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MUSEUMS • WEEKEND

Crackup: Llyn Foulkes Gives Us the Art We Deserve

by Thomas Micchelli on June 22, 2013



Llyn Foulkes, "In Memory of St. Vincent School" (1960), oil, charred wood, and plasticized ashes on blackboard; chair; blackboard: 66 x 72 1/4 in, chair: 26 1/4 x 13 x 12 1/2 in (courtesy Norton Simon Museum)

With its superb [retrospective](#) of the art of Llyn Foulkes, the New Museum pulls off the almost impossible trick of elucidating the work of a long-neglected, unclassifiable and thoroughly recalcitrant figure without sacrificing its mysteries or thorniness.

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The evolution from then (more than sixty years ago) to now in Foulkes-World is a bewildering experience. The neo-Dada/neo-Kienholz/neo-Rauschenberg/black/brown/gray matter of his debut efforts is absolutely nothing like the mordant, hyper-illusionistic tableaux — hybrids of painting, assemblage, collage, found objects and molded bas-relief — that the artist started making in 1983.

But as it progresses, the exhibition, curated by Ali Subotnick, enables us to form a complex but cogent overview of the artist even as he zigs here and zags there.

The first room, right off the elevators, is a wildly mixed bag, an aggregate of juvenilia in vitrines and compactions of apocalyptic residue on the walls. There is also a surrealist oil on wood painted in 1953 when Foulkes was 19, a year before he was drafted into the army.

Foulkes' stint in the service, which brought him to postwar Germany, was followed by studies at the University of Washington and the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. He quickly entered LA's art scene with a group show at Ferus Gallery in 1959 and a solo there in 1961. Another solo, this time at the Pasadena Museum of Art, came a year later.

The work from that period exhibits the trappings of existential angst (drab colors, scuffed surfaces, salvaged materials) but its quirky humor and sheer oddity undercuts the supposed seriousness of many of the pieces. Even the most sober of the lot, "In Memory of St. Vincent School" (1960), which consists of a child-size chair set in front of a charred blackboard, and "Flanders" (1961-1962), inspired by John McCrae's memorial poem from World War I, "In Flanders Field," play with the viewer's perceptions.

Why is there a lopsided swastika scrawled in the upper left corner of "St. Vincent School's" otherwise empty blackboard? Even for a work that seems intended to conjure a sense of lost innocence, its inclusion feels sickeningly out of place.

The wall label tells us that the found objects, "salvaged from a burned-out schoolhouse in South Central Los Angeles [...] reminded him of the bombed-out buildings he visited while serving in the US Army in Germany following World War II":

He scratched a swastika into the blackboard as a reminder of this experience and in an attempt to reclaim the ancient symbol.

This gesture, however, also eerily prefigures the themes of All-American violence and the brainwashing of children that, twenty years later, will spew from his work like a ruptured boil. And the unexplainable white protuberance that cascades off the surface of "Flanders" — could it be a shroud, an angel, a ghost? — undulates along the bottom edge in a baroque display of pleating reminiscent of Bernini's "Ecstasy Of St Theresa" (1644-1647), endowing a work about the war dead with a sexual shudder.

The bone-white slab also evokes the huge cow's teeth embedded in the mouth of a portrait that's, for my money, the most horrifying work in the show, "Dalí and Me" (2006).

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Llyn Foulkes, "Dali and Me" (2006), mixed mediums, 33 x 26 in
(courtesy the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, photo by Randel Urbauer)

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And speaking of Dalí, let's return to that 1953 surrealist oil on wood, which is called "Images of Perception." As the wall label narrates:

When Llyn Foulkes was seventeen, a friend introduced him to the Surrealist paintings of Salvador Dalí, which inspired him to paint. He borrowed the artist's autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942), from the school library and never returned it.

There's much Dalí here in the garish colors and the grimly isolated specimens of humanity; there is Yves Tanguy as well, where the horizon vanishes into a distant mist and a red, bulbous arch rises to meet the orange sky. But there is also an odd Thomas Hart Benton refugee — presumably the artist — visible in the lower stretches of the painting, whose hand (holding a pear), rippling blue jeans and rust-colored shoe (adorned with a butterfly) incongruously poke up from the bottom edge.

In this seminal work — and I'm not using the term lightly — we glimpse what Foulkes was to become, or, perhaps more accurately, we realize that Foulkes has always kept that 19-year-old inside of him, and that his most forceful work is a fulfillment of his youthful visions.

In "Images of Perception," we witness the conjoining of European surrealism, which, in the hands of Dalí, fuses imaginative richness and flashy hucksterism, with American guilelessness. The same thing happened to Jackson Pollock with decidedly different results. Instead of channeling psychological exigencies into purely material expression, Foulkes kept returning to the well of pictorial imagination, intent on making his apparitions as real as possible.

All the elements that later coalesced into his painted tableaux are there from the beginning — the found objects, the obfuscation between real and rendered texture and space, the handwriting (sometimes barely legible) on the surfaces of the paintings, the framing devices around the images.

One of the exhibition's brilliant curatorial strokes is the placement of the vitrines — full of Foulkes' adolescent attempts at cartooning — in the middle of the hellish early-60s works, a juxtaposition certifying that Foulkes' malign comedy, which grows more vicious as time goes on, undergirds everything he does.

The later works from that tumultuous decade became cooler in their approach, affecting a kind of deadpan, Baldessarian reserve. But along with his pictures of cows and facsimiles of Brobdingnagian postcards, Foulkes also painted weirdly flattened landscapes of fantastical rock formations, rendered in black-and-white on a monochrome ground.

They are photographic in their detail, except that after you look at them for a few moments you realize that they are fabricated out of whole cloth from the artist's imagination. They look like enlarged details of Tanguy's blobby landscapes transplanted in John Ford's Monument Valley.

These paintings feature borders similar to old-fashioned snapshots, which wrap parentheses around the image as if to say, "It's only a picture." Similar distancing effects are used in other works from the same period, but once the '70s hit, the frames become very prominent and very real, made from salvaged chunks of wood bulging out into space.

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These frames, which surround a series of grotesque and often bloody portraits of men in jackets and ties, become something of a way station for a fundamental shift that's about to occur in Foulkes' work. Within a few years, he fractures their overbearing lockdown of the image by slipping an arm or a necktie outside the portal's edge, ushering in a radical new engagement with reality. Suddenly the convention that separated art from life is now the engine driving Foulkes' phantasms into the space we thought belonged to us.

The pivot from "Nob Hill" (1964), a double-image rock painting (and the only one not done from the artist's imagination), to "Made in Hollywood" (1983), one of Foulkes' first painted tableaux, completes a changeover from high-art presumptions to the aesthetic of the dime store, the midway and the funhouse. Foulkes has embraced the populist convention that art should look like something, the more real the better, but his attitude is worlds away from the too-familiar neo-conceptual strategy of coopting a demotic style in the service of irony.

Rather, the painted tableaux return his work to the gangly directness and associative imaginings that defined his art when he was 19. The fool-the-eye textures of the rock paintings have broadened into nonstop illusionism pulling the eye into infinity, and the brightly colored portraits have morphed into an array of curious characters, including the artist himself.

Much of Foulkes' art — especially the work from the bloody heads on — betrays the wrath of an outraged idealist. The chasm between America's promise and reality has become an obsessive theme that finds targets in two Hollywood charlatans, Ronald Reagan and Walt Disney.

Reagan is skewered in a painting called "The Golden Ruler" (1985), in which the president's nose and eyes (which bleed down his cheeks) are hidden behind the eponymous ruler attached to a yellow-gold, Easter-Island-style mask. A button-like Cyclops eye pops out of the middle of the ruler. It is a compellingly laden political statement, nailing the essence of Reagan's blinkered kleptocracy without requiring the viewer to be clued in that it's Reagan at all (only the hair, pursed lips and creped neck give his identity away). It's a timeless icon of the rule of greed. But Reagan's legacy, intertwined with Disney's, can be felt throughout the later works in the show, such as the much-too-on-the-nose "The Legend of Mickey Rat" (1996), which depicts Mickey Mouse staring at a Monument Valley-type mountain with a "For Sale" sign planted in front, or the more poignant "Where Did I Go Wrong?" (1991), made at the time of the first George Bush and the first Iraq War, with Clark Kent seated in a barren landscape — his Superman insignia peeking out from the top of his unbuttoned shirt — gripping a newspaper (headlined "WAR!") with a thought bubble ("WHERE DID I GO WRONG?") hovering overhead. (Bush II makes an appearance, metaphorically, in "Mr. President" (2006), a painting of George Washington with his face overlaid by Mickey's.)

But Foulkes has carved out a special place in hell for Disney. As the wall text for "Made in Hollywood" explains: One of Foulkes's first tableaux paintings, this work includes a copy of the letter from the 1934 Mickey Mouse Club Handbook that fueled the artist's ire toward Disney for brainwashing children. The piece also includes a very realistic toy gun aimed at a photograph of two of his children, who Foulkes considered the true victims of Disney.

This piece was Foulkes's first attempt to address the horror he felt upon reading the letter in the handbook and was also his first foray into expanding the limits of depth in painting.

But perhaps Disney's most unforgivable sin in Foulkes' eyes is the looting of our cultural

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heritage (Grimm's and Perrault's fairy tales, American history, the world of nature) for readymade properties to sanitize, sweeten and engineer into money machines.

The cheapening of the imagination, in particular children's imagination, which is part and parcel of Disney's hold on the American character, must be a special affront to Foulkes, who treats the imagination as the sacred grove of gods and monsters, to paraphrase Dr. Pretorius in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).



"Lyn Foulkes," New Museum, June 12–September 1, 2013, installation view: clockwise from left: "The Corporate Kiss" (2001); "But I Thought Art was Special (Mickey and Me)" (1995); "The Western Viewpoint" (1995); "The Legend of Mickey Rat" (1996); "To Ub Iwerks (Portrait of Walt Disney)" (1995) (photo by Benoit Pailley)

Mickey Mouse is envisioned as a tumor in Foulkes' brain ("But I Thought Art was Special (Mickey and Me)," 1995); smooching the artist's cheek ("The Corporate Kiss," 2001); and climbing out of a fissure in Uncle Walt's skull. The title of that painting, "To Ub Iwerks (Portrait of Walt Disney)" (1995), is a reminder that Iwerks, a brilliant animator and Disney's closest friend, was Mickey's actual inventor (they later had a falling out over credit for Iwerk's creations).

Fraud, corruption, cynicism, greed, violence, disillusionment, trivialization, corporatism, exploitation, war – the Ten Plagues of Modern America – wend their way through Foulkes' multilayered mythos of impotent Übermenschen and avaricious, happyfaced rodents to devastating effect, nowhere more powerfully than in his tour-de-force, "Pop" (1985-1990), a large-scale, mixed media work that comes with its own soundtrack, the voices of Foulkes and his two children singing a demented-sounding version of "America the Beautiful" to the

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accompaniment of the artist's one-man band (a video of Foulkes performing in his alter ego as a musician is one of the show's surprises).

Recapitulating Clark Kent's pose and costume in "Where Did I Go Wrong?," Foulkes depicts himself seated in an armchair in front of a TV, his eyes popping, a picture magazine or photo album in his lap, a Diet Coke clutched in his hand, his open collar revealing a red Superman "S." In the dim glow of real light bulbs, with the blinds drawn against the outside world, his daughter places comforting hands on his shoulder while his son reads from a notebook inscribed with the pledge of the Mickey Mouse Club: "I will be a square shooter, I will be a good American." Without the context of the retrospective, the image would be creepy. With references in hand, it's bone-chilling.

Where did we go wrong? The question — as inexplicable as the expression on Foulkes' face — hangs like an anvil over the head of Wile E. Coyote. The sources of our disquietude may be so deep there is no way even to begin, but at the age of 79 Foulkes rages on, telling us precisely what we don't want to hear.

[Llyn Foulkes](#) continues at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through September 1.