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## The Lost Frontier: Llyn Foulkes

by Andrew Berardini

CHARRED REMAINS, hard to tell if it's from firefights or just neglect. The classroom's vacant. There's nothing left but a child's chair and a blackboard cut into two levels, the top for an absent alphabet the bottom for the day's chalk puzzles and problems, lessons and teacherly



Llyn Foulkes, *Dali and Me*, 2006  
 Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy: the artist

ruminations. The frame is charred, some unknown heat has bubbled it over, giving it a curdled skin that flakes over the slate. The board is still dusty from some distant assignment, the only marking left on it is carved into the top corner, a little swastika. Hastily drawn, but recognizable.

A monument perhaps, it's called "In Memory of St. Vincent's School", which sounds like a memorial for a childhood more than for a war. But it's 1960 and there's some echo of dad fending off Nazis, the long "good" war, the triumphal victory of the American way. Is it an American classroom? A German one? Like all the broken skeletons in Normandy battlefields, can anyone really tell the difference between what's German and what's American?

America beat the Germans in World War II, it's true. But did we beat fascism?

It's a battered horizon, a religious scene, an altarpiece, but there aren't any gods or saints lest you count Mickey Mouse in prairie drag patrolling the border, rifle in hand. The Hollywood hills are covered in debris, before the border is some mummified figure like an Indian dark as the hills around him, on the hill opposite him is a very dead cat. Close by, the back of a man's head approaches the border, looking intently into the dead screen of a TV piled in the garbage, a bleak brown city stretches beyond the hills in the distance, a smogged out Los Angeles, its own pile of junk.

The whole scene is magnificently weird. Disconcerting even. Why a dead cat? Who's the Indian? The man looking in, is he our hero, a saint, a traveller, a Dante crossing into hell or at least purgatory? In this theater, we must feel like him, t-shirted and lost, looking into the broken terrain of a familiar city. None of us wants to be shot by Mickey in drag. Still smiling his saccharine, Disney grin, there's something sinister about his chunky body, his rifle, his dress.

Los Angeles; the end of the road, the end of America's westward expansion, the last frontier, the lost frontier.

A friend of mine who worked in advertising often joked that he makes capitalist propaganda.

Instead of beaming laborers in drab olive in US's ad history, we had beaming consumers. They were sexier of course than Soviet workers and chubby-faced Maoist children, but capitalism has always been a bit sexier. Cheerful and suntanned in deck shorts smoking Newport cigarettes on windswept yachts, drinking ice-cold bottles of Coca-Colas with voluptuous ladies in bikinis, and of course after every major achievement in life, we are asked the question:

"How are you going to celebrate?". And always, cameras flickering at our shit-eating grins, we announce: "I'm going to Disneyland!"

I want to write an essay about Llyn Foulkes, but am finding it really difficult. I think part of the reason why is that no one as far as I can tell has ever written anything interesting about Llyn Foulkes. Maybe someone has, but I haven't found anything that satisfying. They tend to repeat the same

boring and sometimes inaccurate litany of traits and coincidences about Foulkes. The first two above are descriptions of artworks, one from early in his career and the other from more recently. I wanted to begin with the work and some of its philosophical underpinnings before actually talking about the critical clichés.

Being at one time a part of the Ferus Gallery is one of these oft rattled off boilerplates on the man, sometimes they mention he got kicked out by Irving Blum, by way of Billy Al Bengston and Bob Irwin, stories differ. Ferus for those outside of LA is like the ur-myth of art in the city. It's like the Cedar Tavern for the butch abstractionist of New York in the 1940s, some place repeated so many times it's gone past legend into the anodyne, the cliché. Started by artist Ed Kienholz, curator Walter Hopps, and poet Bob Alexander and later taken over by dealer Irving Blum, Ferus was one of the early galleries and by far the most famous to exhibit contemporary art in Los Angeles. Kienholz went on to become a famous artist, Hopps a famous curator and

Irving Blum a very wealthy dealer (I once heard him saying on a panel we were both on that the happiest moment of his life was selling Andy Warhol's series of Campbell soup cans to MoMA as a very partial gift and a reported \$15 million dollars). A good percentage of the artists became famous as well, Ed Ruscha and then Robert Irwin being by the far the biggest names, though the gallery exhibited Andy Warhol early on (those expensive soup cans), some legend spinners say it was the first gallery in the world to give Andy Warhol a solo show, which isn't quite true. Foulkes had one show there

in 1961. This fact always appears in the first paragraph of any article written on him, which kind of sucks. As if the most notable thing about him as an artist was that he was shown someplace cool with a bunch a people who became famous, except for him. He's always sold by those that were around him.

More than one piece about Llyn Foulkes calls him a curmudgeon. And he is a little to be sure. He's invariably quirky (one aspect of every curmudgeon); one of his passions being the



Llyn Foulkes, *In Memory of St. Vincent's School*, 1960  
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA. Courtesy: the artist

novelty music of Spike Jones, a tradition he continues with a rambling one-man band set up he calls "The Machine". And there is a little bitterness about a lifetime of missed opportunities and perceived antagonists. But calling Foulkes a curmudgeon would be like calling Kurt Vonnegut a curmudgeon, someone who takes a lot of America's crimes and misdemeanors so personally, that outrage melts into ill-tempered resignation with occasional outbursts of surprise that no one else seems to notice how Kafkaesque the world's become.

Okay, got that out of the way.

Now we can talk about the work.

Llyn Foulkes is an American painter who's lived most of his life in and around Los Angeles making work that blends a very personal surreal and social critique using some of the most potent icons and themes of America mythology, a notable recurring character being Mickey Mouse. Sometimes his paintings better resemble

dioramas and collages, assemblage and collage than old-fashioned brush-and-canvas varietal, but painting is the primary medium through which it's all poured, one of his earliest inspirations being Willem de Kooning's painting "Merritt Parkway" from 1959.

His paintings are haunted by sundry crimes of America, a lot of refracted through Disney and often through portraits, mostly of men, some of them famous, all of them tortured, broken, mutilated. His landscapes, which began like Magritte's "The Anniversary", huge peculiar and precarious boulders perched over America, postcards of the Western frontier, soon became troubled, broken, reaching a surreal pitch in one of his most diligent and agonized-over works, the diorama "The Lost Frontier", 1997-2004 (described above with the prairie drag Mickey), which consisted of a long eight years of regular working and reworking to complete. Llyn Foulkes is an American with a guilty conscience.

There is some element of Ed Kienholz in Foulkes' lineage, self-admitted by the artist. The weird materiality of broken-down America and the sometimes ham-fisted but heartfelt critique of the Land of the Free are trademarks of both artists' work, but while Kienholz was a messy, sculptural, and barbaric yawp, Foulkes is darker, more interior. Foulkes critiques seem more painful, more psychologically exposed than Kienholz's ramshackle room-sized installations, the politics of which generally lacked subtlety but are invariably (for me) visually satisfying. Foulkes in his work seems to take all the political and social misdeeds of a corporatized America deeply to heart, a personal affront. Sometimes the work seems so personal, it's hard to look at.

His portraits are so direct and broken, they also seem almost hard to look at. They remind me of Gerhard Richter's series of portraits, as his were a way to cycle through history, but for Richter, to reflect on it without comment. Foulkes work seems to reflect on history "with" comment, a national culture as experienced by an individual, refracted through his work. Salvador Dalí appears too, both in paintings and in interviews with the artist, but Foulkes happily lacks Dalí's commercial polish and hardly seems the deft publicity man that defines Dalí's public persona.

The symbols that torment the artist-as-subject in the paintings are potent ones, Mickey Mouse, Super Man, the American West, subjects that almost seem untouchable to me. Not because they are mostly corporate icons or hackneyed political myths but because they are so obviously American, so easily lambasted as bad, almost as if they lack subtlety as a subject.

The umpteenth issue of "Adbusters" has sort of killed

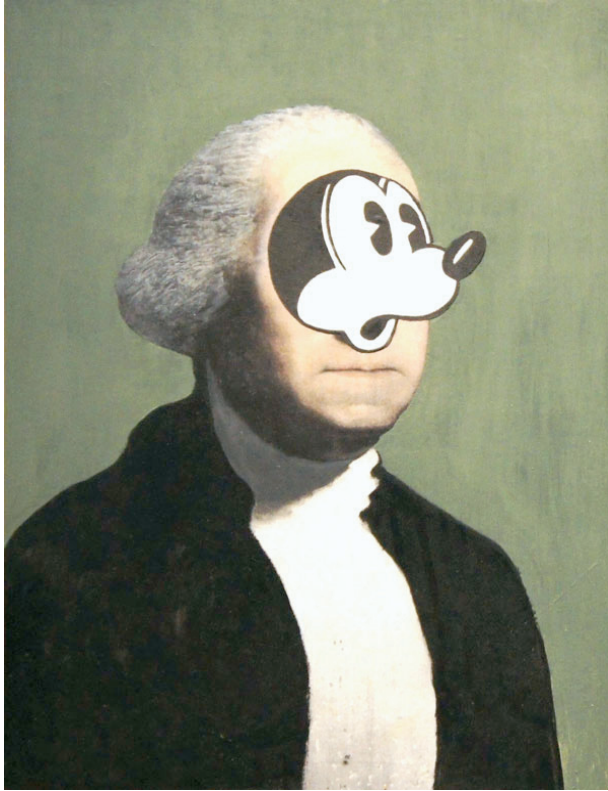


Llyn Foulkes, *Study for St. Anthony*, 2009-2011  
Courtesy: the artist

the corporate of these days, using big companies' imagery against itself. It just looks facile and commercial in its own right, as effective in changing corporate and governmental policy as an angry letter to your congressman, which is to say very little to not at all. Shepard Fairey's protest posters make for better t-shirts than they do protests. I don't want to lump Foulkes in with these popularly loved and facile Popsters or with the ineffectually angry but commercially minded blusterers of the lowbrow or "Adbusters" set. Foulkes work is much darker and weirder and more interesting than the cool complacency or defanged critiques of either, whilst still maintaining its place in the conversation around art.

While the Pop made American high art safe for advertising, celebrity, and cartoons, Pop art is for me a movement grandfathered in. I've nostalgia for Pop art like I've nostalgia for TV commercial jingles from my childhood, but both are passive, complacent, bottoms to Kienholz's top. American culture is dynamic, unapologetically commercial, and generally cheerful. All of which make it hard not to like, even if it can also be rapacious, manipulative, and exploitative. Artists, in varying ways, have of course reflected on this. The supercharged sometimes-goofy imagery coupled with the emotional vulnerability can make Foulkes work off-putting. It's like getting molested by Mickey Mouse

on a family outing to Disneyland, it's so dark and weird, that if you mentioned to anybody in casual conversation it would be almost impossible to respond to. It's the stuff of bad melodrama. But with its ahistorical drive to traumatic and perpetual progress, its unwavering fealty



Llyn Foulkes, *Mr. President*, 2006  
Courtesy: the artist

to corporations and commerce, its vague flirtations with policies fascist in everything but name, so is America.

Finally, in his 70s, Foulkes seems to be getting some belated recognition, included in the 2011 Venice Biennale as well as Documenta 13. Some of it due to the advocacy of Hammer senior curator Ali Subotnick who is planning his upcoming retrospective, which while not the first is certainly the most prominent. When I met Foulkes recently, he seemed softened and honored by the recent change in fortune for his career. Less curmudgeonly than previous accounts and interviews outline, a critical artist finally recognized, his work a bitter antidote to the crass commercialism of an era dominated by Warholian antics, one we might be finally able to swallow.

Foulkes paintings don't offer solutions necessarily to a century of American dominance and all the concomitant problems (and let's be fair here, benefits too) that came with that, but they do offer an individual catharsis, one man's grappling with the personal effects of a country changed by its hucksters and jingoists, its dreams and ambitions, its company men and their cartoons.