



FOREWORD

Such a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a conscience that looks death in the face, is another name for freedom.

— Jacques Derrida¹, author of *The Truth in Painting*

At first exposure to Christopher Fitzgerald's *Portals* series, I was reminded of those intellectually fortified European Salons, Paris being the most notable, with its equally hegemonic counterpart just across the English Channel. While these notoriously anachronistic academies all professed a commitment to steer and safeguard their respective nation's cultural production, they were more proficient at persevering the artistic aesthetic *du jour*, and by convenient extension, the associated careers, professional reputations and closed loop marketplace of its membership.

Be that as it may, each year the Salons would open their doors to the untrained and unrefined eyes of the public. The entire affair was perfectly curated to showcase entirely new works of art carefully selected by the committee and deemed worthy of national merit and universal praise, similar to today's *So You Think You Can Dance* television juggernaut. As one would expect, the less celebrated works would be hung in adjacent rooms off the main path or in the career ending annex across the street. Submitted works deemed unworthy or even abhorrent by the committee, or as Hitler liked to call them, "degenerate art" could sometimes be found — with some effort and bravery — hanging in off brand or avant-garde galleries in the vicinity. One famously notable reject was Paul Cezanne, now

¹ Jacques Derrida (2008). "The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret", p17, University of Chicago Press

regarded, spoiler alert, as the father of modern art. The committee ridiculed Cezanne for submitting his scandalously "unfinished" apples painting.

After Cezanne's Apple-gate scandal, more Salon uprisings followed, most notably Matisse, who was identified as the leader of a marauding horde of "fauve artists," armed to the teeth with palette knives, linseed oil and zero respect for color theory. Each season, another band of unselected artists brandishing new theories and techniques threatened to topple the Salon's cultural dominance. Despite these annual uprisings, artistic order was precariously maintained. That is, until the summer of 1907 when Picasso, now regarded as art world's most magnanimous artistic figure and even bigger misogynist, in Sampson like fashion, toppled the pillars of Paris Salon when he submitted a ninety-six by ninety-two inch painting of prostitutes in various repose brandishing primitive African masks entitled, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. From that year forward, the Salon's dominance had ended, the mostly bloodless coup was over, finally, and the modern art revolution had begun.

All of this bears mentioning when one considers Christopher Fitzgerald's *Portals* series. Had Fitzgerald lived in the Salon era, it's highly probable that he would have been run out of town, being symbolically pelted with Cezanne's apples. However, this is the price a talented and brave new artist will pay to have their work displayed in the public arena for untrained masses and critics alike. Artists forsake the risk and rejection for just one thing: hope; hope that a small following, or even just one person will truly connect with the work.

If you've ever stood in the presence of a Mark Rothko painting such as *No.14* at SFMOMA, there's a spiritual vibration that envelops you. At first you think you're looking at it, then you realize it's looking at you. As such, shortsighted and hurried viewers beware! This body

of work requires a rare, near-existential resolve to truly engage the work, on the work's terms, having a chance at transcendence beyond *looking* at paintings to actually *seeing* and *hearing* them. Fitzgerald purposefully oscillates between bold declarations to ephemeral whispers, that you run the risk of mistaking the work as yet another mid-career artist's ham-fisted grab at cheap notoriety by trafficking on that well-worn shortcut-of-shock. Such a dismissal would be tragically myopic, yet would put Fitzgerald in good company with the likes of Warhol and others.

While most of Warhol's series, shows, films and performance art weren't without controversy, his 1963 *Car Crash* series was considered beyond the pale by many. Even though Warhol was already well regarded in the art world, more than a few art critics and patrons recoiled in collective horror and disgust at the series which featured real-life, ghastly, photographic silkscreens of real human carnage on America's much lauded, but highly dangerous and unregulated highways. As usual, Andy was on to something, history proves it, although at the time neither he nor we really knew what it was. This did not prevent him from sharing his thoughts and findings publicly, despite the initial and near unanimous pushback. Nor did similarly negative reactions and misunderstandings deter Francis Bacon from producing his contorted religious iconoclast series, or Cindy Sherman from sharing the bruised and battled uncomfortable truths of her personal experience with domestic violence.

So at first blush, Christopher Fitzgerald's work challenges you with every weapon in the artist's arsenal. The very materials and methods he employs are intended to knock the viewer off balance. His paintings range in scale from seemingly delicate watercolors four by five inches to enormous canvases with the same runny watercolor brushstrokes, yet rendered in opaque oils. As you enter the gallery and spy the wide spectrum of work on offer from a

distance, your eye is drawn to the fluttering of brilliant reds and blues, each canvas compositionally and kinetically reminiscent of the visually lyrical recent work of Larry Poons or the fantastic and impossible deconstructions of deKooning. But as you draw close enough to start making narrative sense of the images in front of you, you are immediately repulsed and uncomfortable with the notion that this is not what you came into an art gallery to see or where you wanted to be. Thrust smack dab in the middle of the cacophony of emergency room and intensive care unit with a rotating cast of doctors and nurses working frenetically and intensely on main subjects whose bodies are bathed and baptized in various hues of red blood both dried and fresh.

So, how's a human to respond to this unprecedented visual onslaught? Perhaps by walking away in protest of an artist who is exploiting human pain and suffering for aesthetic fodder. That would be an appropriate response had Fitzgerald left us alone to bare the oppressive onus of interpretation. However, through each painting's poetically juxtaposed titles, he beckons us further into a liminal space between horror and hope, with titles like *Training for Utopia*, and the verbose but poignant, *Charter for Love like a Hurricane*. Another piece, the smallest and most delicate watercolor of the series, entitled *Death Losing Grip*, depicts a comatose young boy whose bloody, cherubic-like head has been lovingly yet vainly wrapped in gauze.

Like a twist ending, these paintings are the opposite of macabre. Fitzgerald is looking death in the face, flipping the script on it having the final word, and pointing to a higher spiritual reality. When viewed individually and all together, there's no mistaking that these exquisite and thoughtful paintings and their prescient titles are inextricably linked together in some audacious and elaborate conspiracy of hope; that hope being that these seemingly unfortunate subjects

and sojourners are oscillating precariously between the shackles of their terrestrial trauma and the painless, joy and freedom of a life everlasting. So as ghastly and politically unfashionable as this *Portals* series may seem in the contemporary art "salons" of today, Fitzgerald is in excellent company among his initially misunderstood predecessors, and in a master class all by himself.

CHAD COVERT DARBYSHIRE