

ITALIAN AMERICANA ART

SUMMER 2010



Iceman Crucified



Sam's Dream (detail)



Wallstreet

The Utopian Vision of an Immigrant's Son: the Oil on Canvas Legacy of Ralph Fasanella

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My father's parents were products of the nineteenth century reared in Lavello Italy, a city dating back to the Middle Ages. They immigrated to New York City, where Giuseppe found work in Little Italy but eventually acquired routes delivering ice to Brooklyn apartments, his wife Geneva taking work in the needle trades. They prospered enough to relocate to the South Bronx by 1925. The modernizations of the industrial age proved too much for my grandfather and he returned to Italy, leaving the now emancipated Geneva behind with four boys and two girls.

So my father was really raised in two cities. The lower Manhattan of his early youth was a teeming immigrant enclave, dense with a chaotic mix of specialty food vendors, light industrial workshops, overcrowded apartments and organized crime. The move north of Manhattan to the South Bronx introduced the young Ralph Fasanella to open spaces, sandlot baseball and the impacts of upward mobility and suburban expansion. The combination of these two city experiences left an indelible impression on my father. In a subconscious way, he rose above the city and saw its strengths and weaknesses. In his 1947 painting *Wall Street*, he paints a darkened alley hemmed in by uniform black buildings with coffin-like rooftops covering three-fourths of the canvas, an ominous church at the end of the narrow alley/street emits a dim light. At the top of the canvas is an urban waterway glowing with an eerie orange light. My father saw in his mind's eye, and depicts on this canvas, the literal weight of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The soul crushing emptiness of an urban setting stripped of its economic activity left an indelible mark on his psyche.

In one of his early large paintings, *Sam's Dream*, my father depicts his brother's dream of escaping the oppressing atmosphere of the city, similar to so many immigrants and children of immigrants who made the exodus from little Italy. In his homage to his brother's yearnings painted in 1948, you can see that my father does not embrace the notion of suburbia. The scale of the buildings is disturbing, the ground erratically undulates, the trees are stark and bare. His depiction of his brother's idealized world bears more resemblance to a cemetery in turmoil than the tranquil setting Sam surely had in mind. Most disturbing to my father and expressed in this canvas is that the image he felt his brother had in mind is largely devoid of people. For my father, people animated a landscape. Without them, Ralph Fasanella was in a purgatory.

My father had an incredibly active mind, incessantly absorbing new information and forming a theoretical and visual collage of ideas from the events of his daily life. He tried his hand at a number of things from petty theft and odd jobs in his pre-teen years to his own ice route; a stint as a machinist's apprentice, a career as a union organizer and later the joint owner of a service station in the Bronx, but he was always frustrated. The inequities of the first half of the twentieth century made no sense to him. He could "see" how people should live, it was so goddamn clear. By the time he reached his early thirties he had begun to express his thoughts with a paintbrush. After a decade of practice, his thoughts exploded onto canvas. His facility for expressing his ideas had nothing to do with formal training. He taught himself to paint by reading about artists and visiting museums. Breughel, Goya, the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Picasso, Rivera, The Ashcan School: he read about them voraciously, saw what

works of theirs that he could and then painted energetically through the night, fueled by coffee and the power of his ideas. For everyday inspiration, Ralph remained a “city guy” drawn to inexpensive luncheonettes where you could sit indefinitely for the price of a cup of coffee. He was most comfortable in a small crowded place, run by an owner just barely getting by. If he could smoke and talk politics or baseball with the regulars, gripe about the struggles of working class life, the dignity of work on a factory floor, the need for a decent wage and time to read, play, eat wholesome meals, live a thoughtful life, he was in his element. What he had on his mind he spoke with a self-taught, urban eloquence peppered with profanities that

could be hard on the ear, but faultless in its line of reasoning. His paintings are much the same. The perspective may be off, the colors unrealistic, the scale surreal but the concept(s) he is trying to communicate are clear, articulate, startling in their insight, powerful in their presentation. All of his paintings intentionally or unintentionally tell us what is wrong with our society and / or show us how to live. His technique constantly evolved, he had no one right way, his work is not dogmatic. What drove him to paint was ideological passion. Not a passion for the art of painting, but a passion for the lives of the people.

By 1960, my father had battled for decades against injustice, passed into



Otero's House

middle age, and moved a bit further north of the city. He could envision what the leading scholar on his work, Paul D'Ambrosio, refers to as an “Urban Utopia.” He could see a more just future and felt compelled to show us what it would look like. He had learned from his life in the two cities of his youth that there is a certain density of population that is healthy for the human animal. We need the social interaction of semi-urban settings as long as we are not deprived of natural spaces in which to rest, play and interact. His most adept depiction of his ideal human environment is shown in his 1969 painting *Across the River*. Combining the best aspects of the Bronx, Yonkers and Dobbs Ferry, New York — environments he knew well — *Across the River* shows us what today’s urban planners would call a moderate, density-mixed-use economy. Clean animated apartment buildings are set in close proximity to small industrial employment, a “small town” retail center, a nature preserve and agriculture out on the periphery of the settlement, all made accessible by a network of roads, light rail and bicycle paths.

His 1975 painting *Otero's House* provides a close-up view of the ideal dwellings in his utopia across the river. The home of Frank Otero, the owner of his long time haunt, the Dobbs Ferry Diner, the house is portrayed as a clean bright freestanding stucco building with a slate roof sitting on a small plot surrounded by similar dwellings in scale and economy. It is the American ideal of the two world wars’ era — house with a white picket fence — re-envisioned in a more urban form. The yard is reduced, the fence is an industrial chain link, the neighbors a stone’s throw away. But there is an intimacy of a personal world. The interiors of his urban utopia are



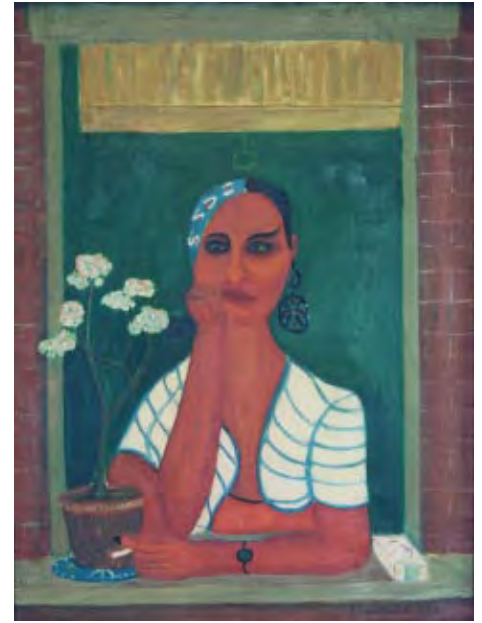
Across the River

no longer bleak. They are filled with light and color, books and art, people sharing meals and moments together. In his 1975 portrait, *Antoinette in Studio*, you can see the contrast to the *Latin Lady in Window*. Though he chose to use the setting of his own studio, he depicts not only Antoinette, but her environment cluttered with ephemera, flooded with light, opening a window to a suburban setting of nature and neighbors.

In the early 1980's I took a trip with my father to visit one of his sisters, and later that day, to his old gas station in the Bronx. For years we had been going to his sister Tess's apartment, but had not visited the gas station nearby (Antoinette's portrait could be said to depict Tess as well). The atmosphere of her apartment home was filled with light, art, books, working class politics and communal meals. Tess and her husband John lived in a post-war brick apartment building on a densely populated street. For many years it was an urban utopia: my cousins Genie and Andrea could walk home from school, Tess and John were friendly with the retailers in the neighborhood, the Bronx Zoo and the New York Botanical Gardens were close. The woods, fields, and farms of Westchester County were a short ride north. By the eighties, the neighborhood had changed, the light industry had moved out, people were cramming into substandard spaces, the streets were becoming less friendly, the stores absentee-owned. What my father

and Tess had left behind in the tenements of their youth had encroached on the Bronx neighborhood. When we arrived at his old gas station it was clear the transformation was complete. There in front of us was an abandoned building, crack cocaine being sold openly in a parking lot, full of loiterers craving open space.

When we arrived home, my father went down to his studio and began a painting: *Gas Station Playground*. In this painting he depicts the conflict that he felt when he saw his old business. I stood in front of his old station and saw the desolation of an urban setting gone awry; he depicted it in the emptiness of the building, the carelessness of the loiterers using the building and its fixtures as a playground. But where I saw vandalism, he saw expression; where I saw the degradation of the human spirit, he saw the struggle for a communal existence. *Gas Station Playground* is a disturbing painting, but unlike his earlier work it evokes a hopeful mood. The composition is reversed so that the people in the foreground, though dwarfed by their setting, animate the scene. The buildings get denser and more and more devoid of life as they rise above the horizon, only the cigarette billboards enliven them. The sky has both a sun and a moon and we are not sure if we are witnessing dawn or twilight. My father was approaching seventy when he made this painting and the world he came to know and the one he envisioned were about to slip from his grasp.



Latin Lady in Window



Antoinette in Studio



Gas Station Playground

The end of the cold war, the age of computers, the growth of big box stores, the replacement of small retailers with franchises, the advent of a "post consumer culture" put my father's utopian vision squarely at odds with the world as it was evolving around him. In many ways he was out of his element in the last decade of his life (the 1990's) and this change is played



American Tragedy

out in his last canvases. But my father's legacy in paint is profound. In more than two hundred paintings, whether he painted what he saw before him, or delved into our past to conjure where he saw our future, he painted the world in which he lived and the world in which he wished to live with passion. His work will hold an important place in the history of American art because of the salient images he created. In scores of paintings, he showed us some of the most seminal acts in the play of American history throughout the twentieth century. The struggle for a living wage and an eight-hour workday, the cold war, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the sexual revolution, Watergate, and

the collapse of the Soviet Union. These themes inhabit large canvases and reflect our history in a condensed form, a type of visual shorthand. He packs a plethora of events, scandals, intrigues and potential outcomes into a single mural-like presentation that stands up to artistic and political scrutiny. One of his most important works, *American Tragedy* depicts a disturbing web connecting the Kennedy assassination, the civil rights movement, the military industrial complex and the struggle for peace into one dynamic composition.

The son of an immigrant iceman father and industrial seamstress mother, my father Ralph Fasanella emanated from a little Italy tenement to become someone who many consider to be America's most

articulate self-taught painter. His canvases capture the events of his lifetime and share his visionary dream for our future.

The largest collections of Ralph Fasanella paintings can be found at ACA Galleries, the American Folk Art Museum and the Fenimore Art Museum. His work is also on permanent display in many public buildings including the Ellis Island Museum and the New York City Subway system. He is represented in numerous important private and public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.