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Llyn Foulkes' art of raw emotion

Llyn Foulkes has been a man apart, but his work is gathering acclaim for its strange power.

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Painter and musician Llyn Foulkes grew up in Yakima, Wash., largely among women. His father left home when Foulkes was a baby, and the youngster filled the gap with idols like Charlie Chaplin, Salvador Dali and the comedic musician Spike Jones, whom Foulkes fondly refers to as "second fathers." "The only thing I ever wanted to be as a kid was a famous cartoonist," he says. "Or a famous musician, have a band like Stan Kenton. It was always famous, all I wanted to be."

"I was this beautiful little boy, and my mother's sisters would say things to me like, 'Oh, don't you think he looks just like William Holden?' They'd compare me to movie actors," he says by way of explanation. "So I grew up thinking the only way you're going to be loved is if you become famous. I think there are a lot of people that happened to. I can identify."

Foulkes' relationship to fame is a complicated issue, one that haunts his paintings and songs — which are filled with defeated Supermen, aimless Lone Rangers and violently bloodied public figures — no less than it does his career trajectory. The standard line, at least among admirers, is that a hard-hitting painting style, a cranky personality and a proven inability to keep from speaking his mind have, since his first brush with success in the 1960s, denied him his share of the beneficence bestowed upon peers like Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari. There's some truth to that, but it's a narrative so frequently dwelt upon that it threatens to overshadow his many real successes, both critical and material (he counts Brad Pitt and French tycoon François Pinault among his collectors).

What's more, the tide shows signs of turning again — and in a manner that looks to be definitive. Foulkes' work appeared in seven Pacific Standard Time exhibitions last fall and shone consistently for its prescience, its strangeness and its raw emotional power. Against the historical backdrop of PST, his tortured portraits and existentially vacant landscapes appeared fresher and more contemporary than most contemporary work.

Yet, like the massive three-dimensional tableau he's undertaken more recently, which he builds up over years using sculptural materials like wood and fabric and exhibits in darkened rooms with theatrical lighting, the paintings have a stateliness, a drama, that sets them apart from current trends as well. Art has taken a turn for the rational in recent decades, but Foulkes' work is filled with emotion: anger, indignation, fear, disappointment and melancholy, as well as humor, sarcasm and, especially in the music, play.

Over the summer Foulkes was included in the Venice Biennale, and at Documenta in Germany he exhibited two major tableau paintings and entertained visitors for a solid month on his "Machine," an immense apparatus of drums, car horns and other musical instruments with which he's been performing as a one-man band for 30 years. In the spring, the Hammer Museum will mount a major retrospective, curated by Ali Subotnick.

"Llyn has been on the verge of getting his due for 50 years now," says former Museum of Contemporary Art curator Paul Schimmel, who gave Foulkes prominent placement in his seminal exhibition "Helter Skelter" in 1992, and again in "Under the Big Black Sun" last fall. "He was part of the legendary Ferus group back in the '60s. He had a one-person show at the Pasadena Art Museum when it was the hippest place in town. He was super successful.

But what I like about Llyn is that on the verge of success, he almost always says the wrong thing, makes the wrong move. He is somebody who perennially zigs when he should zag, which I think, in some ways, has kept his art very pure."

At 77, Foulkes is wiry and energetic, with sparkling blue eyes and a vaudevillian charm that balances curiously against an acerbic temperament. His unusual brand of etiquette is apparent from the first in our own introduction, when he bluntly informs me that I am both younger and thinner than he expected me to be. It's clear from the conversation that follows, however, that the philosophical inclinations of age have softened many of the sharper edges.

In his social life, as in his work, he has always kept himself slightly apart: He taught only briefly, at UCLA, and says he rarely goes to openings. Despite the animated nature of his persona while performing, he is described by many who know him as a bit of a loner.

The studio where he has lived and worked since moving from Topanga after his second divorce in 1997, in the Brewery complex downtown, echoes the shape of his life in its three distinct regions. The front door opens into a large painting studio, scattered these days with half-finished smaller works and promising scraps. His Machine resides next door, in a rehearsal space and performance venue that he's dubbed "The Church of Art."

Upstairs is a small, comfortable living space, where every inch of wall is covered with relics of his past: artworks by Jess, Wallace Berman, Paul Sarkisian; an assortment of rubber bands once collected by his mother; drawings by his children (he has three); skulls, crosses and a petrified snake, among countless other objects.

Over the course of several hours, smoking cigarettes in an armchair in his living room, Foulkes issues verdicts that would make a young MFA grad blush. On the Broad collection, for instance: "It just looks like big jewelry for the rich. That's what we're into now, I guess, we're into money." On the volume of rock music (a point of particular ire): "This guy says to me, 'You got to feel the beat in your body, you've got to feel the bass.' I say, 'You want to feel a beat in your body go stand next to a jackhammer.'"

And on the fate of abstraction, after De Kooning: "It became about design. Simple as that. But then you get into installation art and it becomes something else. Then it's about junk." He recounts a breakfast he once had with the late installation artist Jason Rhodes, then shakes his head: "I could never get into that

stuff. You look at it and you say, 'So what?' I am just like the average person who walks around saying, 'So what?' 'Oh, well, you know this means this and if you make the association with this then maybe ...' I don't care, it's not visually pleasing at all. What's the point of it? Everything's becoming such a head trip."

In the context of an art world that can feel utterly hamstrung by career-minded good behavior, this sort of honesty is extremely refreshing. "I spent four hours at the studio and was basically in love," says Subotnick of her first meeting with Foulkes in 2007. "I'd never met anyone so tenacious."

Nor is Foulkes' vitriol directed solely outward. Indeed, one is struck continually by glimpses of fierce internal battles: between self-assuredness and insecurity, magnanimity and narcissism, conviction and doubt.

This virulence is precisely what makes his work so powerful. His caustic use of cartoonish imagery — particularly the figure of his personal *bête noire*, Mickey Mouse — turns the seduction of Pop art on its head to reveal the cynical underside of American enthusiasms. Tableau paintings like "The Awakening," which depicts an aging man and woman in a bed, and which he worked on for 17 years before premiering it at Documenta, compress the psychological scope of an epic novel into a single frame. His "Bloody Heads" series — portraits of individuals whose faces have been obscured, severed or smothered in red paint — have a quiet, searing violence that isn't easily forgotten.

Foulkes' recent resurgence has been felt in the market. His longtime dealer Douglas Walla, of Kent Fine Art in New York, credits the upswing in part to a post-bust interest in older artists of established critical value. "Let's put it this way," Walla says: "Everything of Llyn's has been sold. Absolutely everything. The marketplace value of his work has gone up about 500% to 1,000% in the last five years. But that's partially because it was so dramatically undervalued."

The most enduring testament to his revival, however, may be the esteem in which he is held by younger artists. "He doesn't believe me when I tell him," Subotnick says, "but he really is a hero to a lot of artists. It's the visceral quality of the work but also that he doesn't really play by the rules. He makes his own rules; he doesn't play the art world networking game. I think that's something that people really admire."

In a handful of conversations, one artist after another expressed admiration for Foulkes' integrity and fascination with the persistent indefinability of the work. "Weird" was a word that came up repeatedly, in a tone of high praise. "They're really odd," sculptor Jason Meadows says of Foulkes' paintings. "They seem to come from somewhere else."

"There's a sort of goopy weirdness reminiscent of a confessional piece of writing," says Joe Biel, a painter. "There's a sense of both fun and horror, but wrapped together, not even layered the way they might be in Postmodern painting or writing."

Sanya Kahn, who collaborated with Foulkes last year on a video piece exhibited at the Orange County Museum of Art, first saw Foulkes' work in person in Subotnick's 2009 exhibition "Nine Lives." "I was excited and unnerved by the work," she says. "I remember laughing out loud in the gallery. Paintings like 'The Awakening' and 'The Lost Frontier' were totally nuts to me. They're visceral and theatrical and disorienting."

Foulkes appears to be mildly taken aback by this newest round of recognition but also renewed in his determination. He's visibly touched by the acclaim he received from audiences in Germany, as well as by the devotion he's found in Subotnick, who introduced him to the curators of both the Biennale and Documenta. ("I've never had a champion," he says in a tone of mingled surprise and gratitude.)

But degenerating eyesight has made painting to his previous standards of precision and nuance difficult, and his focus now is on recording and disseminating his music. Indeed, when asked about his current relationship with painting, his reply is filled with unprintable language.

"I'm getting tired of ... paintings, man," he says. "The joy is gone. I feel joy in music. The painting has been more about torment, anxiety." He pauses before adding. "And discovery — it's always about discovery."

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