

Art & Object

Altered States: The Transformative Art of Fred Tomaselli



Anna Ostoya, *Leap*, 2020.

Courtesy the Artist and Bortolami Gallery, New York Photo: Kristian Laudrup

Visually striking, Fred Tomaselli's multimedia paintings are accumulations of collaged body parts, pharmaceuticals, plant-life, and paint. Images of eyes and hands—along with clippings of fish, flowers, and birds—are culled from printed matter and then juxtaposed with leaves, pills, and painted forms to create epic allegories and hypnotic abstractions. Bound in multiple layers of clear resin, these prepared elements come together to powerfully represent personal galaxies, mystical realms, and contemporary visions of paradise.

"All of my work has been heavily influenced by my growing up near Disneyland, at the heart of Southern California's theme-park culture," Tomaselli shared in an early interview. "In my youth, I was pretty much a ne'er-do-well stoner mallrat." After graduating from California State University, Fullerton in 1982, he began making installations that dealt with perceptions of light and space by presenting a lo-tech trippy view of the cosmos. He exhibited these works in a number of local group shows, including the ironically titled *Crap*, organized by the infamous L.A. artist Paul McCarthy. Then in 1985, at age twenty-nine, Tomaselli packed his bags and moved to Brooklyn, where he became an early settler in the soon-to-be thriving artist's community of Williamsburg. Over the past

thirty-five years, Tomaselli has established an international art career—exhibiting his celebrated hybrid paintings and works on paper with such high-profile galleries as London’s White Cube and James Cohan in New York and at major museums, like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, which all have his works in their permanent collections.

Returning to James Cohan for his sixth solo show since joining the gallery in 2000, Tomaselli is presenting eight new resin paintings and fourteen painted collages, which employ appropriated text and imagery related to current events from the front pages of *The New York Times*.

“I started my *New York Times* series in 2005 with a photograph of Bernie Ebbers, the disgraced WorldCom executive, being perp-walked with his wife while surrounded by paparazzi,” Tomaselli told *Time Out New York* in 2014. “It reminded me of Masaccio’s *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, a work that had previously inspired me. I carried the paper around with me all day and kept looking at it and eventually started drawing on it.”

Scanning photographs and texts from the newspaper, he creates digital files and prints the imagery on watercolor paper before visually altering the content with gouache and collage. Primarily focused on the picture, he includes just enough of the headlines and related copy to provide a context for the transformed piece.

When working at home during the quarantine, the artist started a new group of collages dealing with the coronavirus pandemic and continued the series into the summer and fall by highlighting the economic downturn, police brutality and the resulting protests, the devastating disasters related to climate change, and the impending election. On a March 13 picture of two doctors exiting a hospital tent in Italy, Tomaselli painted a dynamic abstract portal, through which everyone seemed to be entering a new realm, while on an August 21 photo of Joe Biden closing the Democratic convention, he collaged multiple images of the candidate’s eyes and mouth in painted geometric circles to turn reality into a hallucination of truth.

The new paintings in the show further blur the boundary between figuration and abstraction—the real and the imagined—by incorporating shaped sections of text from the *Times* alongside painted forms and collaged bits of nature. An untitled painting of a dead bird, composed from images of plastic objects, captures the creature in a field of flowers with a whirlwind of interlocking, collaged shapes circle above, while another untitled painting referencing environmental devastation depicts an explosive gameboard-like universe floating through darkened skies above a fiery landscape.

Bringing the noise and chaos of the outer world into the inner sanctum of the studio, the artist uses the cut-up, absurdist style of the Beat poets to weave words into his collaged and painted visions—melding his love of nature with the cacophony of the news. “My work has always been a kind of chemical cocktail,” Tomaselli aptly states in an accompanying video, “and when I got rid of the pharmaceutical chemicals, I guess I made up for it by using more and more of the buzz of the media.”

There are two additional New York painting shows by women artists that marvelously mix the representational with the abstract: **Anna Ostoya**’s *Motions* exhibition at the nearby Bortolami gallery and **Cecily Brown**’s second solo with Paula Cooper Gallery in the Chelsea Arts District.

Like Tomaselli, the Kraków-born, New York-based Ostoya brings the real world into her private realm through a marriage of the human body with collaged materials and elements of the news media. Sketching the outline of her form directly onto paper, she then photographs the line drawing and repeats it over and over to create a complex, layered composition, which simulates movement. Finally, Ostoya fills the overlapping figures with paint, fabric, metallic leaf, shopping bags, newsprint, and photographic imagery. In *Leap*, a repeated female figure, rendered in paint and metallic leaf,

passes over a massive crowd of men in suits, composed from inkjet prints of mediated imagery, while in *Float*, bodies drift in a surging sea of color and paint-stained rags that were used to clean the artist's brushes. And throwing the field of commerce into the mix, *Forward* portrays people seemingly swimming through areas of collaged stock exchange numbers, transferred news stories, plastic bags reading Thank You for Shopping Here, and paper mâché pulp made from recycled newspapers.

Step recalls Marcel Duchamp's famous *Nude Descending a Staircase*, as other paintings by the talented artist conjure compositions by Francis Picabia and Gino Severini. Not only dynamically collaging materials, Ostoya compellingly collages modernist movements like Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism with mesmerizing results.

Similarly, the London-born, New York artist Cecily Brown mixes a range of art historical motifs in her densely layered, allegorical canvases. Composed with countless brushstrokes, Brown's paintings immerse the figurative in an immensely rich realm of abstraction. Landscapes and still-life paintings by seventeenth-century Flemish artist Frans Snyders serve as the point of departure for Brown's *The Demon Menagerie*, which references the Old Master's eccentric canvases capturing congregations of singing birds in broken trees, and her encompassing triptych *The Splendid Table*, which riffs on Snyders' delightful depictions of luscious tabletop feasts.

Several works from the artist's *Bedroom Paintings*, which display erotic entanglements in a flurry of brushstrokes, act as a more introspective counterpoint to the wildlife and culinary canvases. Made during the recent lockdown, the paintings *When this kiss is over* and *All I want is a room with a view*, which beckon back to the artist's earliest work, expose fleshy figures in moments of sensual ecstasy, while enchantingly keeping the eye of the viewer in motion and the mind philosophically engaged.