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Fairfield Porter

A X A Gallery through May 27

By Joel Silverstein

Fairfield porter has emerged as one of the most important voices in American Art. A figurative painter in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, Porter was able to revivify American Realism with a line of logic that runs from Hopper, Eakins and Homer, all the way back to Copley and tie it to the French Intimisim of Vuillard and Bonnard. Add to this the brio, mark making and flattening characteristics of the New York School (the Porters and the de Koonings were long-standing friends) and you will begin to see the force of his art and influence. Porter came from great wealth amassed in Chicago real estate, so his understanding of the kind of upper class bourgeoisie that he painted always feels casual and authentic. Like many affluent men in the 1920s and 1930s, he embraced left-wing politics. Unlike many of them, he was able to visit Russia in 1927. The confusion, starvation and political strong arming that he witnessed put him off political idealism forever. His concept of art, derived from modernist poetry was in itself anti-Platonic. A William Carlos Williams' quote nourished him: "No idea except in things." It was in the examination of the life around him, the very object-laden qualities life itself offered a way out of the abstract formalist dictum American Art had adhered to by the mid-1950s.

Porter was Harvard educated, certainly a rarity for the generation of artists spawned before the Second World War. He eventually settled in New York within the circle of the *Partisan Review*. This was the forefront where "Contemporary Art" was being defined. He developed into a canny and insightful critic, one of the best of his generation. (A collection of his writings, *Art In Its Own Terms*, published by Zoland books and incidentally edited by Rackstraw Downes, is a must read for every serious artist.)

What makes Porter such a powerful critic is, unlike Clement Greenburg, that Porter seemed to be actually looking at the paintings he was discussing. Greenberg's philosophical intellectualism and influence may be greater, but it's overarching programmatic character ultimately defers to Porter's fresh observations, creativity and clarity. The artist's tastes and knowledge were broad, and he could evaluate avant-guard or traditional art with equal aplomb. Family life provided a rich ongoing, and ultimately problematic source of artistic inspiration. He married Anne Channing and had five children, including his eldest son who was autistic. His life-long marriage, at times rocky, was complicated by the artist's own admission of bisexuality. Indeed the tensions he was able to sustain, the polarities of bohemia/middle-class propriety, homo/heterosexuality define his paintings of domestic life and cast them in direct paradox and ambivalence.

He could be a wooden painter, especially when it came to his figures. It is, however, a quintessential American woodenness that in its greatest practitioners (think of Hopper, for example) bespeak a spiritual disquiet. When several figures are in a composition, the effect has an inward non-relational quality, a silent disjuncture. The artist's own upbringing undermined his ability to express himself emotionally. This became related to

a triumphant aesthetic impassivity, which even in the heat of the domestic milieu rivals Manet.

In *The Mirror, 1966*, Porter places his daughter Lizzie in front of a looking glass, deriving from the formal inventions of Velasquez and Ingres. There is even a homage to *Las Meninas, 1656* in Porter's own small figure. Lizzie stares out in a harmony of bright red, gold, black, tan and periwinkle. Her forms are flattened, but her physical presence is central and unmovable. Porter, by comparison is diminutive, tentatively leaning on one leg. His features are washed out by light, creating a powerful unease in a rock-hard composition.

In the *Screen Porch, 1964*, Porter's two daughters Katherine and Lizzie are flanked by the poet James Schuyler and the artist's wife. The older daughter on the left, adolescent and a little chubby characterizes a wonderfully awkward moment of passage into womanhood. Lizzie, the younger sister, is twisted into something rivaling a grotesque. Schuyler, a friend and eventually a lover of Porter's, lived in the artist's home for many years as essentially a family member. Here, he calmly reads a book even as he anchors the four figures in place.

In a typically Renaissance and Baroque compositional device, Anne is outside the screen peering in. She is confronting the viewer the way Raphael does in the *School of Athens, 1510.* Her position in the scene, tentatively out of the scene, looking inward while looking at the other three subjects, creates a dis-ease not only formally but with an implied psychological content as well. Would we feel so strongly if we did not know the actual events behind the painting? Schuyler had a history of mental problems and was difficult to care for. There was also a point when he and Fairfield made Anne feel like an outsider in her own home. It's ultimately tantalizing to hypothesize, but, as Porter often stated, a painting is contained within its own language. This is as satisfying and as enigmatic as any figure composition in American Art.

Porter had a flair for Still Life. His objects have a personality and a plastic palpability that he would not allow with human subjects. Paintings, such as *Lizzie at the Table, 1958,* display a warm and disheveled cacophony of objects: a book of Wallace Stevens' poetry, china bowls, an orange. Porter was able to articulate a very human kind of delectation. His surfaces are as sensuous as when Chardin painted a fuzzy peach. By comparison, Lizzie dissolves in a flurry of strokes.

Field, Flowers and Table, 1974 shows a final flowering of Bonnard's and Vuillard's influence. It's a French language grafted on to an American vernacular. Porter retains a hold on form that the French artists would have dissolved. It's his relationship to formal structures that renders him fascinating and problematic.

He usually painted places that he cared about, his parent's summer retreat in Great Spruce Head Maine or his house in Southampton. When glimpsed, his work has a klutzy, handmade charm, but at his best he can organize form the way a general deploys his troops. In the *Tennis Game, 1972*, the figures display the polished ivory flesh of a Piero della Francesca. They are embedded in tan trapezoids masquerading as a ground plane.

They await play, yet their formal gravity and their object-like qualities belie the subject. The sunlight is hashed in abstractly, by the most abrupt of value shifts. Shadows are a swathe of dark purple browns, while tans, off-whites, small accents of high red or green predominate. We are convinced of the scene, but not because it looks real. In *Self-Portrait, 1968*, the artist rendered a complex studio space as a series of colored rectangles; a skylight tilts upwards and a floor tilts downward. A hot orange tint nails the main window as an area of focus. Porter grabs a chair and stares knowingly at the viewer.

There is an old potbellied stove to the right of the artist. It is more fully rendered in a three-dimensional fashion than is the artist himself.

The play of the flat plane against the three-dimensional is a big issue in Porter's work; oftentimes things in the background take on a peculiar glow due to their rendering, color or value. For *Interior With a Dress Pattern, 1969*, the artist paints the great room of the summer house that his father built. In a complex repetition of form, Porter plots blocks of color to denote space. Taking his cue from the Dutch interiors of de Hooch, Vermeer and Velasquez' *Las Meninas* (again), the edges of the walls, their play or interruption takes on the qualities of musical rhythm. The tones of gold-orange, and red-browns are orchestrated the way Mondrian might place squares in an abstraction, that is with certitude and authority.

But Porter finds it in the random chance of configured nature. The odd shifts of form, color and tone in the tangential areas of the paintings create a reversal of expectation. When Porter paints his daughter's socks bright red with green shoes, suggesting Bonnard, but it is related more to de Kooning's opening up of the gravity and weight of traditional painting. When Porter paints landscapes like *July, 1971*, the foliage is a flat mass, or in *Calm Morning, 1961*, the sky dispenses with atmosphere and reverts to tarry, viscous paint. It is here that the artist's work most closely parallels the investigations of abstraction. But Porter was highly conscious of not going there.

Not only was Porter able to articulate an American passion for painterly realism in an era when it was suppressed and seen as retrograde, but he was able to mentor a whole generation of artists twenty years his junior: Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Wolf Kahn, Robert De Niro, Paul Georges, Jan Muller, Robert Goodnough and Nell Blaine, artists not similar enough to constitute a style or movement, but organized around a loose set of painterly concerns.

The exhibition also contains a wonderful selection of Porter's early work, poetry and criticism. Enough to give you a taste if you are not familiar with his entire oeuvre. There are some omissions due to space, but in general, this is a wonderful mini retrospective. It's a great opportunity to reevaluate Fairfield Porter. In the current milieu, there is even more reason to do so. Both as a painter and as a passionate critic, this artist invested his intellectual prowess in things and in process, in painting as a body of knowledge, and ultimately in the artwork itself.

If we interpret Porter's work as merely academic, and by that I mean as a closed tradition, we do him a great disservice. In the 1950s, he was disparaged because his paintings weren't abstract, and in the 1960s, he was criticized because he painted affluence. We may here benefit by Porter's own example and give him the courtesy of looking honestly and deeply into his paintings. The schisms that fueled his life found their expression in a particular kind of observation, one that is deceptive and surprisingly contemporary.

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