. Then I sang a song just like the Lone Ranger." *[Ends with a bell solo.*]

SIMONINI What sort of music influenced these songs?

FOULKES My first idol as a kid was Spike Jones. It was cartoon music that I loved.

SIMONINI Would you say your songs are critical of L.A.?

FOULKES Well, I've been here a long time. So yeah, I'm critical of what they've done to it.

SIMONINI What have they done?

FOULKES The commercialism. It happens everywhere. L.A. is famous for tearing things down. I remember being in art class, on Bunker Hill, drawing the Russian Hotel. I remember someone said, "You know they're tearing all these down." Because L.A. had no powerful historical society. It was all Hollywood. I watched them tear all these things down. I was there when they tore down the Brown Derby. When I came here the

two tallest buildings were City Hall and the Ridgefield towers. All these cities look the same now. Before, cities looked different. They had an identity. Now Walmarts and shopping centers are everywhere.

SIMONINI It's globalism.

FOULKES Well, yeah.

SIMONINI Essentially, though, it's the same reason you get to go to Documenta.

FOULKES Well, international art shows have been around for a long time.

SIMONINI Yes, but the same principle could apply to your art. You bring your art over there. People from all over the world see it and start mimicking it. Suddenly, your style of art is everywhere, like Walmart.

FOULKES Believe me, I know. It's my one fear about bringing my machine to Documenta.

SIMONINI Is it nice to have some recognition now? You've been receiving awards and showing in museums for the last few years.

FOULKES Yeah, I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to do any of this painting, with my eyes. I'll be able to do the machine though. That's for sure. I just got to keep my health. I got to stop this [*points to the cigarette he's smoking*].

SIMONINI Especially around paint thinner.

FOULKES I remember working in the '60s in a room with no ventilation using lacquer thinner and people walked into the studio and they'd go [*gasps*]. But I'm still alive. I'm 76. Because, you know, there's another theory, too. There's those people who only eat health food and they won't touch anything and they disinfect everything. These people get sick more than anyone I know. Why? Because they don't have the immunity. They haven't had anything to fight against. I've had a lot to fight against.

ROSS SIMONINI is a writer, critic and musician living in New York.

Solo exhibition at Kent Fine Art, New York, Oct. 27-Dec. 17. Selected Foulkes works on view in "ILLUMInations" at the Venice Biennale, through Nov. 27.

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