

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Vitality of Everyday Things in Fairfield Porter's Paintings

Porter's paint handling was gestural but exacting, never fancy, and always attending to the experience of looking.

-Rob Colvin
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Art is in a race with its interpretation. Since the impressionists got ahead of the audience, followed always more rapidly by one movement after another, criticism, in its attempt to keep up, has sometimes got ahead of the artists. The painter who looks for a subject, or doubts his role, has fallen behind in the race.

—Fairfield Porter,

"Recent American Figure Painting" (1962)



Claire White (1960), oil on canvas, 45 ½ x 45 inches

The art of Fairfield Porter (b. 1907) might be more admired today than when he died in 1975. If so, it's because he has given younger painters a way out of their own race with art criticism, academic theory, shopworn irony, heartless formalism, and mannered diffidence as if painting had no future. These are the artists who need to see *Fairfield Porter: Things as They Are* at Tibor de Nagy most.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950



Elizabeth (c.1964), oil on linen, 24 x 21 inches

The exhibition shares a rare selection of the artist's watercolors and oil paintings dating from 1949 to the last year of his life. (He had his first show at the gallery in 1952.) His paint handling was gestural but exacting, never fancy, and always attending to the experience of looking. "Love is paying attention," he said. He shunned anatomical correctness as a betrayal of real observation, pitting scientific rationality against how the world appears. (He had polemical ideas on science and art.) The awkwardness in his paintings is owed to the very quality of life and unfiltered looking, void of ulterior motives. His philosophy of painting pervaded his writing as well, prioritizing the description of an artwork's interior logic without regard to theoretical systems.

As a critic, he wrote for *ARTNews*, when it was more critical than journalistic, as well as *Art in America* and *The Nation*. He was the first to write on Willem de Kooning, after once having the *Kenyon Review* reject his review of the painter because de Kooning was too unknown. He wrote sensitively on Elaine de Kooning, Alex Katz, Jane Freilicher, Isabel Bishop, Joseph Cornell, Albert York, Isamu Noguchi, and Berthe Morisot. As a figurative painter in the midst of abstraction, he was never a star. No realist was. The domesticity of his subject matter didn't help either; it was too bourgeois. He painted his family and friends, poets and intellectuals, lounging in Adirondack chairs on green lawns in Southampton, or sitting on the back porch of his house on the island he owned, Great Spruce Head, with the rocky coast of Maine in the background. He lived a good life, for a Marxist.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950



Installation view of 'Fairfield Porter: Things as They Are' at Tibor de Nagy, New York

It's a mistake to think Porter was simply painting his lifestyle. Rather, he committed himself to what Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Matisse had: to attend to the vitality of everyday things. As he noted of Berthe Morisot, "There was no conflict between reality and ideality in the French bourgeois society of which she was a part. Morisot's range was narrow, but her views of art and the meaning of life do not conflict." For her, "Grace is the essence of artistic form."

Is there a better way to describe Porter's "Trees in Bloom" (1966), with its fluidic tree trunks and searching limbs? The houses in the middle distance have a lightness to their geometry and color, as if architecture, too, knows the seasons. "Islands" (1968) was likely painted on Great Spruce Head at a spot he stood on many times, articulating the ground, trees, ocean, and distant islands with a sensual immediacy offering no place for repetitions of form, color, or habit. In contrast to modern artists who followed Bauhaus design principles as a means of compositional organization (i.e., multiple iterations of one or two elements), Porter insisted everything was different and always changing.

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TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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Islands (1968), oil on canvas, 28 x 32 inches

“Claire White” (1960) reveals how light, as color, is always at the center of Porter’s attention. All of his favored motifs — the still life, landscape, portrait, and interior — live together in this piece, one of the largest in the show. “Farmscape” (1966) is the smallest work, at 5 x 7 inches. In fact, it’s one of the smallest paintings he ever made. Each mark is what’s necessary for the image and only that. The atmospheric scale belies its size.

Evidence that artists are looking closely at Porter is found in their work. It’s in the young Eleanor Ray’s intimate plein air works, for example; Porter’s “Night” (1962), with its open door, mirror, and inner glow, could have been channeled into her last show. Daniel Heidkamp and Maureen Gallace embrace Porter more literally, sometimes to the point of riffs and appropriation, sometimes to the point of appropriation, whether sly or bold. These artists, who have been praised for being refreshingly different, reach for Porter as he did Vuillard.

Fairfield Porter: Things as They Are coincides with the launch of a new major monograph of the artist published by Rizzoli. *Fairfield Porter: Selected Masterworks*, is written by John Wilmerding and Karen Wilkin, and includes a poem by J.D. McClatchy. The comprehensive book is special because it includes many color reproductions of paintings otherwise seen only in black-and-white (and small) in the artist’s catalogue raisonné from 2001.

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A decade or two ago “painter” painters had a litmus test for peer respect; it would be if their acquaintance knew who Fairfield Porter was. If that test is no longer in effect, it’s because his recognition is more widespread, and most folks are already up to speed. This exhibition of 25 pieces, spanning most of the artist’s working years, is everyone’s opportunity to see how grace is the essence of artistic form.



Flowers in Salt Shaker (1966), oil on board, 12 x 9 inches

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