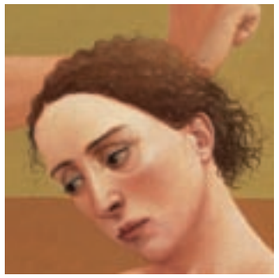


The Mirror as Muse

Alan Feltus composes classically serene pictures that describe the silences between characters—and the artist's own meditative engagement with the art historical past.

■ By Maureen Bloomfield

Alan Feltus's pictures are serenely modulated pas de deux, with figures who are mirrors of each other engaging in an arrested dance. The figures are less particular people than archetypes (one thinks, for instance, of the myths of twins and of animus and anima, the male and female aspects of the soul). So precisely calibrated are their spatial relationships that the figures could be attached with invisible wires; if one were to move, so would the other. When Feltus presents a single figure, she is often portrayed as an artist considering a self-portrait. The artist gazes outward, and the viewer takes the place of a mirror.

The setting for these tableaux is usually a golden interior where pictures on the wall function as windows to an actual Italian landscape or to the art historical past. Feltus quotes the American art critic Hilton

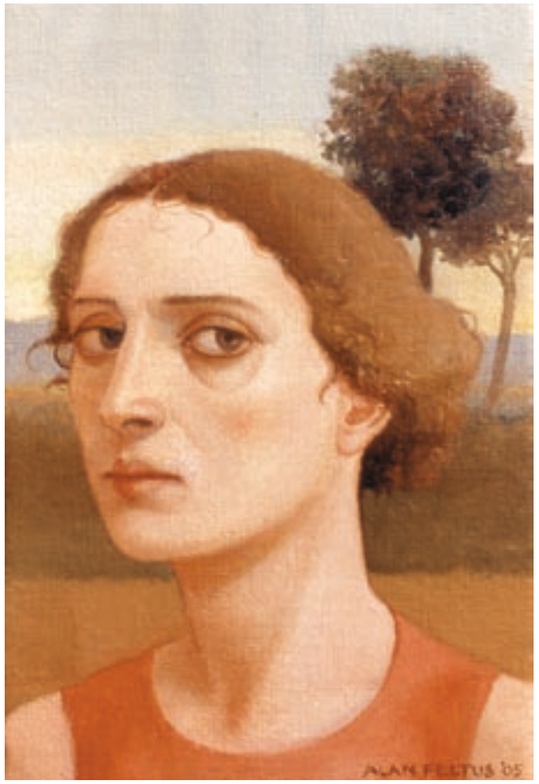
■ **Maureen Bloomfield** is the editor of *The Artist's Magazine.*

Guest Bed (at right; oil, 43x31)

All pictures courtesy of the Forum Gallery, New York, New York

From Page to Memory (at right; oil, 39x47) and *Studio Days* (below; oil, 43x32)

Tuscana (oil, 12x8)



Kramer, who maintains that in art "there are no virgin births." Indeed, Feltus's own influences are diverse: from Cycladic sculpture to Giotto; from Titian to Giorgio de Chirico; from Arshile Gorky to Balthus and Lucian Freud. Feltus puts it succinctly, "I have always understood that art comes out of art."

As a young man, Feltus spent his last year of upper school at the American Overseas School of Rome, and two years at the American Academy on a Rome Prize fellowship. Since 1987 Feltus has lived in Assisi with his wife, the artist Lani Irwin. Thus it's no surprise that his pictures radiate the distinctively Italian palette of the Tuscan, Umbrian and Perugian countrysides, and the beautiful, faded ochre of early Renaissance frescoes. During his initial visits to Italy, Feltus was also impressed by the works of modern Italian masters, less known to Americans, such as Felice Casorati, Giorgio Morandi, Antonio Donghi and Fausto Pirandello.

Once you've looked at several of Feltus's pictures, you will recognize his characters as you would recognize Giotto's, Fra Angelico's or Perugino's. While those Renaissance masters painted episodes in the often turbulent lives of saints, not much happens in terms of action in a Feltus painting—certainly nothing as violent as the tortures of martyrdom. The moment portrayed is suspended—before or after. The mood is contemplative; the setting, calm. In Feltus's pictures, a relationship or a state of mind is adumbrated, not revealed. Often a character holds a pen or a brush, a letter or a book. Thus, the pictures self-consciously reflect on the crafts of writing and art. Just as a letter contains a message inchoate until it is read, Feltus's pictures examine the artist's isolation; they reflect on the solitary deliberation that precedes, accompanies and follows the making of a work of art.

It's a truism oft repeated that all art reflects its maker, but in Feltus's case it's literally true. Instead of employing models, Feltus consults a mirror. His paintings then are, in a way, self-portraits. Another factor is his love of solitude, a habit of mind that would be compromised by interacting with a model. Looking in mirrors is thus a practical alternative. "I need to see something to understand what I'm painting," he explains, "to understand, for instance, the anatomical structure of the arms and hands, or the face as well. Even female figures have more of me in them than they have of any other references. I do look at photographs I've taken in museums of sculptures in many views, and I look through books of art reproductions, but those things never really match the figures I have in the paintings, so I rely more on mirrors."

While his compositions are classically balanced, with nary a haphazard or wayward element, he uses neither a preliminary drawing nor a grid. "I start a painting without any idea of exactly what sort of figure or figures I will be painting," he says. "I try to find the figure or figures within the rectangle of the canvas. Once a line breaks the blankness of the new canvas and there's something to then relate the next line to, I can keep working. (See the step-by-step progression on pages 36 and 37.) A figure is positioned, although tentatively—then maybe a second figure. And line becomes more than line almost immediately. I loosely put in color as the forms are starting to emerge in light and dark, and there begins an endless series of changes and adjustments." While his works emit a serene finitude, they don't necessarily proceed toward a straightforward or predictable end. "At a certain point, what looked good in the initial stages now looks rather bad," Feltus says. "It's part of the development of every painting that it moves into chaos before emerging again into something acceptable. A metamorphosis has to take place."

Pre-primed Belgian linen that he and Lani Irwin carried over to Italy is his favorite surface— "good

2004 Summer (oil, 39x47)

Belgian linen (primed in Belgium by Claessens for Utrecht) sent to New York City, only so we could bring it back to Europe!" When he needs smaller panels, he coats them with rabbit-skin glue and lead-white primer. Color is consistent and distinctive in a Feltus painting, yet he says, "The colors I use are not extraordinary." The oil paints are from several manufacturers, because a color like yellow ochre can differ from maker to maker, but he uses predominately Old Holland paints. The white he prefers is lead white (often called Cremnitz or flake white). "I start a painting with a limited palette, using lead white, ultramarine blue, Venetian red and yellow ochre. I stay with those three primaries plus white for several layers, during many changes in the painting. When things are more or less in their places, I expand the range of colors a little, but I don't use a large number of colors." The medium he uses is a mixture of Liquin, cold-pressed linseed oil and turpentine.

Subdued color, subtle effects, translucent light—Feltus strives for a contemplative mood rather than a dramatic one. He tones down color instead of punching it up. "Most of all I'm after a kind of light in a painting. This light is the result of getting the right balance of colors, as well as adjusting the relationship between what's in light and what's in shadow. It's not a real light any more than the figures and the space are real, but there is a quality that's made through color and light. And I want color to have air in it, so to speak. One feels that the light has air in it."

Feltus builds up these lucent colors in oil by painting in many thin layers, a process that allows him to make what he calls "continual adjustments." He explains: "With oil paints, because they're slightly translucent, the surface color is made more rich and luminous from the layer or layers of color beneath. That's easily seen when one compares a finished painting of many layers with an *alla prima* painting made all in one layer. That isn't to say *alla prima* paintings aren't beautiful. Any kind of technique can be beautiful."

Design—the proportional arrangement of form and its absence, the ratio between the figures and the ground—is of fundamental importance. In a Feltus painting, the spaces between the figures are as eloquent as points of contact would be in other painters'

Transformation and erasure

Feltus has likened the progress of a painting to stages in a metamorphosis. In this step-by-step demonstration he moves from an intial sketch of three tentative figures to a finished painting in which the central figure, having undergone a series of changes, is, at the end, erased. In her place, the artist posits a chair filled with papers and books. This demonstration illustrates how Feltus is continually trying something and responding to each change's reverberations. Given the limited palette and the artist's reliance on line, the preliminary drawing resembles a Renaissance cartoon.

The artist blocks out three figures and a background rectangle. The figures at this point seem interconnected. Note how the artist has tried various positions for the figures in the center and on the right.

Both the central figure and the figure on the right have changed; the figure in the middle has turned the other way. The artist refines the disposition and gesture of the figure on the left.

The figures on the left and right are more developed, as is the suggestion of a landscape at the far left. The central figure, partially effaced, is nonetheless affecting in her gesture. The artist next will erase that figure.

The figure that was initially naked is clothed; the figures now resemble one another. The landscape is gone. In place of the middle figure are a doorway and a chair with books and papers. The suppressed central figure is now a ghost that informs the meaning of *Inner Voices* (oil, 48x39).

The Green Pencil **(oil, 30x24)**

works. The artist comments: "My figures find their precise spatial relationship to one another largely by virtue of my wanting every form in the painting—be it figure or drapery or shapes between things or whatever—to be 'right' in my terms. What that means isn't so easy to define. I love those paintings in which structure seems more present than the narrative content (the story being told through imagery). In the High Renaissance—for example, the works of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, etc.—the structure is less easily seen because the figures and the landscape behind them are so much more lifelike. The awkwardness that seems controlled by the composition in the earlier Renaissance paintings—for example, those of Giotto, Simone Martini or Piero della Francésca–is gone. I like that awkwardness."

Feltus's intent is not to convey a naturalistic illusion, but to fabricate a work of art that partakes of artifice and posits its own rules. He describes his way of dealing with composition as "intuitive, rather than using any systems or geometry or grids." He elaborates: "I'm like an abstract painter as far as composition goes. The forms want to find the most perfect position and relationships possible. That arrangement is complicated by the logic of shadows on the floor, the spaces between figures, and the figures' anatomical structures. But then again, paintings aren't real and don't have to fall into correctness the way real things do. A painting can be better when it doesn't depart too much from the flatness of the picture plane. Contradictions are interesting. Anatomy might be unreal as well. Think of Ingres's distortions. And certainly there are millions of examples in the history of art where there is less of a desire for things to read as real."

While Feltus's pictures may be read as a formal sequence of shapes and intervals between shapes, they partake of the "real" to the extent that they imply a narrative. A clothed man and a naked woman face one another but look away. A drawing board is blank. A letter is held, not read. The message that is missed or waylaid is a recurrent theme. Feltus's characters speak to the quandary of relationships—between the artist and the muse, the body and the soul, the feminine and the masculine, the lover and the beloved and, perhaps most poignantly, between the painter and the past.

"When I make a painting, I find myself in dialogue with other masters from other places and other periods," says Feltus. "My influences go back to the very earliest known paintings and to those of our time. The wax encaustic Fayum portraits, painted in Egypt from around 100 to 300 A.D., are as beautiful and as fresh and seemingly contemporary as any painted heads I know. There is no more sophisticated drawing of an animal than the best of those prehistoric cave paintings from Lascaux, and Brancusi is not really better at abstracting from nature than a good Cycladic sculpture. The making of art today is not about the making of something that hasn't been done before. Even performance and installation art have been around since ancient times. In art as in human nature, there is no progress." a

SILVER GELATIN PRINT BY TOBIAS FELTUS

Meet Alan Feltus

When asked what aspect of his craft was either unusual or hard-won, Alan Feltus replied, "It's all hard-won. Nothing about painting is easy!" Feltus was born in Washington, D.C., in 1943. He studied at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and later earned a bachelor's degree in fine art from Cooper Union in New York City and a master's degree in fine art from Yale University. Since 1987 he has lived in Assisi, Italy, with his wife, the artist Lani Irwin. Feltus has had one-person gallery exhibitions in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Boca Raton, Wichita, and Washington, D.C., as well as in Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans and Rome. In 2007 the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art staged retrospective shows of Feltus's and Irwin's work. Forum Gallery in New York City (www.forumgallery.com) represents him. To see more of his work, visit www.alanfeltus.com.

Olaf and Anya **(oil, 47x39)**