



Dr. Pourfar, 49, a neurologist who specializes in treating people with Parkinson's disease and other nerve disorders, has been treating COVID-19 patients directly. He knew about its symptoms because he knew about his wife's disease and other nerve disorders. He told her he could not sell her coffee.

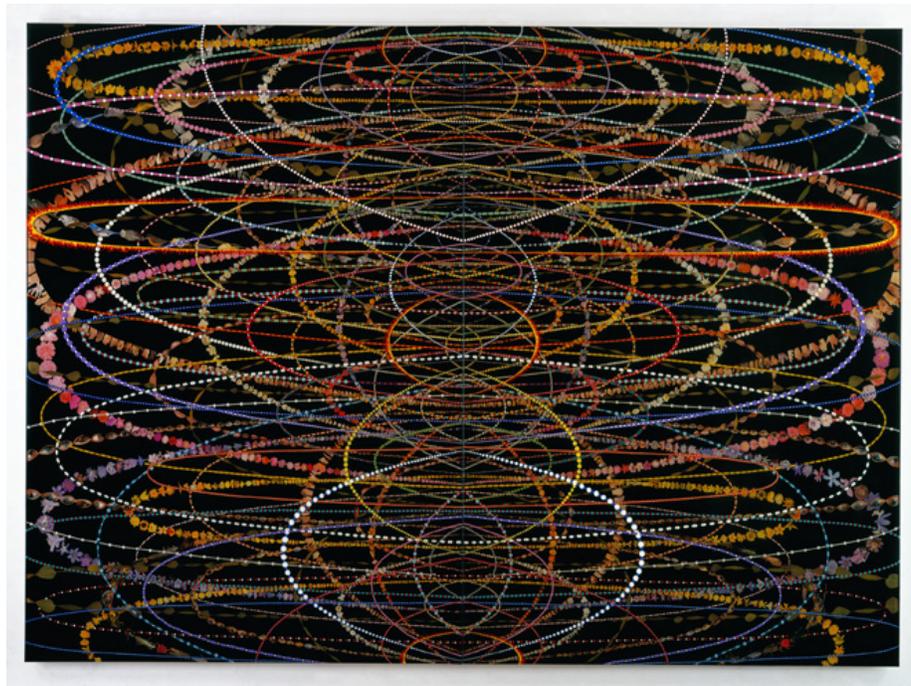
U.S. VIRUS CRASH WIPES OUT 5 YEARS OF ECONOMIC GROWTH
WORST ROUT FOR WALL STREET SINCE 1929
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DRAMATIC CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR
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High Times

By Tina Rivers Ryan, Ph.D.

James Cohan

Since the 1990s, Fred Tomaselli has made paintings that incorporate leaves, pills, and cutouts from magazine photographs, all encased under a layer of resin. Instantly recognizable, their colorful patterns and collaged bodies float above the jewel tones of crepuscular skies or the black void of deep space.¹ Simultaneously maximalist and elegant, sensual and conceptual, figurative and abstract, these works relate to a wide range of visually seductive objects, from Dutch still-life paintings to black Tibetan thangkas. In *Echo, Wow and Flutter*, 2000 (collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), tiny cutouts depicting eyes, hands, birds, flowers, and insects combine with leaves, pills, and dots of acrylic paint to form a dizzying set of overlapping ellipses. The composition is mirrored across the vertical axis, creating a centrifugal force that recalls maps of planetary orbits—or perhaps the visualization of echoing soundwaves, as suggested by the title.² Comprising two conjoined panels, the work measures seven by ten feet, trapping both our central and peripheral vision in its glossy surface. Fittingly, *Echo, Wow and Flutter* was included in the exhibition *Ecstasy* at LA MOCA in 2005, alongside Carsten Höller’s inverted mushrooms, Pierre Huyghe’s light show, and other devices for expanding perception: like many psychedelic drugs, the painting offers a cosmic image of a perpetually “fluttering,” organic universe.³



Fred Tomaselli, *Echo, Wow and Flutter*, 2000. Collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

¹ The reference to the night sky filled with stars—which is associated with representations of the universe, in both physical and metaphysical terms—also appears in his early works that resemble constellations, including his *Chemical-Celestial Portraits*, 1995.

² Tomaselli has explored the relationship of sound and image in many works, such as *I Saw Your Voice*, 1994, *9000 Beats per Second*, 1996, *Doppler Effect in Blue*, 2002, and *Eyes Inverted in Endless Audio*, 2002.

³ Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson explains that Tomaselli’s works, including this painting, have been influenced not only by psychedelics, but also by “superstring theory,” or “the belief that all physical matter consists of vibrating elements called ‘strings.’” Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, “Schematic Maps for an Unknown Space,” in *Fred Tomaselli*, ed. Ian Berry (Munich: DelMonico Books, 2009), 93. It is also important to note that Tomaselli has often explained that his use of pills in his art was originally inspired not only by his own youthful experimentation, but also by the drug regimens of his friends who had been diagnosed with HIV.



Fred Tomaselli, *Guilty*, 2005.

In 2005, Tomaselli began a series that focuses more closely on the mass-reproduced imagery he has long mined for material. He was inspired by the photograph accompanying the front-page story in the *New York Times* on the conviction of WorldCom chairman Bernie Ebbers, and specifically by the mundane detail of Ebbers holding his wife's hand while taking his "perp walk." Painted over a copy of the front page, *Guilty* highlights their hands with a ring of electric yellow gouache, turning the photo into a meditation on a timeless theme: the complexity of human nature. In interviews, Tomaselli has explained that he was indebted to Joan Miró's *Constellations* of 1940-41, which are also paintings on paper. Miró himself described these playful abstractions as motivated by "a deep desire to escape" the increasing horrors of World War II.⁴ For Tomaselli, however, the

Constellations are not simply escapist, but rather, "quietly political" in their affirmation of both art and humanity.⁵ Similarly, Tomaselli's paintings over copies of the *Times* affirm art's importance as a way of understanding and reimagining reality, including even its horrors.⁶

While this series foregrounds the question of art's relation to politics—especially given the kinds of stories generally printed on the front pages of newspapers—it is not traditionally "political." Tomaselli is a student of the history of utopianism (having grown up in the wake of the 1960s, as he has often noted); perhaps for that reason, he is also a staunch defender of ambiguity in art, and wary of the aestheticization of the suffering of others.⁷ In searching for the politics of works like *Guilty*, it is tempting to focus on the content of the original photos, which are often, though not exclusively, political: the perp walks, the aerial shots of "natural" catastrophes. But if the series highlights individual stories, it also challenges the very *structure* of the news.⁸ Through its predictable formatting (the headlines in large fonts, the repeated columns, the big color photos above the break on A1), the *Times* molds information into a single universe to which every article, and all of us, belong, brokering our consensual reality. Tomaselli's colorful paint breaks up the "Gray Lady's" monolithic worldview

⁴ Cited in "Constellation: Toward the Rainbow," Metropolitan Museum of Art collection database, accessed at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/490007>

⁵ Quoted in Lawrence Weschler, "Tending the Garden of His Times; Fred Tomaselli's *New York Times* Pieces," *Fred Tomaselli: The Times* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2014), 13. Tomaselli stated the same idea differently in a 2019 interview: "I was influenced by Joan Miró's *Constellations* drawings. I found out they were done during World War II and thought that was a soulful, wonderful thing to do. Even though the world was burning, they insist that art's worth making. I think that might be what is at the bottom of all of this." Jennifer Smart, "Beer with a Painter: Fred Tomaselli," *Hyperallergic*, January 19, 2019, accessed at <https://hyperallergic.com/480526/beer-with-a-painter-fred-tomaselli/>

⁶ It is in this regard, and not just because of their source material, that the *Times* works are comparable to Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series of the 1960s, which utilize the conventions of painting to explore the problematic transformation of traumatic events into sensational stories, but without editorializing.

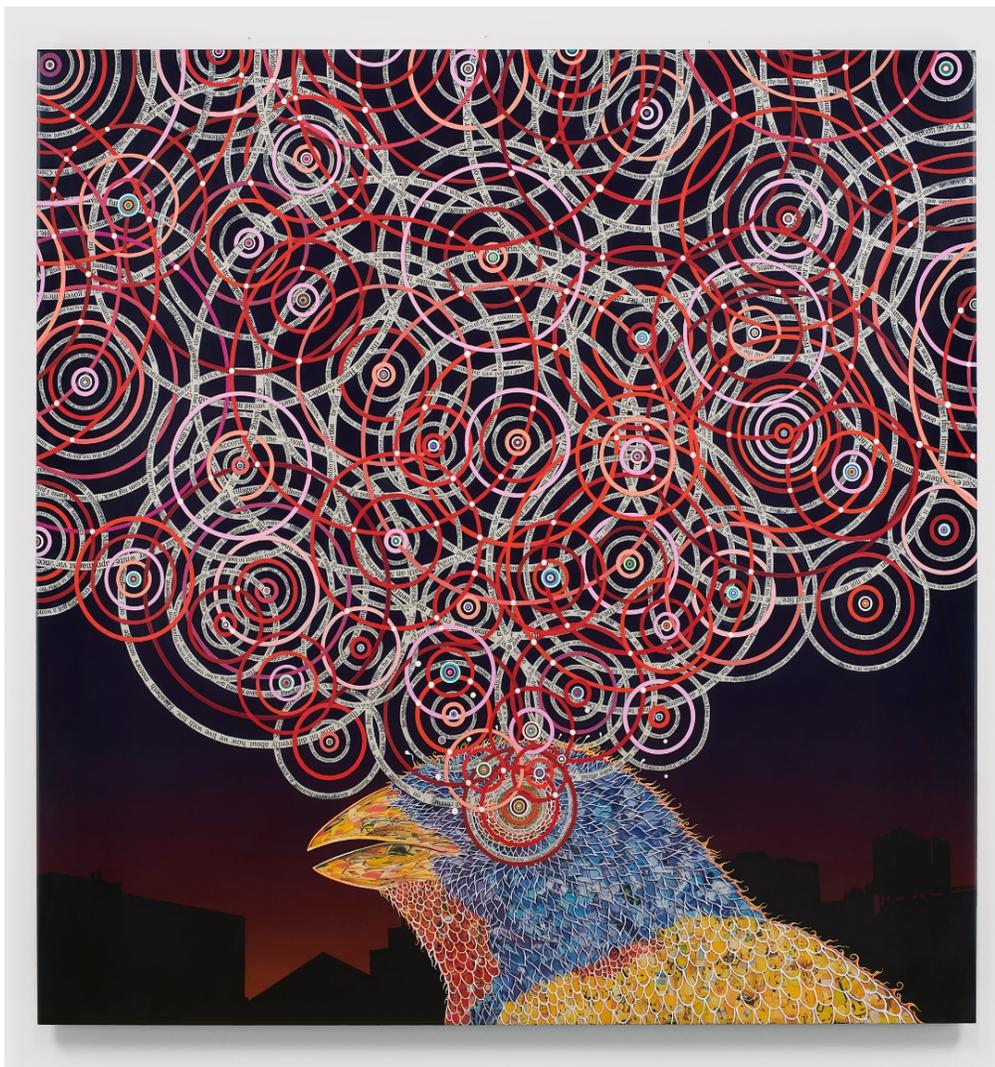
⁷ As Tomaselli has explained, "Across this body of work, I've often thought about Susan Sontag's admonition, in her *Regarding the Pain of Others*, against aestheticizing suffering. It's an ongoing quandary." Quoted in Weschler, 21.

⁸ A similar gesture, with a different motive, underlines Alexandra Bell's newspaper edits.



Images left to right: Fred Tomaselli, *March 19, 2020, 2020*; Fred Tomaselli, *March 16, 2020, 2020*; Fred Tomaselli, *July 31, 2020, 2020*; Fred Tomaselli, *June 1, 2020, 2020*.

transforming its ostensibly objective photographic evidence into more subjective aesthetic imagery. His interventions disturb the surrounding text, too: in contrast to the rigid verticals and horizontals of headlines and columns, he offers irregular blobs, haphazard agglomerations, curling tendrils, and swirling pools. Even in the works where he deploys straight lines and hard-edged geometric forms, he uses contrasting colors and racing diagonals to create a kind of optical vibration that unsettles space, as in the paintings of Kenneth Noland.



Fred Tomaselli, *Untitled*, 2020.

Ultimately, Tomaselli's alterations emphasize that media shape our reality, through their content but also their form. Of course, the current debates over the trustworthiness of media—expressed in rising anxiety over “fake news” and “deepfakes”—inevitably provides a new framework through which to view the most recent examples in the series, which he made at home during the COVID-19 crisis and protests for racial justice over the past few months. In these works, his themes include altered vision (e.g., Mitch McConnell's deranged eyes in *March 19, 2020*) and traveling between worlds (e.g., the woman in Grand Central Terminal in *March 16, 2020*), emphasizing a multiplicity of narratives. He also inverts his source material as a way of opening up interpretations: in *July 31, 2020*, a legible chart of economic data becomes a literal maze, and in *June 1, 2020*, protestors marching through Brooklyn with their hands in the air are shown drowning in a vast sea, fighting the current as they reach above the water, beckoning for help.

Counter-intuitively, these works suggest that altered states can sober us up after over-dosing on media. Tomaselli once described taking drugs as a way of accessing “an experience generated from inside the body” that “while not completely unmediated, was as close to unmediated as one could get. Seen in this light, being high was as real as things got.”⁹ Here, he echoes Aldous Huxley, who famously argued that psychedelics don’t induce hallucinations of things that aren’t real, but rather, open up “the doors of perception,” allowing one to see the world more clearly. By overlaying psychedelic motifs over the news, Tomaselli implies that we need to change our perspective if we want to perceive its normally transparent mediations. In this light, tripping becomes a kind of media discourse analysis. (Recall that Walter Benjamin himself hypothesized, while high, that hash provides a “dialectical optic” to focus history through a Marxist lens.)¹⁰

Tomaselli printed *Guilty*, his first work inspired by the *Times*, on perforated LSD blotter paper. In his latest resin-coated paintings of abstract or occult imagery—including birds, which he has long used as symbols of the enigmatic—he incorporates ribbons of text cut from the *Times*, furthering the connection between media and psychedelia. As in Cubism or Dada, printed words are liberated from the tyranny of syntax and their intended signification, only to be conscripted into service—not as representations of seltzer bottles or agents of iconoclasm, but as spokes in the wheels of the cosmos, joining cut-out body parts, leaves, and paint in an orgy of pattern. In light of the increasing harm caused by the transformation of news into patterns of data (including virulent disinformation campaigns), Tomaselli’s crisp new hallucinations look less like escapism than a clear-eyed (or dilated-eye?) demonstration of the importance of form, which shapes reality on every level.

Tina Rivers Ryan, Ph.D.
Assistant Curator, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

TINA RIVERS RYAN, PhD, is a curator, historian and critic specializing in art since the 1960s. Since 2017, Dr. Ryan has been the Assistant Curator at Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, where her projects have included the first solo museum exhibition of *Aria Dean* and *Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective*.

This essay was commissioned by James Cohan on the occasion of *Fred Tomaselli*, an exhibition of new work on view from October 23 through November 21, 2020 at 48 Walker St.

⁹ Quoted in Ian Berry, “Knowing Nothing: A Dialogue with Fred Tomaselli,” in *Fred Tomaselli*, 57.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, ed. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2006.