Artbound Arts & Culture

Llyn Foulkes: The 'Torment' of Painting and the Joy of Music

By Drew Tewksbury
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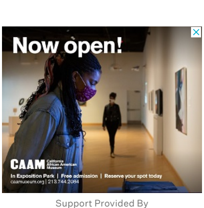

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They're the usual suspects of Los Angeles art.

John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin; they're all names that emerged from the 1960s' cadre of "rebel" artists who became household names in the decades to come. But one artist who showed alongside them at Los Angeles' storied Ferus Gallery has somehow evaded the same notoriety as his peers from the era: Llyn Foulkes.
In the 1960s, Foulkes exhibited alongside these art world luminaries, but he never quite achieved the same kind of widespread notice as a member of Los Angeles' art canon. **A new exhibition at the Hammer Museum (February 3 - May 19)** may change that, revealing the trajectory of Foulkes' edgy works in the largest retrospective of his art to date.

Foulkes' art traverses a wide swath of styles and media. His assemblage art in the 1960s echoes his experiences as a soldier in Europe, where he witnessed the war-mangled cityscapes punctuated with gnarled ruins and buildings charred black. His scorched earth palette and found objects offered striking vignettes of post-Apocalyptic environments. In the 1970s, he digressed into desert paintings thinly coated with color -- perhaps portraits of a Venusian landscape -- revealing the simple beauty hidden in a pile of rocks. "My feeling is that you want to go into the picture as far as you can," he says, "where you feel like you can just walk into the picture." From these inanimate objects, Foulkes embarked on his most confrontational works, the so-called "bloody head" paintings. If there is an American equivalent to Francis Bacon, these grotesque and eye-catching images could be it. "I had a lot of anger with my father because he left when I was a baby," Foulkes says, "so I made my fathers up. [I] started doing these bloody heads and that had a lot to do with going into therapy. Through that, I started to feel my father, and images came out."

As a musician, Foulkes' band made something of a splash in the psychedelic era, landing him spots opening for the Doors. He even performed on the "Tonight Show," with his quirky jazz band, which once played with illustrator and jazz musician Robert Crumb's troupe. Today, he lives in the Brewery Art complex and performs on his Machine, a hodge-podge musical instrument assemblage, including horns, drums, and a xylophone.

Artbound recently caught up with Foulkes for an extended interview to discuss the psychology behind his works, how music soothes his soul, and what he really thinks about the art establishment.

Artbound's very interested in location and how the human geography of Southern California influences the artistic development of people. Could you talk about the role California played in the development of your work?

Well, when I came down to go to art school I came to Los Angeles like many other artists did at my time -- it was L.A., it was Hollywood -- you grew up in that sort of thing. I came from a small town, a car would drive down the block with a California license plate, and the kids would look in to see if it was a movie star. So you come to L.A., and I was very interested in the rocks in L.A. and in Chatsworth. When I first saw outside the city, that's where rocks really influenced my painting in the beginning, and they still do. I still do rocks and mountains. A lot of what I do in my paintings has to do with the brainwashing in Hollywood and the music industry, I'm very extremely anti-Disney and so that has permeated my work for quite a while, the stock market of art has permeated my work, I'm probably one of the only artist that talks against that kind of stuff.

I think it's interesting in your work, the depictions of Disney, of Mickey Mouse. Taking these iconic images that are part of advertising and capitalism and you twist that a bit.

Well, I don't know if I twist it, it's right there. It's controlling everything. My feeling is that we have been pretty well brainwashed for years. And particularly since Mickey Mouse Club in 1934, the dark spot planting things in children's minds. And you see where we are today. You water down society with one-dimensional thinking. People are selling their souls to Disney. Music has gotten pretty well brainwashed into people's heads. You can look at the Disney channel and look at the old cartoons from the 1930s and 40s and they've taken the original music out and put rock music to it, rap music to it and so all these kids growing up don't know what kind of music went with it. So that kind of music has been totally dismissed by our society in relationship to young children. Young children don't know anything about history.

What about your own forays into music. What got you into making music in the first place, and also, what approaches do you take making visual art and music? Is that the same creative process or something totally different?

Not the same creative process. Even though I go back and forth, I do talk a lot about the same things. I have Mickey Mouse in my song, I have Lone Ranger in my song. There's a crossover there. My music started when I was ten years old, that's when I first heard Spike Jones and his music was like cartoon music, and then I got into a band and started to play the drums in high school. Then started getting into jazz, got up to contemporary jazz. And all that stuff you can hear in my music. It's always been a part of my life. I've played music just about as long as I've painted.

What kind of creative processes are different between writing a song or making a painting? Does it come from the same place?

That's a difficult one. Painting has been a little more of a torment, whereas music has been more of a joy. So there is a difference. I'm not the kind of person that just goes into the wood and draws. It's a monumental process, sometimes they can take me years to do. Songs that I write, they come at different times or when something happens. Like when I'm in love, angry at Disney, or what is going on politically. Of course, the same thing happens in my painting.

It's interesting that you describe it as a torment, could you explain that to me?

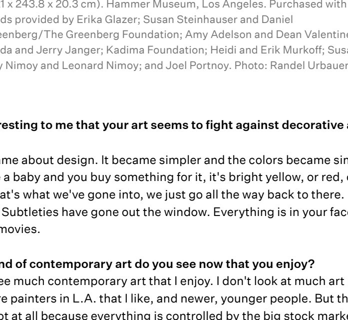
Let's put it this way, in a certain sense you're kind of doing therapy at the same time. I've had different points in my life when I changed my thinking about painting. I won the Paris Biennial while I was teaching at UCLA, but I also felt like I was losing my soul. So I stopped doing it and went in and started doing these bloody heads and that had a lot to do with going into therapy.

"Painting has been a little more of a torment, whereas music has been more of a joy."

The paintings started to change and I started to get more dimensional. I started to think about painting and what a picture meant. A lot of people now do installation. People like [Frank] Stella who does those things that come off the wall. And my feeling was "My God!" You want to run away. My feeling is that you want to go into the picture as far as I can. So the most recent things I've done have been the most dimensional things I've done, where you feel like you can just walk into the picture.

The bloody heads feels to me so in-your-face, they're hard to look at, yet beautiful at the same time. It's interesting that you describe them as coming out during a process of therapy, can you describe that more?

Well, let's see. I had a lot of anger with my father because he left when I was a baby, so I made my fathers up. My fathers were people like Spike Jones, Salvador Dali, Charlie Chaplin. I followed them, and they've never left me. So I had a lot of anger at my father. I started going through therapy with an older man who was like 70. He was Jewish and he only wrote one book in his life and it was called "The Legend of Henry Ford" and he looked like Henry Ford. Of course, Henry Ford was anti-Semitic. Through that, I started to feel with my father, and images came out. And also political stuff, Nixon, and even Wounded Knee. I started thinking about what was happening. I thought about my early experience being in Germany in the army, nine years after the war. The buildings were all bombed out and it made quite an impression on me. My first things were burned blackboards and chairs, big black crosses. Then I started painting on canvas and flattening it out more, and that's when I started to get into art magazines.



Llyn Foulkes. The Lost Frontier, 1997-2005. Mixed mediums. 87 x 96 x 8 in. (221 x 243.8 x 20.3 cm). Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased with funds provided by Erika Glazer; Susan Steinhauser and Daniel Greenberg/The Greenberg Foundation; Amy Adelson and Dean Valentine; Linda and Jerry Janger; Kadima Foundation; Heidi and Erik Murkoff; Susan Bay Nimoy and Leonard Nimoy; and Joel Portnoy. Photo: Randel Urbauer.

It's interesting to me that your art seems to fight against decorative art.

Art became about design. It became simpler and the colors became simpler. If you take a baby and you buy something for it, it's bright yellow, or red, or bright blue. That's what we've gone into, we just go all the way back to there. It's much simpler. Subtleties have gone out the window. Everything is in your face. Kind of like the movies.

What kind of contemporary art do you see now that you enjoy?
I don't see much contemporary art that I enjoy. I don't look at much art now. There are painters in L.A. that I like, and newer, younger people. But they don't get a shot at all because everything is controlled by the big stock market of art. And Gagossian, he was a guy who graduated in business administration when I was going to U.C.L.A. He started a poster gallery, and now he has the biggest art gallery in the world and he's defining what is contemporary art and how much it's worth.

Did you ever think of moving from L.A., being in a different art market? New York, London?

No, I would never live in New York. I like L.A.. It can get cold in my studio in winter, I wouldn't want to be in New York. I wouldn't say New York has rejected me, but I couldn't get my retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, or the Guggenheim. The reasons I couldn't get those big major museums are the same as those who are on the board of MOCA here, they're all those who are in the stock market of art, all those particular people and they keep pushing those people all the time because they are in their collections. And I talk against that. They don't want that.

Who were artists that you looked up to throughout your career?

I didn't look up to a lot of people. Only the big artists, de Kooning, the older Flemish paintings, Rembrandt. There weren't many artists I looked up to. There are artists who I liked and thought were saying something interesting like Kienholz, Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, some of those people. They influenced everybody out here.

That's interesting that you bring up Kienholz because that is somebody who I see a little bit in your work. Did you meet with these guys?

I mostly stayed on my own. When I worked at the Ferus Gallery, Irving would call me up and say, "Billy Ells is having a party tonight. We'd like you to be there." And I would never go. I had a kid and a wife. I was driving a taxi. I had to work. A lot of those people didn't have to work, they had people supporting them. Besides I wasn't that interested in them or their work. Besides Kienholz had left anyway. When I left Ferus Gallery in '62, Kienholz was already gone.

For some artists, it's difficult to keep on your own trajectory, so it's important not to see other people's work. Is that true of you?

It's kind of that way. For instance, I never listen to music when I paint. Never, ever. If I want to hear some music, I go practice on my machine. I don't listen to music that much anymore, and I don't look at a lot of paintings anymore.

It sounds like you've compartmentalized your life in two different places, art and music, like they are two separate things, but it seems like the machine you've built is a sculptural piece in itself.

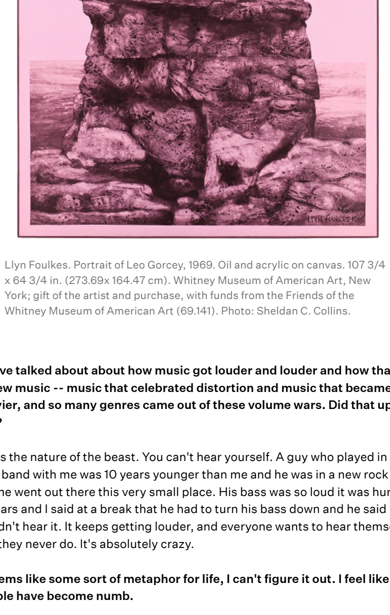
I was never interested in one man bands. In fact, it's funny 'cause when Christine McKenney wrote the Ferus book, and in it, she starts talking about my interest in one man bands. I was never interested in one man bands. It just happened. I had a band, and after the rock band, I went back to my roots and started a band that was a cross between jazz and Spike Jones and that band got on the "Tonight Show" in nine months. Then I pushed it up until 1978, and then all of a sudden I needed more control over what I was doing. You would lose people or things would change. I needed the same kind of control I had over my art. I don't paint with other people. I've never done that. I'll still play with other musicians. But there is so much that is going on in my machine. It's sort of the opposite of everything that is going on now, it's all electronic and everyone is playing guitar now. It's the opposite. I'm not liking a lot of the music that is being done now. It's just me.

What made you want to start playing rock music?

Oh that is a different thing. When I was in the army, I could have stayed in the 7th army band playing the drums. I had a choice of going to Germany or staying in Texas and I wanted to see Germany. I played in a jazz band there, I kept up my playing but I never really had a band after that.

"I think I've been fighting against something the whole time."

Then I went to art school in 1965 and a friend of mine Rick Smith, a poet, had a rock band, and wanted me to play the drums. I didn't really play rock drums, but I learned, and I was pretty good, we played alongside The Doors, The Byrds, on the [Sunset] Strip you know. And the last time we played together, we opened for Smokey Robinson and the Miracles at the old Cheetah Club, which used to be the Aragon Ballroom in Venice. It was so loud, it was crazy. My hands were bleeding because they had these huge drumsticks because they didn't amplify the drums like they do now. So I stopped doing it and went back to my roots.



Llyn Foulkes. Portrait of Leo Gorcey, 1969. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 107 3/4 x 64 3/4 in. (273.69x 164.47 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the artist and purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art (69.141). Photo: Sheldan C. Collins.

You've talked about about how music got louder and louder and how that led to new music -- music that celebrated distortion and music that became heavier, and so many genres came out of these volume wars. Did that upset you?

It was the nature of the beast. You can't hear yourself. A guy who played in the rock band with me was 10 years younger than me and he was in a new rock band and he went out there this very small place. His bass was so loud it was hurting my ears and I said at a break that he had to turn his bass down and he said he couldn't hear it. It keeps getting louder, and everyone wants to hear themselves and they never do. It's absolutely crazy.

It seems like some sort of metaphor for life, I can't figure it out. I feel like people have become numb.

That's the point of it. People have become so spatial and so loud that you get into a trance sort of. So you see everybody with their hands raised up, not like they are dancing like you used to see in the big bands. They didn't need to turn it way up and everybody was dancing.

When you began playing rock music, it sounds like you were playing with iconoclastic counter culture people. Was that something you were comfortable with?

I don't know about comfortable with. No, I was never that comfortable with rock music anyway, it was just an excuse to be playing the drums, you know. Certain kinds of rock music I do like before it got too loud. In a certain sense, it was a lot better.

Throughout your career you've been through many art movements, is there any one that you really loved?

That's a tough one. I never even thought that way. When the Pop Art movement came in, I got more popular because my paintings flattened out and got some Pop-ish elements. Everything was a new experience to me. I never thought about that I was excited about a new movement. I was just doing my thing. In fact, there are movements that really bothered me, which was installation, conceptual art. I get real irritated with a lot of conceptual art because my feeling is that art is supposed to be visual. I'm looking at a thing and it doesn't turn me on visually. I'm not the kind of person that goes, "Okay, I'm gonna go around and try to figure this thing out." And then if you figure it out, then you win the prize. It still doesn't effect you visually.

So you would say that a lot of what you do is in opposition...

A lot of my stuff is in opposition. My machine. My paintings. I think you're right, I think I've been fighting against something the whole time.

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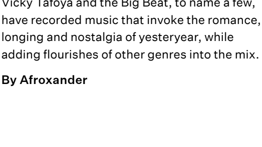
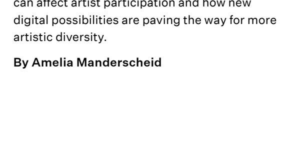


A New Generation of Musicians Are Revitalizing Chicano Soul Music

A new crop of artists from the Southland have taken on the mantle of Chicano soul and oldies. Groups such as Thee Sacred Souls, Thee Sinseers, Los Yesterdays, The Altons, and Vicky Tafoya and the Big Beat, to name a few, have recorded music that invoke the romance, longing and nostalgia of yesteryear, while adding flourishes of other genres into the mix.

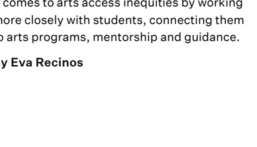
By Afroxander



From Land Art to NFTs: How Artistic Mediums Affect Artist Demographics

Environmental art came out of the movement to reject commercialization, yet its capital-intensive approach also shut out certain artist demographics. Learn how artistic mediums can affect artist participation and how new digital possibilities are paving the way for more artistic diversity.

By Amelia Manderscheid



Bridging the Gap: Greetings from South-Central Connects Youth to the Arts

Karina Yánez started Greetings from South-Central to connect her community to arts education resources they may not know about. Now, it is looking to further level the field when it comes to arts access inequities by working more closely with students, connecting them to arts programs, mentorship and guidance.

By Eva Recinos

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