



Llyn Foulkes: *Pop*, 1985-90, mixed mediums with soundtrack, 84 by 123 by 3 inches; at the Hammer Museum.

# Llyn Foulkes

LOS ANGELES — Hammer Museum

In this retrospective of over 145 works, Llyn Foulkes proves himself to be more than worthy of his newfound blue-chip status. Spanning half a century, the chockablock exhibition provides a steady stream of the L.A. artist's trademark melancholy, righteous anger and self-reflective angst. Known for his cantankerous rectitude, Foulkes is a quintessential maverick, daring to promote moral values in an art world and city usually unconcerned with such things.

After a formative experience as a private in bombed-out postwar Germany, Foulkes emerged from L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute as a formal innovator. His early mixed-medium paintings feature burned or charred found materials and deftly controlled brushwork, sometimes complemented by vintage photographs and short poetic texts that address American values. In *Geography Lesson* (1960-61), Foulkes presents a bombed-out landmass in the shape of the United States, formed by layering old pages of correspondence and blurring their borders with black paint. Unlike Johns's map of the same year, Foulkes's gothic USA is frighteningly dark, seeming to chart an ensuing apocalypse. A more material expression of doomsday appears in *Flanders* (1961-62), in which a found mound of melted white plastic extends a foot out of the frame, bursting from a ground of charred newsprint. A blurry, otherworldly photo of Death Valley is attached to the mound, and an unsettling painted version of the photo hangs below.

Several smaller collage works feature photographic cabinet cards whose human figures have been blotted out by paint. These rarely seen works presage Foulkes's well-known Bloody Head paintings, which he began in the 1970s.

Several queasy pink and green monochrome Rock paintings (1964-69)—a group absent from Foulkes's 1995 retrospective at the Laguna Art Museum—depict gigantic desert formations with anthropomorphic features. Although Foulkes later disparaged these large-scale, photo-based landscapes, they are deadpan representatives of national soullessness, bleakly conveyed with a Pop immediacy. Foulkes seemed to be struggling with the flatness of these photorealist works, animating some with borders featuring the diagonal warning stripes of roadwork. In several others, he presents double images of landscapes in the style of a stereoscope. A later mountainscape, *Ghost Hill* (1984), includes the text of a darkly troubling poem by Dylan Thomas.

The Bloody Heads—portraits of patriarchal figures with violently blotted out faces—take Foulkes's alienation to a new level, seeming to unleash the allegorical tableaux that he began in the 1980s. Playing off the politically charged traditions of history painting, the large works of the past 30 years are vehement, heartfelt complaints about the direction of art and culture in postindustrial America. Foulkes himself poses as an impotent Superman or Lone Ranger, battling the seductive

powers of Mickey Mouse, his symbol of corporate co-optation. His work lambasting Disney's all-pervasive product placement feels particularly bracing in light of the current tendency of L.A. museum administrators to court Hollywood at any cost. Foulkes himself succumbs to the lure of the devil in the self-portrait *But I Thought Art Was Special (Mickey and Me)*, 1995, in which the Mouse appears to emerge from inside the artist's brain.

In Foulkes's tableaux, altered found materials and faux relief surfaces promote deep-focus experiences. In interviews Foulkes has spoken of wanting viewers to "walk into a picture." Without studio assistants, he can work for years on a painting, digging into wooden surfaces, building up molded forms and changing details to augment shadows. In the show's dark spaces, with subtly controlled lighting, stanchions position viewers so that Foulkes's masterpieces of disaffection, *Pop* (1985-90) and *The Last Frontier* (1997-2005), convey maximum 3-D effects. In *Pop*, Foulkes's abject Superman, cowed by the accoutrements of mass media, sits frozen in a sealed-off living room. The gnarly surfaces of rocks, trash heaps and withered flesh in *The Last Frontier* transform the L.A. landscape into a study of the ravages of time.

Foulkes uses art as a kind of purgation, destroying smooth surfaces in imagery that deeply explores human behavior. Brilliantly portraying the soul-crushing forces behind the glitter and hype of contemporary Los Angeles, Foulkes finds redemption in craft, self-analysis and poetic fervor. Unlike L.A. peers such as John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, Foulkes maintains his energy and purpose. This exhibition shifts the city's art landscape.

[*"Llyn Foulkes"* travels to the New Museum, New York, June 12-Sept. 1, and the Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Germany, Dec. 6, 2013-Mar. 2, 2014.]

—Michael Duncan



ON VIEW  
THROUGH  
MAY 19



# Llyn Foulkes

Raw, tactile, eviscerating, and more timely than ever, Llyn Foulkes' transfixing work both skewers and reimagines the inner landscape of LA.

By Tibby Rothman

"This is about as far away from 'Hollywood' as I can get."  
— Text in Llyn Foulkes' "Robyn's Rock"

If you ask painter Llyn Foulkes to remember the opening of "Helter Skelter," the MOCA exhibition that rekindled his career in 1992, he'll tell you what was in the air. Literally. "Helicopters flying all over the place," he'll say, and then he recalls the teeming throngs of Los Angelenos trying to enter the Temporary Contemporary that night. "Opening night of 'Helter Skelter' was so big, you couldn't even get in! Chris Burden couldn't get in," he recalls. The mob grew so unwieldy that the city Fire Department shut down the museum's upper level, where Foulkes' tableau *Pop* (1985-90)—his dark, hypnotic narrative of the American family circa 1990, infiltrated by popular culture, and reeling in issues that still run through his work: corporate power, greed, corruption, guns and American dystopia—was installed. "There was just too many people," he says, a touch of wonderment in his voice.

The show was not the first time Foulkes was at the fulcrum of a signal moment. In 1961, having jettisoned Chouinard Art School without graduating, Foulkes celebrated his first solo exhibit at the Ferus Gallery. And yet, as happened after those gleaming-future Ferus-days, Foulkes' post-"Helter Skelter" recognition would dissipate in time like the *whock* of helicopter blades fading away on a Los Angeles night—retreating, reviving, reoccurring every ten years or so, he'll say.

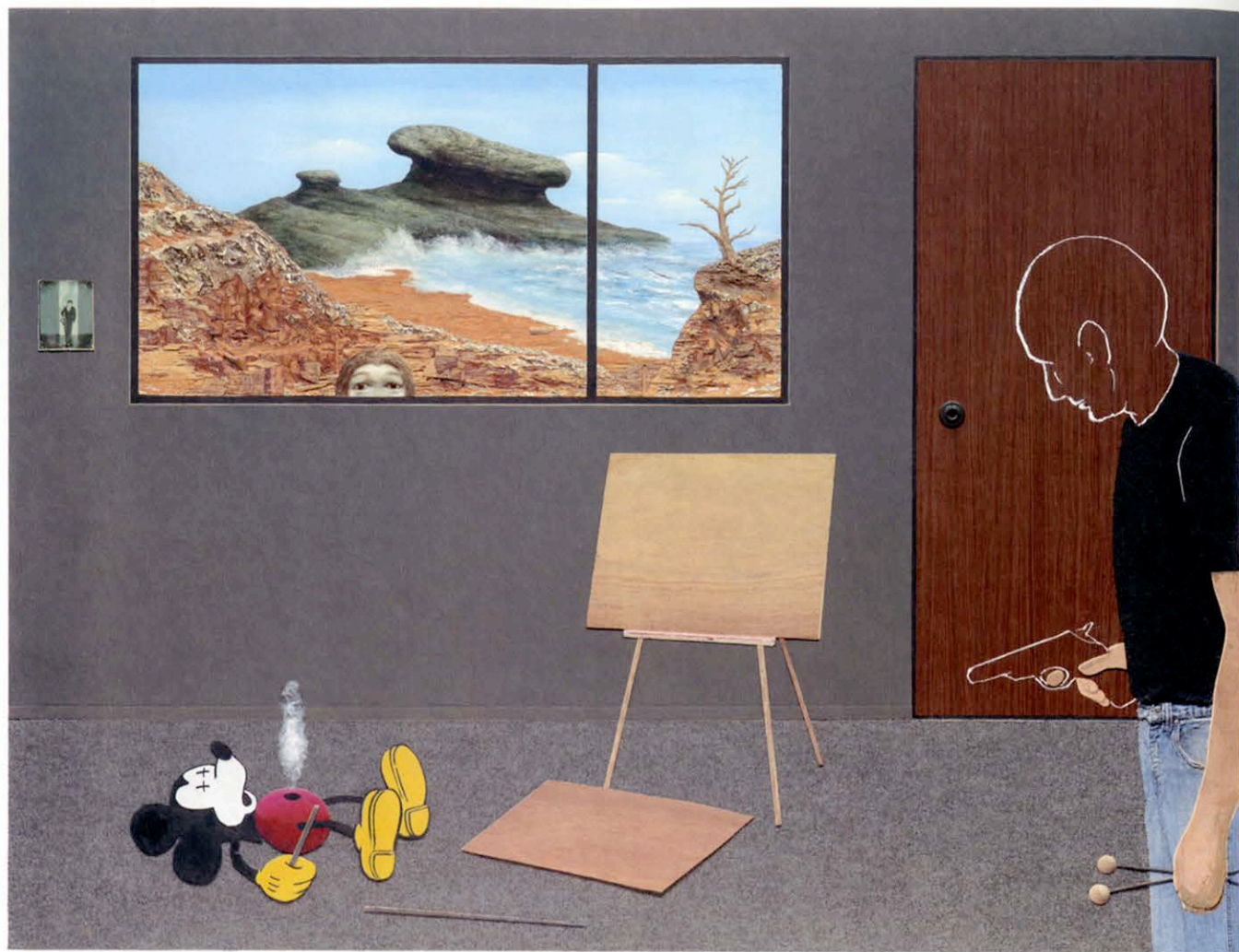
"He is one of the most significant and influential artists of his generation... He has been there for every significant moment in LA art history since the early '60s," says Hammer Museum curator Ali Subotnick. In one sweeping year, 1967, Foulkes won the Paris Biennale, represented the United States in Sao Paulo and was LACMA's first new talent purchase recipient. "But every time he feels himself becoming too inside he pulls back, preferring to exist a bit on the periphery to retain his rawness, integrity and realness," she adds. Turned on to the artist by collector Dean Valentine while organizing "Nine Lives: Visionary Artists from LA," Subotnick was transfixed by Foulkes' "raw and visceral and honest" oeuvre that "seemed timeless and doesn't fit into any box, any category." Eventually,

"THE LOST FRONTIER," 1997-2005, MIXED MEDIUMS, 87" x 96" x 8"  
PHOTO: RANDEL URBAUER

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES  
PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY ERIKA GLAZER; SUSAN STEINHAUSER  
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SUSAN BAY NIMOY AND LEONARD NIMOY; AND JOEL PORTNOY







"DELIVERANCE," 2007, MIXED MEDIUMS, 72" x 84"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO: RANDEL URBAUER

she chose to anchor the exhibition with his tableau *The Lost Frontier* (1997-2005)—Foulkes' bleak take on the classic western landscape, his saga of lost Angeles.

Though *The Lost Frontier* is less than eight inches deep, it appears to stretch for miles as it draws the viewer into its story. Far off in the horizon, beyond a burnt-out—or is it oil-soaked?—ravine, the city sits upon a dump that spills down, and out, towards us. Embedded in the dark ravine that we must pass through to reach our city-slash-destination are symbols of a genocide that began with the displacement of the Native American and go on today as the city voraciously eats the sacred open space that once was California: an Indian almost disappears within the blackness of the craggy relief that narrows the route before us, a mummified cat, representing a mountain lion, lies paws-up on its back, and an artist—Foulkes himself—stands gazing into a lifeless blank TV set. Above them all stands an oh-so familiar American, Mickey Mouse, dressed in a black pioneer dress and wielding a rifle. So much for the Hollywood sign.

"My work has always been about man's inhumanity to man," says Foulkes over lunch at the Hammer Museum, where he and Subotnick are in the midst of installing the extensive retrospective of his work which opened in the museum in early February.

The painter's reputation is that he can be difficult—an attribute ascribed to individuals who tell truth in a town that prefers the safety of slick, or to artists buried alive. Yet, there's also a haunted, quizzical

quality to the now 78-year-old, a touch of actor Bill Murray's persona in the film *Lost in Translation*. And a brush of frailty, as well. Maybe it's the consequence of the hours installing the retrospective's approximately 150 pieces, which chart a journey from the comics he drew as a teenager to the tableau about his marriage disintegrating... and everything between. Or perhaps it's the psychic wear and tear of decades alone in the studio bleeding the body blows of corporate greed into the work.

"He is really trying to make a statement with his work and that is a little rare today with contemporaries," says Subotnick. "He's much more in tune with what's happening in the real world rather than just focused on—as so many artists are—the art world."

Since his first solo show at Ferus, Foulkes has told rich but brutally tactile stories. The swastika on the burned out chalkboard in an assemblage titled *In Memory of St. Vincent School* (1960) alluding to his past—a soldier moving through a desolate, bombed-out Germany after World War II—and foretelling his future. Though Foulkes would leave behind the assemblage aligned with that of peers such as Edward Kienholz or George Herms, he evolved a painting technique that fully integrates collage and found objects within the paint itself. And, he has spent a lifetime observing and absorbing the angst and destruction of real life, as he exposes what lies below the golden state. From the start, his narratives—given the space of single frames rather than thousands of feet of celluloid—have conveyed complex and evocative plots.

*The Rape of the Angels* (1991) is Foulkes take on the city's overdevelopment and the end of Bunker Hill. As he, himself, stands within the



## Foulkes' subject matter has, from time to time, frightened collectors and the general public, dinging his career.

story, mourning it all, an LA city planner is depicted as the developers' messenger boy, his mouth gaping open, a collage of hands and money tumbling out. On his shoulder, sits Mickey Mouse, sitting in for Disney Hall. Ever since Foulkes was given a copy of a 1934 "Mickey Mouse Club Handbook"—which he realized was extending beyond benign entertainment to the indoctrination of children—the artist has clawed the shiny velum off of the Disney Company's front man to reveal the voracious corporation beneath.

"Art should take some kind of stand," he says at lunch, digging into the complexities of Los Angeles' development equation. And don't even get him started on Eli Broad, suburban sprawl, and politicians' Faustian bargain to pay for their municipality. "That was the problem with people like Warhol, he never took a stand like that. He would do movie stars. He even did a silk screen of Mickey Mouse, but it was just Mickey Mouse, or, it was just Coca Cola... I could have been a really good abstract painter but there's more to art."

Foulkes' subject matter has, from time to time, frightened collectors and the general public, dinging his career. In 1973, he famously turned from his monumental Rock Paintings to his raw *Bloody Head* portraits, in which restrained deliberate painting juxtapose with visceral horror. And his commitment to the narrative, to talk about deep societal problems, has also meant that he has consistently produced work outside the party line of Southern California art.

During the mid-1960s, as perceptual work garnered recognition, Foulkes showed *Post Card* paintings, sly nostalgic soliloquies of open space falling to development. As reductive minimalism took hold, his *Bloody Head(s)* morphed into visceral tactile disfigurements that could be wryly comedic. In the 1980s as postmodernism grev, he kept with the story—vignettes set within stages—as he explored techniques that could bring his paintings deeper into the wall. He may have found a spiritual home in Paul Schimmel's "Helter Skelter" in the early '90s, but his work was more overtly political, giving face and name to the enemy. Yet if Foulkes' narratives have been out of step with his contemporaries, he has influenced many younger artists. "His point of view is [that of] somebody who wants to make an object that is culturally rich, not exclusively as a commodity," says Los Angeles artist Joe Biel. "He has a really complex set of contradictions of emotions in the work. They're not like Hollywood TV stock characters. And that's how real life works."

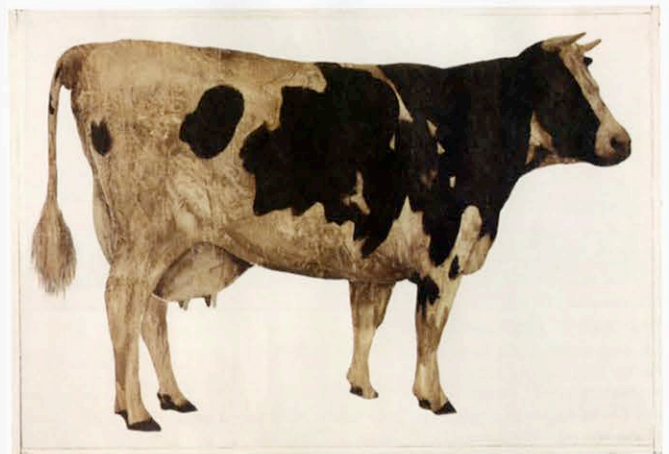
"There's this real pathos, a melancholy even though he's using this iconography versus Warhol," notes Adam Helms, one of three artists invited by Subotnick to conduct public walk-throughs of Foulkes' retrospective. Born in Tucson, now living and working in New York, Helms was introduced to Foulkes through the catalogue for "Helter Skelter," and drawn to the artist's despotic vision of the American west. Though Foulkes' use of irony, humor and American iconography—Mickey Mouse, Superman and guns appear frequently in his artwork—have led to his frequent categorization with Pop, or the dark

FROM TOP:

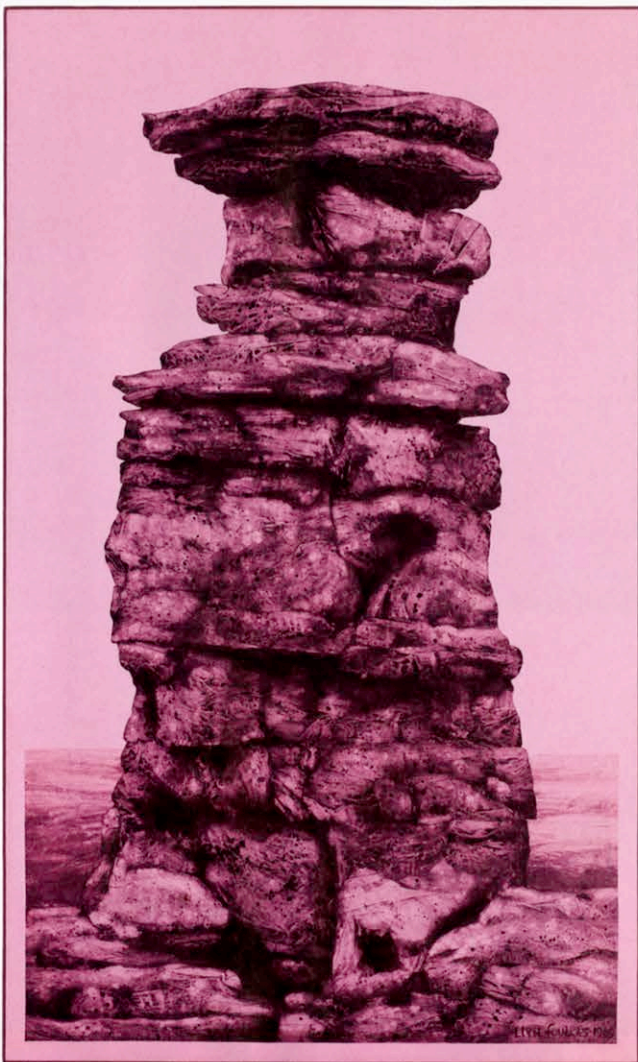
"IN MEMORY OF ST. VINCENT SCHOOL," 1960  
OIL, CHARRED WOOD, AND PLASTICIZED ASHES ON BLACKBOARD AND CHAIR  
BLACKBOARD: 66" x 72 1/4" CHAIR: 26" x 13" x 12"  
NORTON SIMON MUSEUM; GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. HARRY ZLOTNICK

"COW," 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 43" x 62"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO: JASON DEWEY

"THE AWAKENING," 1994-20012, MIXED MEDIUMS, 40 1/4" x 44" x 7"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER







"PORTRAIT OF LEO GORCEY," 1969  
 OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 107¾" x 64¾"  
 PHOTO: SHELDAN C. COLLINS  
 WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK  
 GIFT OF THE ARTIST AND PURCHASE, WITH FUNDS FROM THE FRIENDS  
 OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

side of Pop, his work rejects the movement's cool aloofness. "He wears his heart on his sleeve unlike the elitist pretentious tendency of artists trying to be cool, clever, and conceptual," notes Subotnick.

While Foulkes' commentary on the Gulf War, *Where Did I Go Wrong* (1991), features Clark Kent as the protagonist, as time went on, the central figure of Foulkes' paintings and tableaux often was Foulkes himself. Stripped of Pop's removed tone, his paintings release raw emotion, angst, paralysis and fear in the face of the world's both mental and physical violence. In 1995's extremely difficult *But I Thought Art Was Special (Mickey and Me)* (1995) in which Mickey Mouse literally eats Foulkes' brain, the intensity of paint coupled with his exhausted expression is almost overwhelming. Even in 2007's *Deliverance*, in which Foulkes finally triumphs over Mickey by shooting him, Foulkes' silhouette seems tired not exalted.

Foulkes' work runs through with the tactile. The heavily worked bas-relief of *The Corporate Kiss* (2001) results in a self-portrait so textural it feels like a narrow sculpture. An actual metal-cold pistol sinks into the fluff of a painted little boy's actual-cotton-ball reverie in *Day Dreams* (1991). If Foulkes brings the reality of the human condition to the disingenuous worlds of politics and the entertainment industry, so too he

embeds real world objects into his made up stories. A gruesome set of real teeth are gaped open by material fabricated into a dead fetus in *Double Trouble* (1991), the real tie that drops from President Reagan's neck in *The Golden Ruler* (1985) is offset by his mottled textured neck skin, and in *The Awakening* (1994-2012), in which Foulkes finally accedes to the inevitability of divorce, he implants screws as his eye-balls. Using his virtuoso painting ability and groundbreaking techniques to interpose them in his unreal slash real narratives.

"He creates a schism between the conjured image and the real image..." says Lisa Adams, an LA-based painter whose work was noted by Foulkes in a recent interview. "You see this built-up surface of the face, which he renders kind of realistically, then finally, he applies a real necktie to the image. He messes around with the illusion of the thing. There's a strange reality/unreality going on. It can't get much more real than gluing a shirt down on a painting, but at the same time, it's all an imaginary world."

Particularly in later works, Foulkes has used materials that mean something to him personally: that's his sweater from the army he wears in *Pop*; the bedspread in *The Awakening*, he couldn't let go of because a dog he loved died on it; the hair on the Native American in *The Lost Horizon* (1991) is that of the late assemblage artist John Schroeder who was interested in Native American culture; occasionally, a shirt he wears while he paints might find itself in that painting. Yet, these materials are not about the objects themselves but integrated into the painting's narrative. "He'd rather that you get the subject and the image and what he's trying to express, rather than what the specific materials are," says Subotnick. "If you focus too much on that there's a dead cat in *The Lost Frontier*, it takes away from the story he wants to tell."

Even the artist's most complex pieces do not begin with a specific intent but develop from a process during which he might paint, chip away then re-affix panel, or embed images and ephemera only to remove and replace them later on. "If you look at those big paintings like *Pop*, like *The Lost Frontier*, they weren't planned out. I had no idea what they were going to be," he says. Foulkes, the father, is the focal point of *Pop*, and yet, initially, the tableau was based on a picture of a friend of his. Installed in blacked-out rooms these two tableaux envelope the viewer completely in Foulkes' stories. Yet, the painter says that too wasn't the intent, rather, it grew from his dissatisfaction with specific assemblage pieces in which objects protrude instead of receding in space. "My whole idea was to try to build back into the wall, into the canvas... to keep pushing the space back with the light," he says.

Ironically, this utter emersion of the viewer into a multi-layered provocative narrative lies in the province of American cinema when it was once great. "[*The Lost Frontier*] is the most mind-blowing experience I've ever had in a commercial gallery," says Biel, who first saw it during its initial showing at the Patricia Faure Gallery. "It really affected me in the way that reading a really big novel affected me." What struck Biel too, was the length of time Foulkes devoted to the work—eight years. "A very extended process not in line with the typical market-driven gallery world," he says with admiration. There's "something that's quite personal to the work. Even in the way it's made," notes Helms, who warmly describes it as "unabashedly analog, handmade... He's not in a studio factory with a lot of assistants pumping out product."

In the four years since *The Lost Frontier* welcomed-slash-warned Hammer visitors in "Nine Lives," Foulkes' star has once again surged—his work was celebrated in seven Pacific Standard Time shows, exhibited in the 2011 Venice Biennale, and turned him rock star in *DOCUMENTA 13*. Overtime legend has it that Foulkes has not been quiet about the fact that he believes he has not received the acknowledgment due him. Perhaps now, as commercialism overwhelms the American psyche, the art business becomes the domain of venture capitalists turned collectors and young artists revel in their success at producing brand-able work, the timing is just right.





## LYN FOULKES

### Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

'I guess I do a lot of complaining,' admitted Lyn Foulkes recently. 'But I think I have a lot to complain about!' His comment came during a performance at the Hammer Museum of the byzantine musical apparatus he calls *The Machine*; it is just like Foulkes to toss out an acerbic aside even when it looks like he's having fun. More than half a century since the Los Angeles-based artist began his career, he shows little sign of mellowing.

This long-awaited retrospective, organized by Ali Subotnick, is as exhaustive an overview as we're ever likely to get. It runs all the way from Foulkes's teenage cartoons and clumsy pastiches of Salvador Dalí through to his extraordinary more recent *trompe l'oeil* tableaux, which look like nothing else on God's sweet earth. It makes a compelling case for the seriousness and depth of his artistic contribution.

So what does Foulkes have to complain about? At the age of 19, he was drafted into the army and sent from his native Washington State to Germany. The year was 1954, and Foulkes witnessed a broken landscape and a society struggling to come to terms with its past. He was profoundly affected; six years later, having completed graduate studies at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, he made *In Memory of St Vincent School* (1960). The assemblage features a child's chair beneath a section of charred blackboard with a swastika scratched into it. He visited sites in Germany that he had seen in newspaper and television images over a decade earlier. *Flanders* (1961–2) references not World War II but the Great War. A painting of a black, ravaged landscape is set into a curtain of billowing plastic, and a photograph of the same scene hangs in a separate frame below. Apparently the picture shows not Belgium but Death Valley, California.

It is ironic that an artist from LA, the capital of mass cultural dissemination, should develop an interest in image mediation during

travels in postwar Europe. Edging away from his borderline histrionic early style (which owes too much to Wallace Berman, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns), Foulkes hit on a technique using a rag soaked in paint to create nearly photorealist surfaces that resemble equally fabric, leathery skin (human or animal) or rock. This painterly trick had two benefits. The first was that Foulkes was able to paint near-identical rocks, which in works such as *Nob Hill* (1964) he repeated on the same canvas like stereoscopic photographs. The second was that those rock formations, in their resemblance of skin, became human or animalistic. Subotnick hangs *Postcard from Gilroy* (1967) adjacent to *The Pig* (1969), the latter's rounded back mirroring the former's horizon.

In a few years Foulkes had moved from messy, furious assemblages and collages to photorealist paintings on canvas of rocks, pigs and cows. Anger, nevertheless, still simmered beneath their surfaces; many works from this period bear the scrawled legend: 'This painting is dedicated to the American.' The American what? Foulkes didn't say, but the dedication sounds darkly accusatorial. In the early 1970s, the story goes, he was working on a self-portrait when a friend took him to a mortuary. In shocked response, he returned to the painting and added blood-soaked hair, and an exposed, grey featureless skull. *Who's On Third?* (1971–3) was a breakthrough painting for Foulkes, and allowed his florid taste for the macabre and his expressionist inclinations to re-emerge.

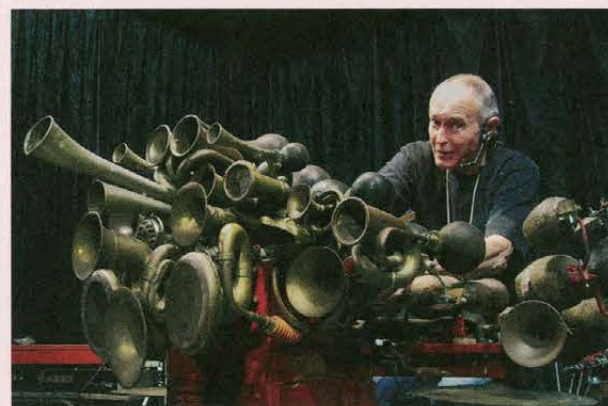
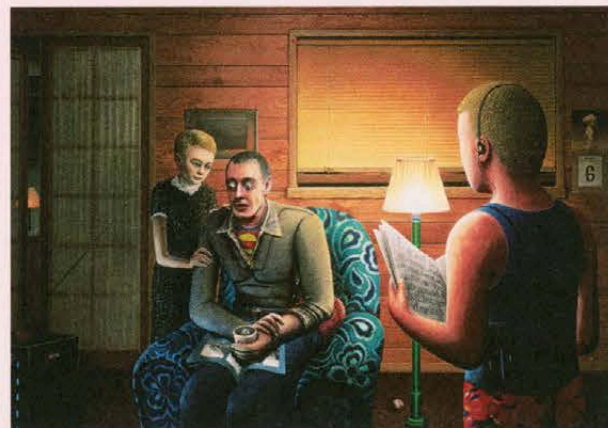
Foulkes is monumentally prolific, and Subotnick has chosen to reflect this rather than curtail or edit it. On one grey-painted wall, more than a dozen of Foulkes's portraits from the 1970s – all faces obscured by gore, or found images, or both – are hung salon-style. Towards the end of this decade, as Foulkes tells it, he was given a copy of the *Mickey Mouse Club Handbook* (1934), which detailed how the Disney Corporation hoped to mould their customers into loyal and pliant young patriots. Foulkes was outraged.

This indignation might seem a touch naïve today, but it fuelled much of Foulkes's

work for the next three decades. *Made in Hollywood* (1983) includes a facsimile page from the offending book as well as a photograph of the artist's young children; *Deliverance* (2007), shows an outline of Foulkes, gun in hand, a dead Mickey lying at his feet. Subotnick admits, in an exhibition wall text, that 'subtlety has never been the artist's style.' That is an understatement. In 1983, Foulkes created *O'Pablo*, a three-dimensional tableau featuring the executed corpse of an art critic, a press pass pinned to his jacket and an erection poking out of his unzipped flies. This is the point at which Foulkes, as the saying goes, jumped the shark. The work is too much in every way – too desperate to shock, too splenetic to be convincing. There are even copies of Foulkes's past paintings on the scene's back wall.

From the 1980s on, Foulkes's socio-political critique (of which poor Mickey often bears the brunt) takes centre stage. However rickety his polemic may be, his convictions undoubtedly pushed him to new extremes of formal innovation. His two masterpieces, *Pop* (1985–90) and *The Lost Frontier* (1997–2005) are specially lit in their own darkened rooms. Each intricate tableau is built from media that, in some cases, are also the subjects they represent. Wood is wood, a shirt is a shirt. *Pop* even includes a soundtrack, written and performed by Foulkes on the *Machine*. Both paintings show the artist watching television; it is perhaps this kind of stupefied viewing experience that Foulkes is trying to contend with. That is no mean feat, but here, in these entrancing works, he succeeds.

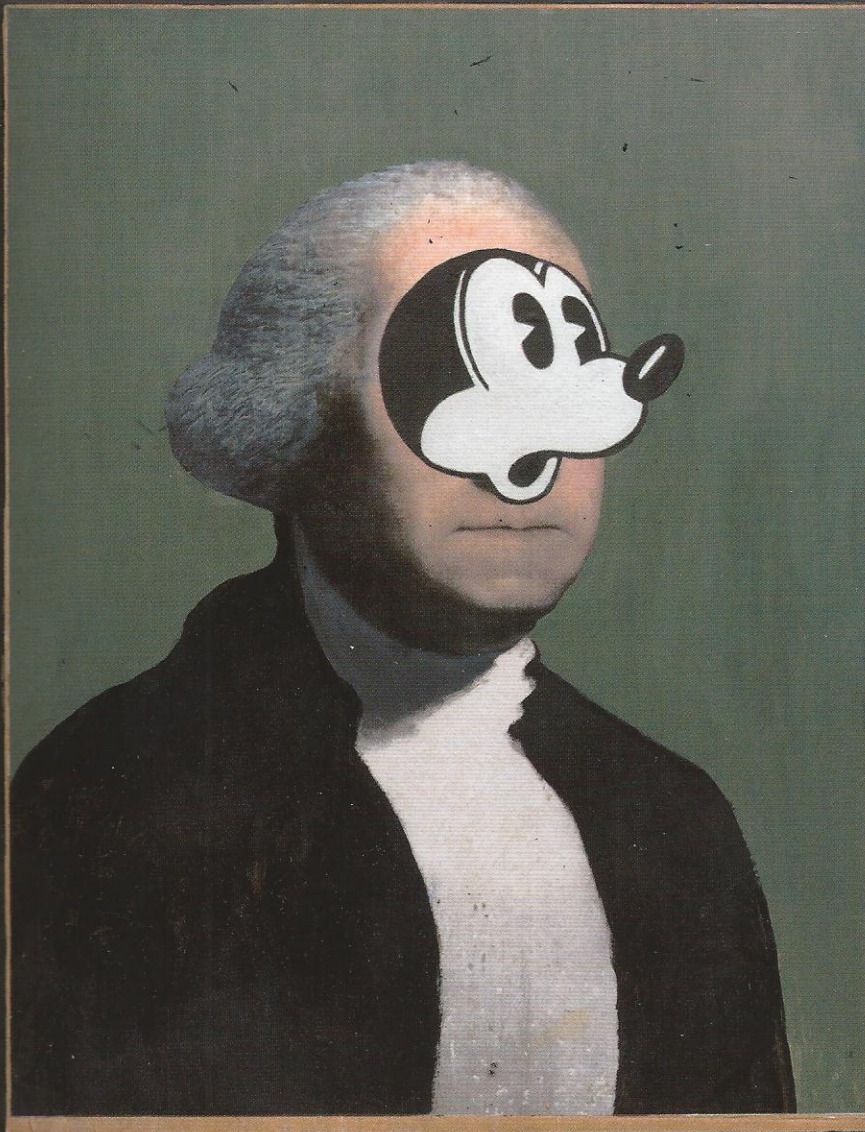
JONATHAN GRIFFIN





# Flash Art

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LLYN FOULKES







# Llyn Foulkes

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A MOUSE...

Maurizio Cattelan

**MAURIZIO CATTELAN:** *This might not be the best way to start, but I have to ask you, what's with all the bloody heads and obscured faces?*

**Llyn Foulkes:** I've been doing those since the '60s. A face is the most important part of a portrait, and when I obliterate that, I'm creating a blank slate, a painting.

**MC:** *Did you know you wanted to be an artist?*

**LF:** Ever since I was a kid. At the age of 19 I was drafted into the Army, the Korean War, sent to Germany for two years. I traveled all over. It opened my eyes to everything. I saw the Flemish painters and went all the way down to North Africa and Italy. Barcelona knocked me out. I saw the Sagrada Familia Church and it just blew my mind. That made me really want to be an artist. I saw all the great paintings all over Europe, at a very early age. I went back in '65, six years after art school, because I had won the Paris Biennale. I bought a VW van in Germany because it was half the price to ship it back then. So my family camped in the van for three months all over Europe, which was really great.

**MC:** *You went to school at the Chouinard Art Institute, right? That's now CalArts?*

**LF:** I only went to art school for two years.

**MC:** *Who did you study with there?*

**LF:** The professors that influenced me the most were Donald Graham, Richards Ruben and Emerson Woelffer. Graham taught all the Disney animators how to draw. He started me off on a project: do your own thing, or illustrate whatever you want. It could be a story, a poem. So I took something by Edgar Allan Poe. Richards Ruben is somebody who's been left out of the art history of Los Angeles. He had two shows at Ferus. I only had one show at Ferus. He influenced my painting, as did Emerson Woelffer. Oh, and the other one that influenced me was Jules Langsner. He was a brilliant critic and was teaching art history. He turned me on to Picasso. I still have the paper I wrote on Picasso. He gave me an A+.

**MC:** *Who are some of the other students who were in art school at the time you were there?*

**LF:** Let's see: Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Ed Ruscha, Jerry McMillan, Ron Miyashiro, Bob Mackie. But my closer friends were Ed Bernal and Stephan von Huene. Then after I'd been

there a year and a half, I won first prize for drawing and painting at the school, and then I left and went to Ferus because Richards Ruben told me to take my stuff over there. Irving Blum was really the one that saw my work first; he recognized, or discovered me.

**MC:** *Disney took over CalArts soon after you left Chouinard, no? Tell me about your thing with Disney and Mickey Mouse. What did they do to you? I saw a painting of yours with Mickey Mouse lying dead on the floor and you're standing there with a smoking gun [Deliverance, (2007)].*

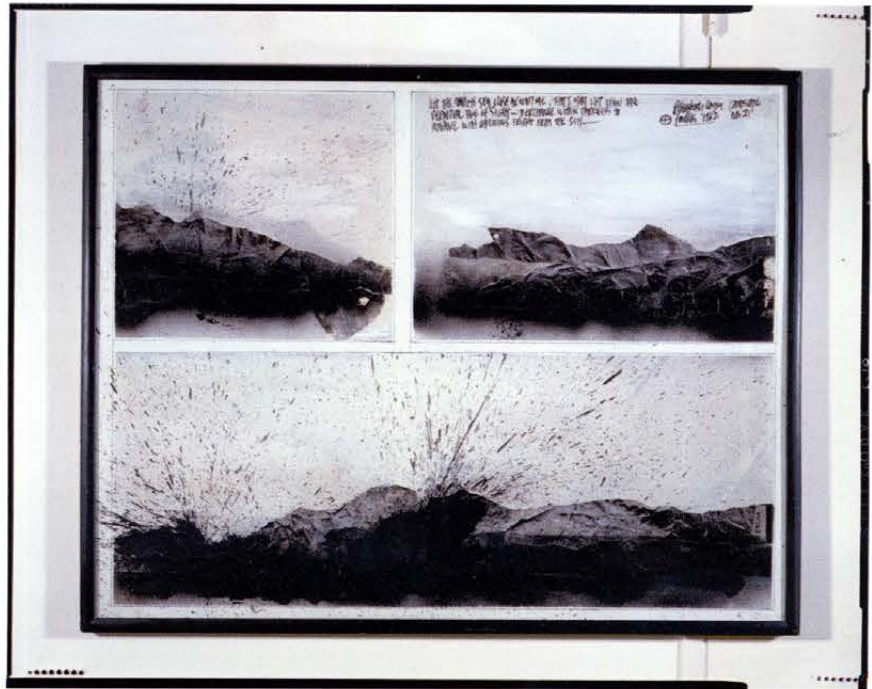
**LF:** I read the first page from [a letter Disney wrote regarding] the Mickey Mouse Club from 1934:

*The Mickey Mouse Club is an organization for boys and girls suggested by the Mickey Mouse cartoons... The primary purpose of the club is twofold. It provides an easily arranged and inexpensive method of getting and holding the patronage of youngsters. Through inspirational, patriotic character-building phases, it aids children in learning good citizenship, which in turns fosters goodwill among parents. Everyone*

**LLYN FOULKES, Ellensburg Canyon, 1962. Mixed media collage, 91 x 127 cm. Private Collection. Courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York. Opposite: That Old Black Magic, 1985. Mixed Media, 170 x 145 cm. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Courtesy the artist and Kent Fine Art, New York.**

*knows how strong the gang instinct is in kids. The Mickey Mouse Club is unique in that it furnishes entertainment of the most popular nature and at the same time implants beneficial principles. The latter is so completely shorn of any suggestion of lessons or lecturing that children absorb them almost unconsciously.*

This was the real beginning of marketing on a grand scale, and it worked. I had a show in 1996 at [Patricia] Faure called "The Legend of Mickey Rat," and the critic David Pagel accused me of McCarthyism for going after Disney. I wrote a letter back to the *Los Angeles Times* talking about how I was concerned about children and what was happening to them. I included the first page of the Mickey Mouse Club letter. The *Times* printed my letter but they deleted the part about implanting things in children's minds. That only showed me Disney makes their newspapers go with







LLYN FOULKES, *I Think it's Over*, 2009-2011. Mixed Media, 73 x 54 cm. Collection of Fondazione Prada, Milan. Courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York.

all their advertising. And it made me start to realize we don't always get the real news, not if it has to do with anything that's anti-commercial. So when I looked at that letter, I thought: if that had been in Mao's *Red Book*, about implanting things in children's minds and patriotic blah blah blah, you would have thought, "Oh yeah, those communists." There it is right there. Nobody goes after Disney. I feel like I'm a lone person out there going against it all the time. He's so American. To not like Mickey Mouse would be un-American. That's why I had the song:

*Once upon a time there was a mouse  
He lived in every house  
People did not set traps for him because  
it was a sin  
His job was to keep everyone clean  
To run people through his washing machine  
He had a white face / He kept the right pace  
with his patriotic jive*

**MC:** How did you get that letter?

**LF:** I got that from my former father-in-law, Ward Kimball, who was one of the Nine Old Men at Disney Studio. Walt was like a father to Ward, so he didn't even think anything about it. I just read it and all of a sudden I thought, "What?" I just saw the beginning of marketing right there, and that just suddenly started to ring a bell in my head.

**MC:** Have you ever had any problems with Disney, like a cease and desist?

**LF:** No. When I had my 1995 survey that started in the Laguna Art Museum, right in the middle of Orange County, *The Orange County Register* — I guess there's a lot of Democrats trying to go against the establishment there — put this picture of mine on the cover of their calendar section, in color, with Mickey coming out of my head, and it said "Danger." In the show, I had that letter in a

piece, as I did in the Hammer show [*Made in Hollywood*, (1983)]. They never did a thing because if they made a fuss about it, people would become aware of the document. So, it's better for them to say it's just art; it will go away if you just ignore it. But I'm determined to keep on going.

**MC:** So you wrote that song about Mickey Mouse. I've heard that you are a serious musician and have a Machine that you play. Tell me about *The Machine*.

**LF:** I played drums in a rock band from '65 to '71. Then I got fed up with it, because the music had gotten so loud.

**MC:** But back to *The Machine*...

**LF:** After that in '73 I started *The Rubber Band*. I started going back to my childhood, collecting horns. I'd go to all of the swap meets. In *The Rubber Band*, I had a washboard with horns on it. I had a snare, a bass drum and a few cowbells. That was it. There were seven musicians in the band. We were on "The Tonight Show" in '74. Then after the band I just decided I would try to make it a one-man band, so I acquired more horns and arranged them to play in standard chords. Then I started getting all these weird chords because I tried to get as many together as I could. I didn't hook the bass up till about 1987. It used to be just the bass drum, but as I soon as I hooked the bass up, it changed everything. I play the bass with my foot and I've gotten very good at it. It took me a long time. When you're doing everything else you really have to listen to it.

**MC:** Sounds very complicated.

**LF:** When I played the drums you had all these accessories you had to put in cases or fold up. So I decided to make it mostly all one thing.

**MC:** Is *The Machine* a way for you to take a break from painting and working in the studio?

**LF:** Yes, it is. And I mostly write all my own songs.

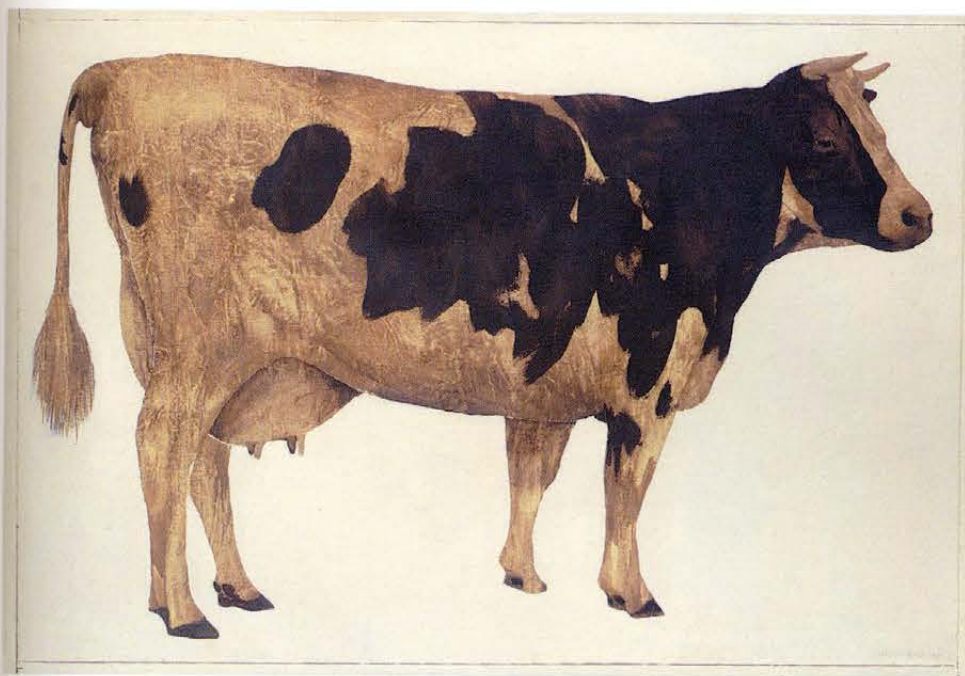
**MC:** Is it portable?

**LF:** Well, the main part is on wheels. When I perform, afterwards some people stay, and then I invite them to come up and see how I do it. They're always surprised. When Documenta 13 wanted to ship the whole thing over there, I was a little leery about that, because I've never had anybody pack my machine up and ship it. It comes apart in five sections.

**MC:** I've mostly seen your little paintings recently, but a couple of them were dimensional and had like a three-dimensional self-portrait in a landscape. Have you always done this assemblage work?

**LF:** I've never considered myself an assemblage artist. Most assemblage artists take things and assemble them. I've always considered myself a painter from the very beginning. I always thought in terms of painting. My





idol in art school was de Kooning, so when I started working on painting, or if you want to say assemblage, or putting things on it, it was different. I was involved in the painting space. The art world never knew where to put me, which in the long run was probably a good thing. I started getting in the art magazines because of the painting, not because of the other work I had done before that, which had assemblage in it. I could whip the paintings out faster because they were on canvas

and weren't as much of a struggle. Other artists that are my contemporaries order the canvases and the stretcher bars. I never did that. It used to be, when I walked in my studio — early on, like the mixed-media work I exhibited at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962 — I would touch something and it would be magic. It would just happen. By 1966 the magic had disappeared, and I knew it. I was just sort of copying myself, in a sense. Then David Stuart said, "You got to have a show."

He says, "You're on top of it. You won the Paris Biennale." I took three months off from UCLA — where I was teaching — and made seven six-by-nine-foot, two ten-by-twelve-foot and five five-by-five-foot canvases. Made the stretcher bars myself. Stretched the canvas myself. I started doing things that I'd never done before like using an overhead projector, like Lichtenstein did, and blowing up the rock images. Five major museums bought those paintings right away, because I was on top, but when I look at those paintings now, it's a whole different feeling. They just fill up the big museums, but if you get too close to them, it's not as interesting. It's not like my early work when I was using the rag, and every part meant something. I stopped doing those big paintings and I started doing the bloody heads. I started having things come off the canvas or frames. Then it started a whole thing, which led me up to what I've been doing lately. I have been getting back into actually creating a space in a painting with material difference. When I look at a painting like *The Lost Frontier* (1997-2005), I say, "Nobody's done a painting that deep." It's because I went back to my roots. Just like in the music.

**MC:** *I've seen pictures of The Lost Frontier. It's like a diorama, no? Would you call that your masterpiece?*

**LF:** *The Lost Frontier* took seven years in the making. I think the process is really important. A lot of people really miss the process now. Some teachers now say, "Well, just come up with a good idea." Well, shit, man, come on. After a while you leave out the whole process. And it's gotten to the point now where you don't even need to make it. Well, come on now.

**MC:** *Oops, you must hate my work. Good thing I've retired. Would you ever retire?*

**LF:** Hey, the art world kind of turned its back on me for quite a while. I had to climb back up again. They wanted me to do that same thing over and over again. Then all of the collectors can have them, and they can all say, "Oh, I have a such and such, see?"

**MC:** *Sometimes it's better if they all hate you and leave you alone.*

**LF:** Sometimes you feel like you just want to disappear and go out into the country. It's funny. ■

*This interview is part of a series conducted by New York-based artist Maurizio Cattelan exclusively for Flash Art.*

*Llyn Foulkes was born in 1934 in Yakima, Washington. He lives and works in Los Angeles.*

*"Llyn Foulkes" is on view at the Hammer Museum from February 3, to May 19, 2013.*

*From top: LLYN FOULKES, Cow, 1963. Oil on canvas, 109 x 157 cm. Private collection. Photo: Jason Dewey; Llyn Foulkes in his Pasadena studio, 1961.*





**CULTURE MONSTER**  
ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

## Art review: Retrospective shows Llyn Foulkes' sharp eccentricity

The best works in the Llyn Foulkes retrospective at UCLA Hammer Museum are odd. But behind the eccentricity are biting messages.



Llyn Foulkes' "Who's on Third" is part of the retrospective. (Hammer Museum / February 5, 2013)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic  
*February 7, 2013 | 7:00 a.m.*

Llyn Foulkes is a crank. That's a good thing, because we need cranks.

I might not want to sit next to one on the subway or listen to one give a floor-speech in Congress. But popular culture and institutional art have a way of smoothing out or even debasing life's often painful rawness. Works of art offer contemplative distance, which can make zealous eccentricity especially riveting.

Take "The Corporate Kiss" (2001), a bracing bit of strangeness that is on view in the sprawling, 50-year retrospective exhibition of Foulkes' art newly opened at the

UCLA Hammer Museum. In it, Mickey Mouse stands on a man's shoulder and plants a big cheerful smooch on his cheek. The man, beleaguered and despondent, barely responds.

His careworn face expels an open-mouthed sigh, downcast eyes staring from beneath a furrowed brow. A bleak, empty brown desert unfurls behind the pair, beneath a limpid blue sky.

In this painting's gonzo reinterpretation of the biblical kiss of Judas, which launched the physical, emotional and spiritual



suffering of the Christian Passion, the betrayal of art by popular culture is on frank display. Disney's famous, empire-building rodent is cast as Judas, keeper of the 30 silver pieces; the man's careworn face is a self-portrait, making the artist the abandoned savior.

Foulkes is a long way from Giotto's famously heartbreaking rendition of the subject at the dawn of the Italian Renaissance. Here, a personal narrative is embedded in the picture.

Born to modest circumstances in a central Washington farming town in 1934, Foulkes came to Los Angeles in 1957 to study at the Chouinard Art Institute. Three years later he married the daughter of Ward Kimball, one of the celebrated team of Disney animators known as the Nine Old Men. (The couple later divorced.) Kimball published a 1975 book titled

"Art Afterpieces," in which famous masterpieces were updated in absurd contemporary terms — Mona Lisa bedecked in hair curlers, for example, or tan lines on a Degas nude.

"The Corporate Kiss" follows a similar path, but the joke is transformed into a social portrait of considerable despair. The painting is actually a relief, with features built up, scraped down and built up again, and the tattered plaid shirt and thermal jersey added as collage. The surface is as weathered as the man while Mickey's swollen cheeks are like a tumor.

Partly the work succeeds by refusing polarization and self-aggrandizement. Foulkes is on record as a great admirer of Kimball's abundant skills. More important, the story of the Judas kiss is not a simple tale of good and evil, saintliness versus immorality, since without it the biblical narrative of salvation could not blossom. The man who is kissed is complicit in the tragedy. "The Corporate Kiss" is a contemporary portrait of human frailty.

Certainly it's odd. So are all the best works in Foulkes' retrospective, organized by Hammer curator Ali Subotnick.

That's because much of it forces an unholy alliance between incompatible artistic urges. One is Expressionism, the other Pop art.

Expressionism speaks of private, deeply personal impulses, which spill out from primal motivations. Pop, by contrast, manifests itself in more anonymous, socially constructed ways.

The show opens with a group of drawings made during Foulkes' childhood, when he had aspirations to become a cartoonist. Great cartoons are pop culture's underbelly, their nutty raucousness navigating life's madhouse.

The next gallery introduces black and brown paintings, often bleak, that Foulkes made after art school — an era when Abstract Expressionism held sway. By then he had spent two years in the U.S. Army stationed in Germany, where the grimness of the charred postwar landscape was everywhere.

These early paintings engage Beat Generation elements familiar from Ed Kienholz and Wallace Berman, with their recycling of broken, cast-off objects. An awareness of Jasper Johns' use of letters, numbers and collage is also apparent.

In the third room, Expressionism and Pop collide — and the show begins to percolate.

The chief drawback is that, at nearly 140 paintings and mixed-media works, plus a slew of juvenilia, the crowded exhibition is way too big. Foulkes' esteem has waxed and waned over the decades, and the job of a retrospective like this is to secure the artist's reputation by making the strongest case. It needs editing by at least one-third.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Foulkes looked to postcards, commercial signs, magazines, comics and other sources in mass reproduction. Social trauma lurks in the pop motifs.



"Junction #410" (1963), painted in the traumatic year of JFK's assassination, features a barren photographic hill, reproduced six times down the right side of a big canvas like a movie-frame stuck in a projector. A "caution yellow" border on the other side, plus diagonal black bars marching across the center, turn Frank Stella's mute geometric Minimalism into an evocative end-of-the-road warning.

This dead-end theme turns up again in a completely different way in "Portrait of Leo Gorcey" (1969), named for the actor who starred in a series of Hollywood movies about Depression-era street kids. The cracks and shadows in its 9-foot monolith of desert rocks harbor apocalyptic suggestions of corpses embedded in the stone.

The painting is one in a recurrent series. Disconcertingly, their fields of color are pleasant pastels. With Martin Luther King dead in Memphis and Bobby Kennedy assassinated in L.A., bodies piling up in Vietnam and Gov. Ronald Reagan on the ascendancy after sending police into UC Berkeley, Foulkes' dissonant rock paintings form a creepy "monument valley."

Benign cruelty continues in another extensive series of more than two dozen "bloody heads." All are men. Their eyes are obscured by cascading blood, geometric shapes, collages and anything else that might strip them of distinctive individuality.

Around 1990, though, the wheels started to come off Foulkes' art-wagon. Big, ambitious, mixed-media reliefs — sort of contemporary history paintings — are erratic in the extreme, some powerful and others blandly ineffective. Desolate paintings on subjects like Operation Desert Storm and fundamentalist Christian bigotry are merely fervent rants.

Perhaps the problem was caused by the rousing success of "Pop" (1985-'90), a marvelously bizarre sound-and-light installation on which Foulkes worked for five years. This homey tableau, set in a suburban living room, shows a young girl resting a gentle hand on the arm of her bug-eyed, TV-watching father, who holds a plastic cup of Coke in one hand and his wrist in the other, as if searching for a pulse. We look over the shoulder of a blank-faced boy in the foreground, able to read the Mickey Mouse Club oath he has copied into a composition book.

The scrawny father's unbuttoned shirt reveals the red-and-yellow logo of Superman underneath, while a gun is holstered at his waist — as if a genuine superhero might need one. The ruin of the nuclear family is underscored by the Hiroshima mushroom cloud rising on a calendar page on the back wall.

Foulkes had built an elaborate, outlandish musical instrument out of car horns, a xylophone, organ pipes and cowbells, and "Pop" is accompanied by a soundtrack featuring a woozy, rewritten rendition of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" played on it in the satirical manner of Spike Jones. Your eyes bug out at the painting, just like the father aghast at the TV.

Foulkes will perform on his instrument, called the Machine, on Feb. 26. As a snappy catalog essay by Jim Lewis puts it, a "one-man band" is an inherent contradiction in terms. The clash is akin to an Expressionist Pop art, a dissonant conflict ideal for carrying Foulkes' recurrent theme of travesty — social, cultural, personal, environmental and political. When he pulls it off it's a sight to behold.

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Llyn Foulkes

**Where:** UCLA Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood

**When:** Through May 19. Closed Mondays.

**Contact:** (310) 443-7000, <http://www.hammer.ucla.edu>



## How L.A. Neighborhoods Influence Llyn Foulkes' Retrospective at the Hammer Museum

By [Claire de Dobay Rifelj](#) Thursday, Feb 14 2013



Pioneering artist [Llyn Foulkes](#) wasn't born in Los Angeles, but since moving to the city more than a half-century ago, L.A. has burrowed its way into his intense and challenging paintings. It appears as subject matter in canvases that mourn the stripping and gentrification of L.A.'s neighborhoods; and the city's debris literally inhabits the surface of many of his paintings, which often incorporate an array of found materials. None are straightforward landscapes or portraits; rather, Foulkes condenses his impressions of the L.A. Basin into deliberate, tactile works that offer an abstracted sense of place. After all, the city's issues often are those of the country as a whole,



and Foulkes offers his unwavering opinions about the direction of both.

The major retrospective of Foulkes' work now on view at the Hammer Museum is a long time coming. (His last such exhibition was nearly 20 years ago at Orange County's [Laguna Art Museum](#).) That it was organized in Los Angeles reflects the importance of the artist to his hometown and vice versa. Foulkes' particular experiences in the city as a place to live, breathe and make art are part of what give his work its visceral punch and its convincing edge. Seeing his paintings and constructions, you may well glimpse Los Angeles in an altered light.

Foulkes came to L.A. in the late 1950s, first by way of a rural, mountainous town in Washington state, where he was born and raised; and then via the war-ravaged cities of Europe through which he traveled in his two years in the Army.

Thanks to the [G.I. Bill](#), Foulkes landed at [Chouinard Art Institute](#) — L.A.'s premier art school, which was located downtown before it merged into CalArts in 1970 — and he excelled in painting and drawing courses, winning several awards.

He married young and lived in Eagle Rock, which like today offered more affordable and spacious living spaces, and a chance for Foulkes to explore the neighborhood's craggy areas. He also would travel up to [Chatsworth](#), in the northwest Valley, spending time among its peculiar natural rock formations.

It wasn't long before both locales showed up in his paintings. Works such as *Geography Lesson* (1960-61) and *Geographical Survey of Eagle Rock* (1962) reflect some of Foulkes' earliest forays into representational imagery — his student work had leaned toward abstract expressionism — and they demonstrate the artist's method of applying paint to canvas with soaked rags. The result of this technique, entirely Foulkes' own, is a texture that exists somewhere between crumpled paper, jeans, animal hides and the mottled surfaces of rocky peaks. It transforms a simple mountainside into a lush, evocative, even sinister apparition.

In the exhibition audio guide, Foulkes mentions that the Native American tradition of seeing figures in rock formations resonated with him early on. His large-scale rock paintings from the



PHOTO BY RANDEL URBAUER

Foulkes' work *The Lost Frontier* is reminiscent of the Sepulveda Pass.



PHOTO BY STEFANIE KEENAN

Llyn Foulkes at the Hammer show opening

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later 1960s, colored in an array of bright, monochromatic washes, bring this ritual to life: Bulbous protrusions and depressions could well double as noses, mouths, limbs and orifices.

Straddling landscape and portraiture, these works combine Foulkes' specific observations of L.A.'s natural beauty — always in danger of being commercially developed — with surreal fantasies. Their timeworn surfaces also serve as metaphors for an imagined American West, where Levis-clad cowboys still have untapped spaces to explore.

In the artist's subsequent portrait series, which occupied him through the 1970s, he employed a similar technique to apply red paint atop his subjects' faces. In these pieces, the blotchy surfaces allude to blood rather than skin, and the results are similarly arresting.

In 1979, Foulkes moved with his second wife to Topanga Canyon, transplanting his studio to one of Los Angeles' more remote neighborhoods. But instead of becoming more introspective after the move, Foulkes' works expanded both in terms of physical depth and cultural scope, and L.A.'s ties to Hollywood and the corporate sphere took center stage.

A page from the 1934 *Mickey Mouse Club Handbook* clings to the surface of *Made in Hollywood* (1983), the first of Foulkes' painting-constructions to move outward from the wall like a stage's apron, as curator [Ali Subotnick](#) notes in the exhibition catalog. Foulkes uses a combination of sculptural objects and painted surfaces with *trompe l'oeil* effects to bring the illusion of deep space onto a relatively flat surface (it measures a little more than 7 inches in depth). The handbook shows how [Disney](#) attracts America's youth to its consumer-driven entertainment, and a photograph of Foulkes' children — propped atop one of his distant, painted rocks — embodies the casualties of this social experiment.

Other stage set-type constructions of the 1980s, like *O'Pablo* (1983), detail Foulkes' struggle to find his place within the L.A. art world and among fellow artists. Specific addresses mingle with reproductions of the artist's work and other personal references, each offering crumbs from which one might piece together his whereabouts, influences and yearnings.

Foulkes currently works in the Brewery, downtown L.A.'s live-in arts complex, where he moved in 1997, and over the last two decades the artist has reflected upon the city's built environment.

Soon after moving to Los Angeles, Foulkes was dismayed to witness the razing of stately Victorian homes on [Bunker Hill](#) in order to make way for downtown's future skyscrapers. *The Rape of the Angels* (1991) — this time a flat canvas, still imbued with a palpable depth of field and carefully collaged objects — is an allegory for this incessant process of urban renewal. In the offices of "LALA LAND CO.," the artist stands next to a money-hungry city planner, who is seemingly in cahoots with a tiny [Mickey Mouse](#) sitting on his shoulder. Foulkes composed the work with a strong network of vertical and horizontal lines, which both echo the skyscrapers visible through the window and confine the painting's subjects. By including himself in the picture — which Foulkes has done repeatedly in recent work — the artist maps his personal history onto the fraught historical landscape of his beloved, but convoluted, city.

Foulkes' retrospective closes with his monumental construction, *The Lost Frontier* (1997-2005), housed in a separate, carefully lit room. The piece is only 8 inches deep, but it presents a view reminiscent of the Sepulveda Pass that stretches backward miles and miles, toward a seemingly infinite horizon. As the Wild West recedes further into the past, Foulkes revives its spirit through his own expansive, unexplored territory.

You could really lose yourself surveying *The Lost Frontier*, trying to take in each of its innumerable assembled fragments. In the end, it is Foulkes who says it best in the audio guide describing the picture: "It's all about Los Angeles. We're in a lost frontier. We don't know where in the hell we're going."



# Los Angeles Times

## ARTS & CULTURE



Work by Llyn Foulkes appeared in seven Pacific Standard Time exhibitions and at the Venice Biennale and Documenta. Coming: a Hammer Museum retrospective. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times / October 28, 2012)

by Holly Myers

*October 28, 2012*

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 gooey 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."

Stanya 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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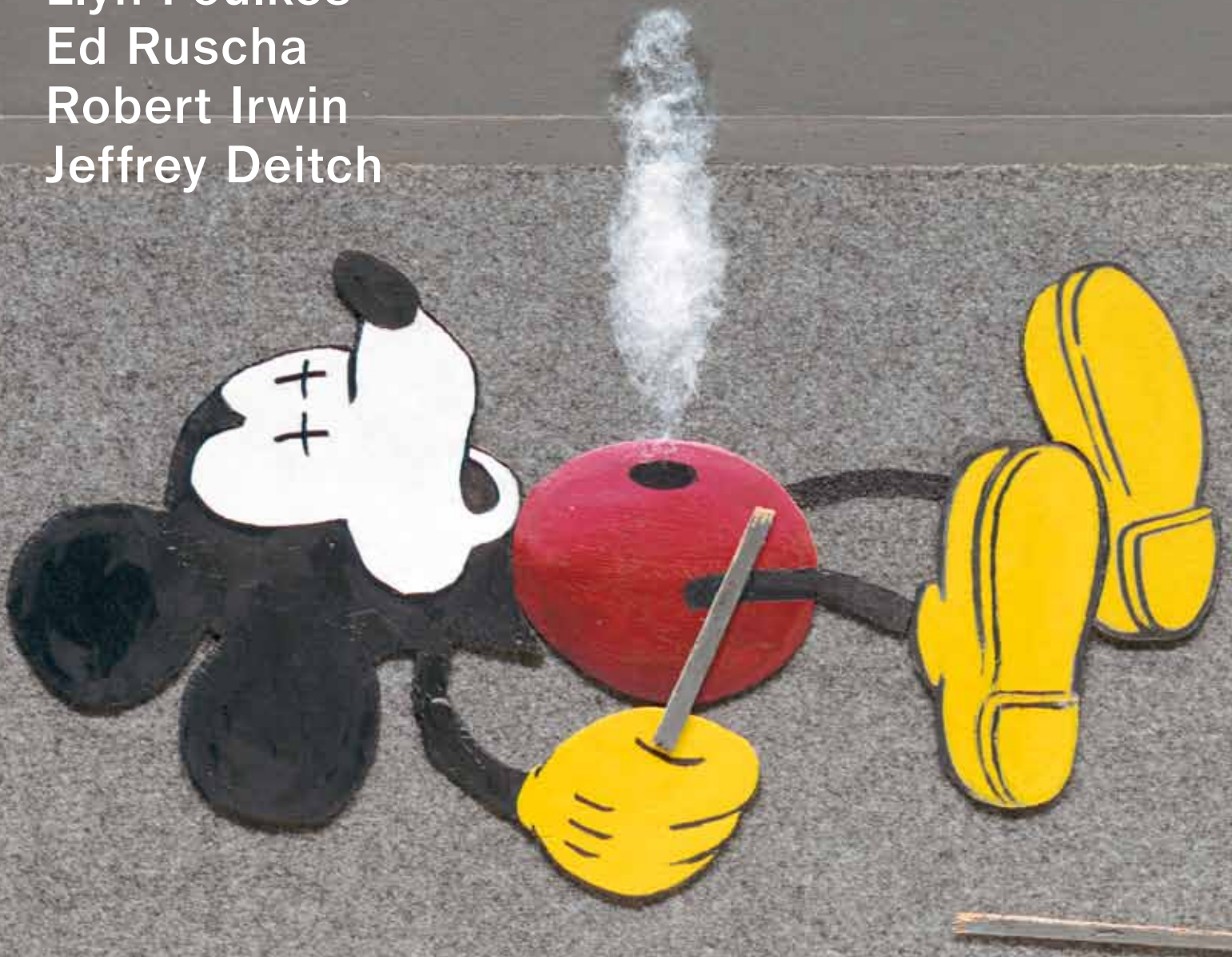


# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## Los Angeles

Llyn Foulkes  
Ed Ruscha  
Robert Irwin  
Jeffrey Deitch





# Llyn Foulkes IN THE STUDIO

WITH ROSS SIMONINI

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, the Los Angeles painter and musician Llyn Foulkes has decried both art world careerism and trends in popular music. At 76, he remains a dissenting voice. Often left out of histories of art, he refers to himself, bittersweetly, as the "Zelig" of contemporary art, referring to the Woody Allen character, a pervasive and influential figure ultimately uncredited for the role he played in 20th-century history.

After attending Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), Foulkes began showing at Ferus Gallery in 1961, joining Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, Ed Kienholz and Ken Price, many of whom had been his Chouinard classmates; he parted ways with the gallery the next year. His early, multipanel paintings often incorporate found objects. A Pop phase, in which he created well-received landscape paintings, lasted several years before he denounced Pop art's flatness. After abandoning the studio for a time, Foulkes began to create portrait-style paintings that frequently include collage elements and depict either actual persons or types such as businessmen; their disfigured faces, often recalling those in works by Francis Bacon, form indictments of modern emptiness, corruption and greed. Since the 1980s, Foulkes has broadened his social satire, targeting commercialism and war and various aspects of the human condition. Writing in these pages in 1997, Michael Duncan observed that Foulkes articulates "a dark vision of American culture in trouble." Since the beginning of his career, Foulkes has made larger, "dimensional" paintings, sometimes 8 feet tall, which may

Llyn Foulkes in his studio,  
2011. Photo Vern Evans.

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## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Solo exhibition at Kent Fine Art, New York,  
Oct. 27-Dec. 17. Selected Foulkes works on view in  
"ILLUMInations" at the Venice Biennale, through Nov. 27.





**“GREAT JAZZ PLAYERS HAVE TO PUT A LOT OF WORK INTO THEIR ART. I RESPECT THAT. I BELIEVE IN THE PROCESS.”**

combine woodworking, found materials, dead animals and thick mounds of modeling paste built up into relief; they often require theatrical lighting in a darkened room to convey their full effect of shadowy depths. Many of Foulkes's works include his own likeness, sometimes antagonized by Mickey Mouse, a symbol of the Disney corporation, which he loathes.

As his eyesight fades, Foulkes concentrates more on his music, another lifelong pursuit. In reaction to the increasing loudness of '60s rock, he founded The Rubber Band (active 1973-77), a combo featuring banjo, accordion, tuba and his own "machine," a sculptural mass of musical instruments the size of a small automobile. He now plays the machine as a one-man band. Like something out of a steampunk car-

toon, the artist, squatting behind his instrument, honks on old car horns, taps cowbells, dances a walking bass line with his toes by plucking a single string attached to a plank of wood, blows into various handmade wind instruments, foots a hi-hat, and sings into a headset microphone. The sound of the one-man band is full and resonant, suggesting what pop music might have become had jazz, not rock 'n' roll, been the dominant form.

In the next two years, Foulkes's art and music will see considerable exposure: several of his paintings are included in the Venice Biennale; a solo show goes on view at New York's newly reopened Kent Gallery late this month; he will give a series of "machine" performances at Documenta XIII, in Kassel in 2012; and a full retrospec-

tive is scheduled for 2013 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Foulkes and I spoke this summer at his Los Angeles workspace and residence, tucked within a compound of warehouses near Chinatown. Downstairs, the high-ceilinged studio is filled with half-finished artworks, drawers containing tiny portraits, and slabs of wood covered in animal hides and upholstery. The balcony, where he lives, is a vast cabinet of antique wonders and dusty bones. Adjacent to his studio is a room he calls the Church of Art, his private performance venue and rehearsal space, housing the machine, a PA system and a few dozen folding chairs. During our conversation, Foulkes was impassioned and wild-eyed. He often answered questions in song, improvising wildly on three instruments at once.

**ROSS SIMONINI** Can you talk about your relationship with the current state of art?

**LLYN FOULKES** I've had a problem with corporate art since the beginning. I had my first exhibition nine months before Andy Warhol showed his soup cans. I just walked in and said, "Oh, that's cute." It's like a joke. That's all I could think of it. I'm looking at the paintings and, well, anybody could have done them. No reason to treat them with any value as a painting. And yet, I knew that one of my huge paintings which had recently been on display and took seven years to complete would sell for far less than one of his soup cans.

**SIMONINI** Should price be in proportion to the amount of work someone puts into a painting?

**FOULKES** Yeah. There should be work put into it. Great jazz players have to put a lot of work into their art. I respect that. I believe in the process.

**SIMONINI** But so much new art doesn't hold to that set of values, right?

**FOULKES** What gives an artist the right to act this way? I know it comes from the whole Duchamp tradition, but suddenly any old piece of shit has value. I get tired of that. And then in the '70s, because of this whole thing, they declare painting dead! Then all



this installation art comes about. And it's still all going that way. I heard from people who went to the Venice Biennale that the majority of work was installation art. I get tired of installation art because it takes up a lot of room. So many artists can't show their work because of one installation.

**SIMONINI** I would say that your work, like *Pop* [1990], which I saw at the Geffen [at L.A. MOCA], was a kind of installation. It was in a room with a particular lighting and particularly dark cinematic environment. Isn't that what an installation is? Controlling the whole environment of a work—not just a framed square on a wall?

**FOULKES** It did not start as an instal-

lation, but considering its complexity it ended as one.

**SIMONINI** That's an important distinction?

**FOULKES** Of course! I remember when I went to the Claremont schools and visited all these artists in their studios. There was a girl with all feathers in a room. That's too easy. That's not right.

**SIMONINI** Because it's easy?

**FOULKES** Anybody can think. Anybody can imagine. Not everybody can do it.

**SIMONINI** Couldn't you say the same thing about painting?

**FOULKES** Did I say all paintings are good?

Above, *The Lost Frontier*, 1997-2005, mixed mediums, 87 by 96 by 8 inches. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Opposite, *In Memory of St. Vincent's School*, 1960, oil, charred wood, plasticized ashes on blackboard, and chair, 66 inches high. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, Calif.

**SIMONINI** Well, you're making a claim about the overblown profundity of installation art. But it's also true of every kind of art, including painting.

**FOULKES** I just don't think the art world is open enough to artists these days. It should be open. I'm lucky—the only reason I'm showing new work is because the curator at the Hammer





*Deliverance*, 2007, mixed mediums, 72 by 84 inches. François Pinault Collection, Venice, Italy.

[Ali Subotnick] showed my work [in the 2009 exhibition "Nine Lives: Visionary Artists from L.A."] and it caused a stir. I've never had someone stand behind me like she has.

**SIMONINI** I saw some of those Hammer pieces. They looked great.

**FOULKES** No you didn't.

**SIMONINI** Not in person, but . . .

**FOULKES** Well, you have a three-dimensional painting like *The Lost Frontier* [1997-2005]. You stand in a black room and look at that thing and you say, "That's the deepest painting I've ever seen." That's important. You don't get that in a photo reproduction, like you saw.

**SIMONINI** So do you think reproduction serves your work poorly?

**FOULKES** You can see the image, but not the dimension, not the light. There's just a big difference with

seeing these works in person. [Documenta XIII curator] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev visited my studio and after seeing my new work in progress along with the machine asked me immediately to participate in Documenta. I don't know if that would have happened from just seeing reproductions.

**SIMONINI** What was your connection with the artists who showed at Ferus Gallery?

**FOULKES** My only connection to the people at Ferus is that I went to school with them. Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode. Robert Irwin started to teach at Chouinard. Ed got into Irwin's class. Emerson Woelffer was influential. Richards Ruben had two shows at Ferus, but was totally ostracized after I was kicked out. He was the one who got me in. I had taken some drawings over to Ferus that had won me some prizes and I got into a group show with Kenny Price. Then I had a one-man show

in 1961 which included the burned blackboards and chair now owned by the Norton Simon Museum. I never got along with Irwin. Because Ferus was changing. Ed Kienholz left because Irving Blum took it over. So, really there were two Ferus galleries. It eventually became more of a Light and Space gallery. So many artists left, including me. I was kicked out because Irwin, Bengston and I did not get along. But I was at a different place then. I was painting with tar and even had a painting with dead possums in it—real dead possums. All that will come back out again, though, with the retrospective.

**SIMONINI** How do you preserve those pieces with carcasses?

**FOULKES** I had to throw that painting out.

**SIMONINI** You have a dead cat in your very large, mixed-medium painting *The Lost Frontier*. Did you preserve that?

**"THESE DIMENSIONAL PIECES START MORE LIKE PAINTINGS AND THEN I WORK WITH THE SURFACE, PUSHING AND PULLING IT TO CREATE THE ILLUSION OF A DEEPER SPACE."**

**FOULKES** I soaked it in salt, dried it all out and then plasticized it with acrylic medium. In fact, I almost thought I'd lost it. It was stiff and then it got all limp and soft and wrinkled. But I saved it. It's weird because the way I positioned it, it looks like a cougar.

**SIMONINI** Is that a reference to the mountain lions that roam Los Angeles County?

**FOULKES** Yeah. It's a Southern California thing. So are all the rocks I depict. Los Angeles used to be known for its rocks.

**SIMONINI** Can you talk a little about the dimensional aspects of *The Lost Frontier*?

**FOULKES** I consider it a painting but using all different kinds of materials. Canvas is one thing, but I wanted more dimension than oil on canvas would allow. These dimensional pieces start more like paintings and then I work with the surface, pushing and pulling it to create the illusion of a deeper space. Every element of a painting has dimension and finds its place in the end.

**SIMONINI** How deep are you talking?

**FOULKES** A few inches out, a few inches back. When people see it, though, they think it's a lot deeper.

**SIMONINI** You achieve that with lighting?

**FOULKES** Yes, particularly in *The Lost Frontier*. Everything's based on shadows, but there're no painted shadows.

**SIMONINI** Do you use particular lights?

**FOULKES** Mostly 65-watt tungsten. And each painting should be in a room by itself. People always see pieces in this way and they say, "Wow, how big is that? Sixteen feet?" Well, no, it's eight feet. But that's what the lighting does—it makes the piece expand. I'm stretching the painting out by forcing all the light in.

**SIMONINI** It's not something you decide afterward, right? You're working with light the entire time?

**FOULKES** I work with light from the beginning.

**SIMONINI** When I saw *Pop*, there was a viewing line you couldn't cross.

**FOULKES** I don't let anybody get too close to the paintings. Not only do I not want people to touch them, I want them to experience the whole reality of the space.

**SIMONINI** You are depicted in both of these works.

**FOULKES** That's right. It's a younger version of me in *The Lost Frontier*. In *Pop*, my daughter is putting her hand on my shoulder. To the right of my son is a calendar with the date they

bombed Hiroshima. . . . Let me show you the machine now. [*We walk into the Church of Art.*]

**SIMONINI** Can you travel with this thing?

**FOULKES** They're going to ship it to Germany for Documenta. It comes apart. When I travel with it, the horn section is detachable and fits on my front seat. The rest of it fits in the back of my van.

**SIMONINI** You've been building this over the years.



*Lucky Adam*, 1985, mixed mediums, 50 by 35 by 4 inches. Hammer Museum.



**“I THINK WHEN I GO TO GERMANY THEY WILL DEFINITELY APPRECIATE THE AMERICAN ASPECT OF MY MUSIC. I’M VERY AMERICAN BUT I’M NOT A CAPITALIST.”**

**FOULKES** Yeah, but the horns are all the same as when I started. I added a few more bells.

**SIMONINI** Where do you acquire all these old parts?

**FOULKES** I started collecting them when I formed The Rubber Band. I’d go to old automobile swap meets. I could find an old horn at the bottom of a pile of rusty auto parts. Some of these bells are from when I was 11 and I’d go to the Chicago Junk Company in my hometown to search for different parts. I got these three at a hardware store in 1948.

**SIMONINI** What is this instrument here?

**FOULKES** It’s an octavin. They don’t make them anymore. I got it for \$150 from the Recycler. They used to use them in symphony orchestras. *[Plays the instrument, whose sound has a reedy, pitch-bending quality, and sings]* “There is a ghost in Hollywood. I see him every night. He walks alone. He’s made of bone and skin all shiny white. I am told he’s very old indeed. He’s really quite a sight. He shakes his head, his eyes turn red. Whooooooooooa. I have no name, I have no fame. I did not make it. I am ashamed. But as a ghost you’ll hear me boast that I’m the toast of Hollywood.”

**SIMONINI** Do you ever play jazz standards? Your songs have that quality.

**FOULKES** No, I play songs about L.A. and songs about myself.

**SIMONINI** Your art and your music have a particularly American flavor.

**FOULKES** I think when I go to Germany they will definitely appreciate the American aspect of my music. I’m very American but I’m not a capitalist. There’s a difference between capitalism and democracy. We’re beginning to think they’re the same thing. No! Who’s a better capitalist now? The Communist Chinese!

**SIMONINI** A lot of your work has an anti-corporate and specifically anti-Disney message.

**FOULKES** It all started when I read the first page from the Mickey Mouse Club handbook written in 1934. They talked about how they implant things in

children’s minds so they absorb them almost unconsciously. It’s very far-reaching. I had a show called “The Legend of Mickey Rat” in 1996 here in Los Angeles. A local critic, in the L.A. *Times*, accused me of McCarthyism for going after Disney. I wrote a letter back and said I was concerned about children and what it was doing to them. I included the page of the Club booklet that talks about how they implant ideas. But the *Times* deleted that part. Why? Because the *Times* supports the whole Disney operation. Everybody’s brainwashed by Disney. Go into a 99-cent store and it’s all plastic, packaged Hannah Montana and Disney crap. All made in China! In my art, I’ve used three things like these: Disney, Superman and Lone Ranger! That’s what America is. A Lone Ranger. And now it’s getting to us, right? *[Sings]* “My father told me if I ate my vegetables and clean my plate, that I could be a cowboy, just like the Lone Ranger. My mother told me if I took my medicine and read my book, that I could be a cowboy, just like the Lone Ranger. I got a rifle. I got a pony. My mother said I could play outside if I finished my macaroni. I shot the postman in the head. I rode away ‘cause he was dead. Then I sang a song just like the Lone Ranger.” *[Ends with a bell solo.]*

**SIMONINI** What sort of music influenced these songs?

**FOULKES** My first idol as a kid was Spike Jones. It was cartoon music that I loved.

**SIMONINI** Would you say your songs are critical of L.A.?

**FOULKES** Well, I’ve been here a long time. So yeah, I’m critical of what they’ve done to it.

**SIMONINI** What have they done?

**FOULKES** The commercialism. It happens everywhere. L.A. is famous for tearing things down. I remember being in art class, on Bunker Hill, drawing the Russian Hotel. I remember someone said, “You know they’re tearing all these down.” Because L.A. had no powerful historical society. It was all Hollywood. I watched them tear all

these things down. I was there when they tore down the Brown Derby. When I came here the two tallest buildings were City Hall and the Ridgefield towers. All these cities look the same now. Before, cities looked different. They had an identity. Now Walmarts and shopping centers are everywhere.

**SIMONINI** It’s globalism.

**FOULKES** Well, yeah.

**SIMONINI** Essentially, though, it’s



Foulkes on the “machine.”  
Photo Iva Hladis.

the same reason you get to go to Documenta.

**FOULKES** Well, international art shows have been around for a long time.

**SIMONINI** Yes, but the same principle could apply to your art. You bring your art over there. People from all over the world see it and start mimicking it. Suddenly, your style of art is everywhere, like Walmart.

**FOULKES** Believe me, I know. It’s my one fear about bringing my machine to Documenta.

**SIMONINI** Is it nice to have some rec-

ognition now? You’ve been receiving awards and showing in museums for the last few years.

**FOULKES** Yeah, I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to do any of this painting, with my eyes. I’ll be able to do the machine though. That’s for sure. I just got to keep my health. I got to stop this *[points to the cigarette he’s smoking]*.

**SIMONINI** Especially around paint thinner.

**FOULKES** I remember working in the ‘60s in a

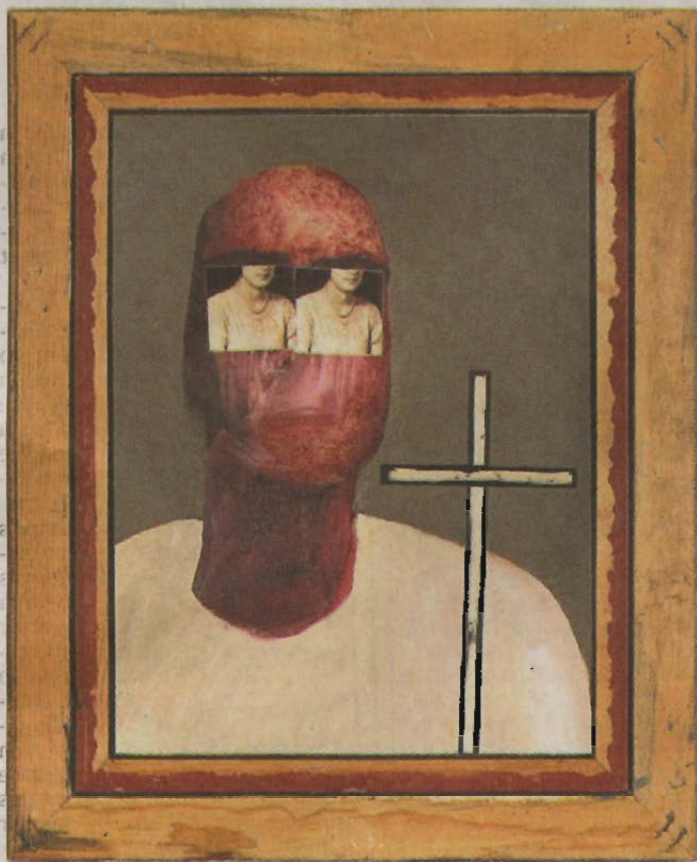
room with no ventilation using lacquer thinner and people walked into the studio and they’d go *[gasps]*. But I’m still alive. I’m 76. Because, you know, there’s another theory, too. There’s those people who only eat health food and they won’t touch anything and they disinfect everything. These people get sick more than anyone I know. Why? Because they don’t have the

immunity. They haven’t had anything to fight against. I’ve had a lot to fight against. ○

ROSS SIMONINI is a writer, critic and musician living in New York.



# Art in Review



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KENT FINE ART

"Where Is the Light?" by the artist and musician Llyn Foulkes, in "Bloody Heads," one of two shows of his work in Chelsea.

## Llyn Foulkes

'Bloody Heads'

Kent Fine Art  
210 11th Avenue, at 25th Street,  
Chelsea  
Through Dec. 17

## Llyn Foulkes

Andrea Rosen Gallery  
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea  
Through Saturday

As evidenced by two Chelsea gallery exhibitions, the well-known artist and musician Llyn Foulkes, now 77 and based in Los Angeles, has never been a happy camper, but he nonetheless enjoys himself. Since the late 1950s he has cultivated a distinctively dour and gnarly brand of Pop-Photo Realism, regularly devising new ways to combine existing images and paint, not to mention collage and assemblage, with his sardonically grim worldview.

The show at Andrea Rosen focuses on Mr. Foulkes's early landscapes, which depict sphinx-like rock formations derived from vintage postcards and early photographs, using a thin, twitching, implicitly disturbed painterliness. The splattered boulder of "Untitled (Holley Rock)" (1963) telegraphs an emotional agitation that grows louder in "Carte Postale" (1975), in which a bloomer-wearing schoolboy's face is obliterated by a postage stamp.

Solitude becomes more pointed, and the paint becomes obses-

sively thick in "Lost Horizon," a dioramalike scene from 1991 showing the artist climbing out of a canyon. Its dauntingly physical yet illusionistic realism slows you down to consider interpretations, foremost that it's an extravagant, exquisitely controlled screed against the destruction of nature.

In a somewhat overhung show of new works at Kent Fine Art, Mr. Foulkes returns once more to the bloodied heads he has made intermittently since the late 1960s, for the most part painting over old, small formal portrait photographs, and occasionally amplifying the defaced personages with bits of actual teeth or clothing. The subjects apparently include both victims and perpetrators, among them the artist, the clergy and, in the case of "Arnold," possibly a recent governor of California.

Here, medium and message do a different dance: the overt grotesqueries are undercut by the restrained verve of the paint handling and the deliberation of the physical details. For example, each portrait is mounted on a combination of wood, cardboard and whatnot that neatly bridges assemblage and collage, and pits the quiet of the studio against the anarchy outside.

Life is genuinely gruesome, and civilization is but an easily flayed veneer. About this, Mr. Foulkes makes no bones. Yet he delivers the news with an undeniable delicacy and touch of humor that curdle into some kind of optimism.

ROBERTA SMITH



# ARTFORUM

15 November 2011

## Llyn Foulkes

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY  
525 West 24th Street  
October 28–December 3

Llyn Foulkes never really “fit in” and didn’t try to either—not with the “Cool School” surrounding the Ferus Gallery, the site of his first solo exhibition in 1961, and not with the contributors to Wallace Berman’s Beat magazine, *Semina*, of which Foulkes was one. The bellicose Los Angeles legend has evaded artistic affiliations and classification by resisting any one recognizable style throughout his unruly oeuvre, which consistently illustrates his fraught relationship with his hometown. This much can be seen in his current exhibition of just six paintings featuring his signature rock formations. Spanning four decades of the artist’s half-century-long (and counting) career, the show plots Foulkes’s various methods of individuation; a concurrent exhibition at Kent Fine Art of his “Bloody Heads” from the past decade further elucidates his ambulatory practice.



Llyn Foulkes, *Lost Horizon*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 83 x 110”.

Early canvases on view such as *Untitled (Holley Rock)*, 1963, typify Foulkes’s desert images lifted from postcards, a procedure the artist later decried as too obvious and successful. Like Michael Heizer’s forthcoming monolithic monument on LACMA’s campus, Foulkes’s depictions of LA’s bouldered terrain revel in the static, terrestrial underpinnings of a city built on fantasy and transformation. Paintings from the 1970s and early ’80s display an evolving stubbornness through brash insertion of Pop imagery for the sake of explicit social and political commentary. In *Eagle Rock*, 1984, a sign-painted eagle embellished with a smirk hovers over a gestural mountainside. Foulkes regurgitates the myth of American heroism with a wink and a splattering of paint.

Foulkes’s mystifying relief tableaus, which confound with their oscillating surfaces, are the culmination and synthesis of over thirty years’ worth of painterly exploration. *Lost Horizon*, 1991, for instance, reveals an apocalyptic vista of a deserted ravine; a humanoid boulder is visible in the distance. If the hikers in Balthus’s *The Mountain*, 1936–37, had experienced a bad acid trip, the scene might look like this. The view of the panorama is disrupted by a resolute Foulkes pulling himself over the precipice only to find crushed soda cans, a “for sale” sign, and a fallen American flag. As dismal as it may seem, Foulkes reminds us that seemingly eternal, commercially driven entities such as popular culture and national pride become detritus in time, and only nature itself will outlast it all.

— Beau Rutland



# MOUSSE - MAGAZINE

October November 2011



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



# Art With Cancellations, Postal and Other

By JOHN RUSSELL

What is on at the wall at Llyn Foulkes's exhibition at the Willard Gallery, 29 East 72d Street, is not so much a group of paintings, in the traditional sense, as a group of objects in which painting plays a part. Somewhere within each object is a standard image: a miniature portrait of General Custer, President Taft or one of the Berigan brothers, for instance, or a photograph of a boy or a girl in anachronistic costume, or what looks like a Photomat portrait enlarged and painted freehand.

But something has been done to the image, in each case. The image has usually been canceled, the way a stamp is canceled on an envelope. Ideas derived from the mails proliferate, in fact; on one occasion the image of a small boy is canceled by an actual 10-cent stamp that fits neatly where his face should be, while on others the picture as a whole forms up as a jumbo postcard with the words *Carte Postale* carefully painted in.

The cancellation may be mischievous. Mr. Foulkes's geometry teacher has his face canceled with one of his own triangles, for instance. It may also be gruesome. Mr. Foulkes has never forgotten either the bloodied head that he once came across in a morgue or the sense of rampageous indignity with which a human identity had been canceled in death. Sometimes this memory comes across with an impact of unforced horror, but sometimes it doesn't. It takes more than a free hand with red paint, for example, to make a memorable comment on the Manson case. (Mr. Foulkes does on the other hand, bring a nice touch of what can only be called gallows humor to his written comment in that context.)

The best of these objects are a genuine contribution to the tradition of the altered (or simulated) object, which has been one of the liveliest elements in modern art for 50 years and more. The frames or surrounds have in many cases a lunatic inaptitude that makes us look more closely at the venture as a whole. Materials, textures, irrational embellishments, all play a part; and though the image imprisoned within may have its spooky side — as when an altered photograph of two dogs turns into an almost human mother and child — it may also be quietly poetical. (For this second possibility, see the photograph of a girl that has been cut in such a way that a frontal view turns into a profile and the ruffles of



"Letter to President Taft" is one of the works by Llyn Foulkes now on view at the Willard Gallery.

upper sleeve and shoulder turn into a cowed head.)

In the larger paintings some of the subtlety evaporates, but in a miniature like the "Letter to President Taft" it stays intact and we realize that in this case the letter itself is the cancellation stamp, and that what is canceled is not a man but an age (and, perhaps, a certain notion of authority). This is really a very curious show, and provocative for almost all of its length (42 pieces of varying size). Through March 15.

In other exhibitions: Agnes Denes (Stefanotty Gallery, 50 West 57th Street): Among the new kinds of exhibition that have become current in the last few years, a great favorite of mine is the private, self-made museum—the collection of objects, in other words, that functions rather as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, functioned when it first began. Such museums were small monuments to a Montaignelike curiosity that took all knowledge for its province. They came back in strength in the most recent "Documenta" exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and Agnes Denes's new show is a further and a strikingly intelligent example.

Miss Denes starts in one case from the fact of human dust: that handful of chromatic powder to which we shall be reduced in the end. She charts in statistical form

big-scale ambition underlies these paintings, in which clusters of ambiguous forms tussle together in a luminous two dimensional space. The problems of the grand scale in the nineteen-seventies are tackled squarely and fairly, even if the tussles in question may be thought to have been resolved to perfection in Max Ernst's very small "Battle of Fish" at the Guggenheim. The blinding whiteness of the gallery makes it ideal visiting ground for polar bears, by the way; Mrs. Barr-Sharrar's canvases may well be somewhat bleached out by their environment. Through next Saturday.

Barbara Sandler (Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer, 1040 Madison Avenue near 79th Street): Ever since George Catlin's portraits of American Indians touched the imagination of Charles Baudelaire, anyone who tackles the subject starts way ahead of the game. Good or bad, the paintings work upon us. Miss Sandler's paintings are by no means bad. Based upon photographs taken about 75 years ago, they have a real painterly presence. These huge, undecieved, all-enduring heads are enlarged to the scale of a home-movie screen, and they have a poignancy which is that of the subject matter plus something else. Through next Saturday.

Forgotten German Printmakers (Galerie Summers, 1057 Madison Avenue near 80th Street): Germany in the first third of this century had an art that necessarily went underground in 1933. Nor was it simply a matter of the six or seven major names that history made haste to rehabilitate. A labyrinth of sardonic feeling and incisive social comment remains to be re-explored, and the Summers show makes a modest but telling beginning. Through Friday.

the previous history of one such heap of dust, and she goes on to consider dust in general. Specimen after specimen is set out and commented upon: moon dust, New York City dust, explosive dust, poisonous dust. (This last is subdivided into dust that causes brain damage, dust that attacks the central nervous system and dust that causes muscular paralysis and eventual death.) Fundamental to all this is that lucid ordering of experience that is one of the characteristics of art.

Not one to make things easy for herself, Miss Denes has also taken on the task of reinventing a set of Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs that will express a concept for which no equivalents existed in ancient times. Furthermore, she has projected the map of the world in the form (successively) of a cube, a pyramid, an egg, a doughnut and a nautilus shell. By way of relaxation she has also embarked on a visualization of Pascal's ideas about the relative probability of the accidental repetition of chance occurrences. The calculations involved in this last venture made my head spin, but their visual presentation has the elegance of a mountain in the heyday of Sung Dynasty painting. Through next Saturday.

Beryl Barr-Sharrar (Livingstone-Learmonth Gallery, 178 East 72d Street): A





Llyn Foulkes, "Seal Rock." Oakland Art Museum.

Wool on wool embroidery, Swedish Folk Art. De Young Museum.



Palmer D. French, James Monte, Elizabeth M. Polley, Knute Stiles.

**LLYN FOULKES: Oakland Art Museum:**

This is Northern California's first large-scale showing of the work of one of the most promising young artists on the West Coast. An amazing quality of Llyn Foulkes is his apparently effortless ability to transform an essentially assemblage sensibility into the two-dimensionality of thin paint on canvas. This feat has been accomplished with absolutely no loss of intensity or expressive power. On the contrary, the newer works have a tomb-like finality surpassing the earlier constructions, if for no other reason than because the scabrous materiality of the former works interfered with the ultimate appraisal of the images struggling to be seen. The present clarity of execution and presentation leaves no room for fudging; every passage must work by itself and in conjunction with its neighbors. The relational aspect of Foulkes' art is perhaps its most fascinating quality. Repetition of any sort reminds one of such non-art concerns as mass production, rote learning, advertising, Goebbels, etc. Foulkes, quite deliberately it seems, plays on these not-so-vaguely horrible references in a delicate manner, full of gestural artifice, classifiable as painterly irony.

Another curious aspect of Foulkes' work is the atmospheric handling of paint, apparently applied to the canvas with a stiffened rag. This process allows the artist to repeat, as in the mono-print technique, a serial image within a single painting as often as he wishes. The technical oddities, creative in themselves, coupled with a fecund imagination, make one of the most exciting shows this year.

J.M.

**ENGLISH POTTERY, SWEDISH FOLK ART, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum:**

120 pieces of early English pottery from the Frank P. and Harriet C. Burnap collection housed in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and the Atkins

Museum of Fine Arts in Kansas City, and over 500 items of Swedish folk art in an eight-part exhibition from the Nordiska Museum, Stockholm.

The new policy lined out for the de Young Museum by new Director Jack R. McGregor, does not eliminate the showing of contemporary art, but it evidently aims at curtailing it, which has its unfortunate side. However, such historical and educational exhibitions the de Young's program, and some validity to the argument that this important museum, easily accessible to the ambulatory public by virtue of its location in Golden Gate Park, should maintain a generous attitude toward ethnological shows. Perhaps with an enlargement of facilities, a properly balanced program will be maintained.

The value of the Burnap Collection, which contains more than 1000 pieces, lies not in its size or rarity, but in the excellence of the types it includes. The de Young selection presents a pageant of English earthenware from the 17th through the 18th century, after which machine industry ended the work of the individual craftsman. It traces the rise of a rude craft to a fully accredited art.

It is the functional 17th-century Slip Ware with its clumsy simplicity and crude strength that holds the attention here. The bold designs, integrated with the vessel they embellish, are wonderfully harmonious. Like the contemporary Vallauris pottery, English slip ware gains much of its charm from its faithfulness to the very nature of the clay.

This is an historical exhibition, objectively reflecting the variable tastes of the English people. It reveals their periods of vulgarity followed by, and sometimes contemporaneous with, a sophisticated regard for ceramics of exquisite design and workmanship.

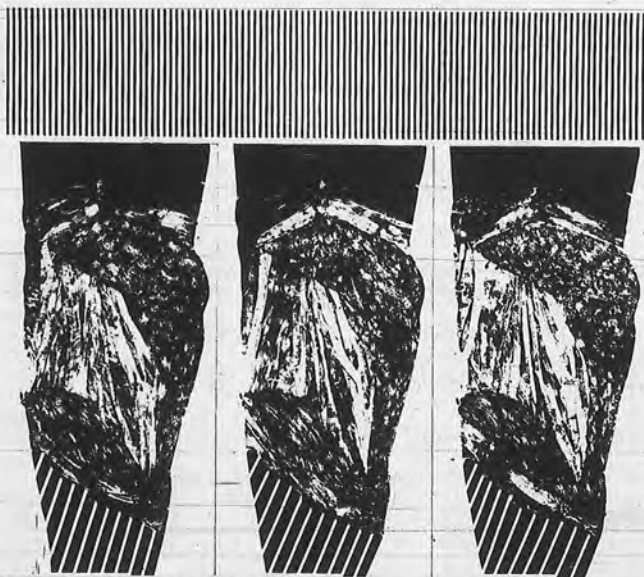
The inventiveness and craftsmanship of Josiah Wedgwood are impressive, even in the small selection of his works included here. One delights in Wheel-don's agate ware, yet has more clinical than esthetic interest in his "cauliflower ware" with its strange taste-



# Llyn Foulkes

Llyn Foulkes. "Death Valley," 65x65 1/2", 1963.

*This painting is dedicated to the American  
This painting is dedicated to the American*



Llyn Foulkes, "untitled," 96x108", 1963.

LLYN FOULKES, born Yakima, Washington, 1934, lives in Pasadena. Studied music and art, is a graduate of the Chouinnard Institute, 1957-59. Served in the U.S. Army in Europe, 1954-56. One man exhibitions: Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1961; Pasadena Art Museum, 1962. Now shows with the Dilexi Gallery.

Foulkes is a powerful, strong and gripping image maker of Baconian horror. Whereas Bacon's morbid and shocking imagery is of a psycho-erotic origin and lashed with frenzy and guilt, Foulkes' art is a personal reliquary—he reconstructs an imaginary past that haunts him like a mirage. This past is so far removed from an everyday vision of life that at first sight it appears to be associated with intense morbidity, even, perhaps, insanity. He actually likes things of which most people would be frightened. He likes the imagery and world of Poe, but does not follow the same romantic programme. He is, instead, a serious formalist with a strong and powerful sense of anticlimax. This feeling of freedom from mawkish sentiment, combined with an absolute refusal to allow good taste in painting to overtake his personal sense of what painting is about, gives his art its raw, unnerving effect.

Each work is a very distinct and separate experience based on a strong and formal order, often with a compulsive repetition of format and a deluge of apparently similar images controlled by a high technical innovation. He constantly creates and invents fresh means to enlarge and express his insights. Inside his narrow, restricted and almost monochromatic palette of black, dark brown, grey and white he creates a tremendous range of dynamics. Gold and red appear sparsely in certain paintings, not as a decorative highpoint, but rather a dramatic one. Typical of his images is either a black cross—a reminder of fascism, death and dreadful violence, or a photographic rocky landscape anthropomorphised with faces, flesh and fingerprints. Again there is always a formal break up of images within images, paintings within paintings, paintings of a photograph with a photograph within.

Llyn Foulkes, "Cow," 15x18", 1963.



**COW**

Llyn Foulkes, "Junction 410," 79 1/2 x 93", 1963.

