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Fred Tomaselli

TRANSCENDENCE IS POP

JAMES RONDEAU

Over the course of the last ten years, Fred Tomaselli has established an international reputation for his meticulously crafted, richly detailed, deliriously beautiful works of both abstract and figurative art. His signature pieces are compelling, hybrid objects: *ersatz*, or maybe surrogate paintings, or tapestries, or quilts, or mosaics. Their various components—both over-the-counter and controlled pharmaceuticals, street drugs, natural psychotropic substances and other organic matter, collaged elements from printed sources, and hand-painted ornament—are all suspended in gleaming layers of clear, polished, hard resin. Forms implode, explode, oscillate, buzz, loop, swirl, and spiral. Actual objects, photographic representations, and painted surfaces co-exist without hierarchy on and in a single picture plane. The combined effect, neither determinably real nor fully illusionistic, is at once electrifying and destabilizing.

At their best, these works are over-the-top decorative pile-ups—giddy, decadent, at times even embarrassing in their shameless embrace of once-taboo pleasures. Tomaselli's keen exploitation of the beautiful, however, is largely self-conscious and deeply critical. A formally intuitive artist, he is also an intelligent, intensely literate, articulate, and confident thinker whose knowledge, derived from multi-faceted experiences outside of the art world, is actual rather than theoretical. Considered together, Tomaselli's work can be understood as an extended meditation on artificial or hyper-mediated realities including, but by no means limited to, conditions associated with drug culture. Seemingly designed for the saturated, jaded spectator in all of us, his Op-inspired, potently visceral works respond to and satisfy a gluttonous, over-stimulated visual appetite. In his process, Tomaselli implicitly acknowledges that, as viewers, we require an exaggeration of the ocular, a hyperbole of the natural, and the short-cut shock of excess in order to gain access to notions of the sublime. The basic ingredients required to achieve such effects are, of course, readily available in the culture at large; they require only the assignation of use value, re-arrangement, and presentation. Tomaselli's work forces us to simply acknowledge that Transcendence is now Pop—or, at the very least, that all of the attendant signifiers of transcendence are now circumscribed by pop cultural idioms.

His explorations center around man's relationship to nature—at times depicted in archetypal forms or scenes, at other times suggested through materials, color, and pattern. With this overarching thematic concern, Tomaselli is very much connected to both the romance and weirdness of particular aspects of American artistic, literary, and philosophical history. Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and other thinkers now associated with nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism argued for an approach to spirituality and personal transformation that was intimately connected to an immersion, whether communal or individual, in nature. Representational practices—most notably, the genre of landscape painting as defined by the Hudson River School artists, or, later, the Luminists—ad-

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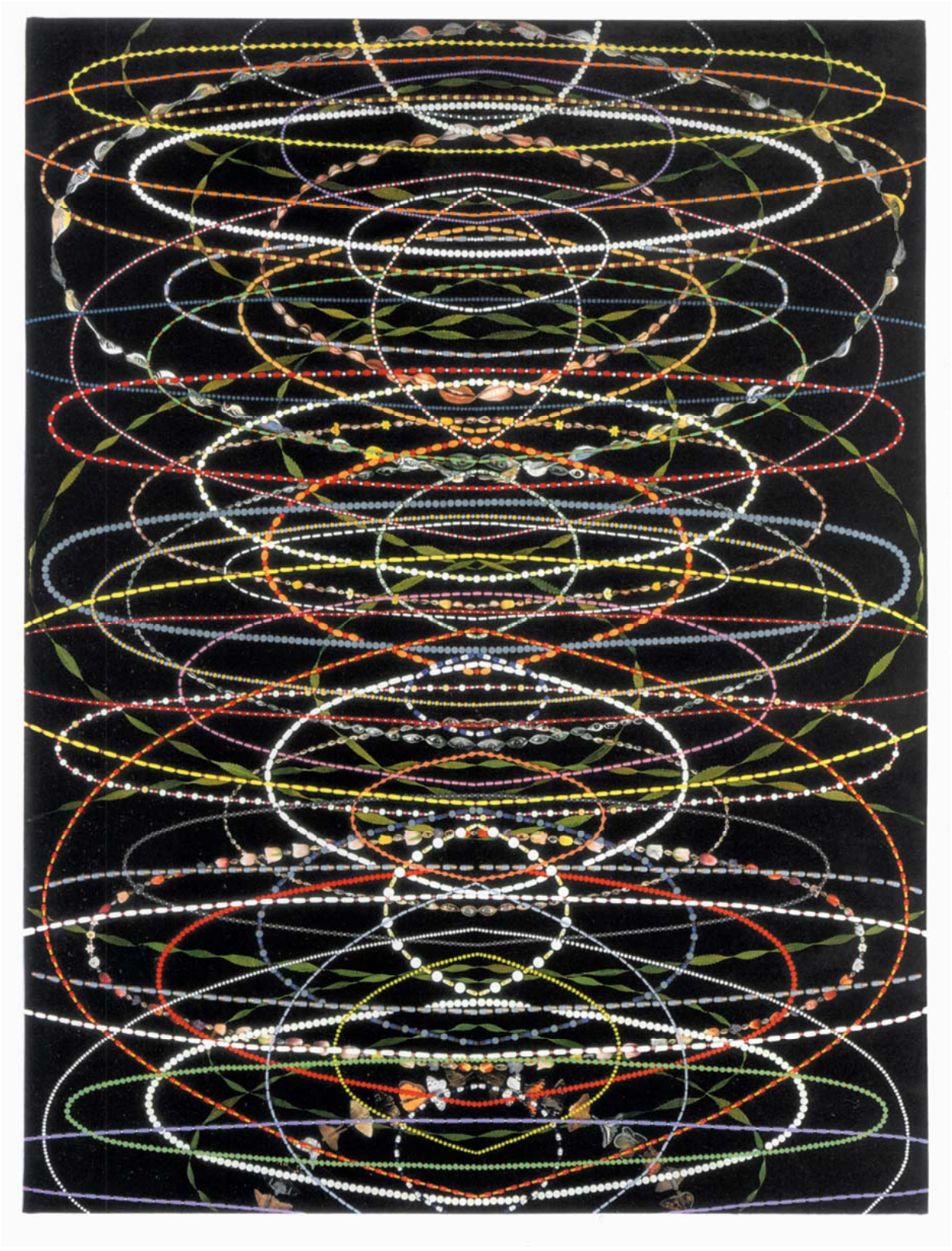

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FRED TOMASELLI, NEW JERUSALEM, 1998, pills, leaves, photocollage, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 60 x 60" / NEUES JERUSALEM, Photocollage, Blätter, Pillen, Acryl und Harz auf Holzpaneel, 152,4 x 152,4 cm. (PHOTO: ERMA ESTWICK)

vanced this thinking and posited a portable, ultimately collectible, version of the same experience. Their pictorial essays, at once symbolic and veristic, grandiose and humble, aimed to reveal and create spiritual correspondences.

Fred Tomaselli has followed the same course. His ambition to stage a discourse around questions of nature vs. culture closely parallels that of his literary and artistic predecessors—their admired ranks including, for Tomaselli, both well-known figures and oddball outsiders. The results of his engagement with the subject, however, are unique, simply because the quality and experience of the American landscape has changed so very radically. Any naïve pre-industrial faith in utopian idylls has been emphatically precluded. The emblematic vision of our land—and with it, our collective center of cultural gravity—has moved from the east to the far west, from the green New England woods outside Concord to the suburban desert sprawl of southern California. The preserve of the real Walden Pond, recently the target of residential developers, is known in the twenty-first century as a celebrated cause for benefit concerts organized by Hollywood environmentalists, as well as the namesake for other, unopposed condominium developments from Westchester to Orange Counties. Today people who choose to leave society to live alone in the woods for ideological reasons are likely to be regarded as frightening or dangerous. Like many members of his generation, Tomaselli was raised with an ineluctable understanding not only of our changing perception of the natural landscape

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but also of the resultant, synthetic alterations in art and aesthetics across a wide, high/low spectrum of contemporary American life.

The artist has said, "I grew up in California, so near Disneyland that I could sit on my roof and watch Tinkerbell fly from a fabricated Swiss Mountain through the night sky amid bursting fireworks. Artificial, immersive theme park reality was such a normal part of my everyday life that when I saw my first natural waterfall I couldn't believe it didn't involve plumbing or electricity. My confusion over what was nature and what was culture—the smearing of the boundaries between the authentic and the artificial—was further compounded by my immersion in seventies stoner culture."[1] In spite of the potentially bleak ramifications of this quasi-revelation, Fred Tomaselli remains sincere, wryly optimistic, and remarkably uncynical in his approach to art and life experiences. Importantly, his work is not a lament for some vague, lost, romantic communion. Rather, it is an affirmative response to an essential, inherited disillusionment. Tomaselli grew up in a world —regardless of proximity to Disneyland—in which any experience of nature, aesthetics, or, by extension, art was mediated by artifice, conditioned by low expectations, or, if needed, chemically enhanced in order to create meaning.

Around 1985, Tomaselli—a post-punk, recently graduated art student, habitué of the L.A. underground music scene, and former recreational drug user—moved to New York and, almost inevitably, recognized the metaphoric connection between drug consumption and painting. Struck by a rhetoric common to both art and the drug culture—particularly with regard to a shared need for escapism, altered consciousness, pleasure, beauty, desire, and seduction—Tomaselli drew upon the full range of his previous experiences and embarked upon a serious exploration of the allegorical relationship between art and drugs. On the trajectory of his artistic development, Tomaselli recalls, "... My [installation] work kept getting flatter and flatter, and I started thinking about the pre-modernist ideal of painting as a window into an alternate reality. I started seeing lots of comparisons between utopian aspects of art and the utopian counter-culture and also seeing the dystopic side as well... It's important to remember that I entered the art world as it was imploding into post-modernism and I was coming into the counter culture as it was collapsing into disco and cocaine. There was all this failure and loss of idealism and I was interested in digging through the rubble to see if there was anything worth saving."[2]

As Tomaselli explored New York City (or, more precisely, a still-rough Williamsburg, Brooklyn) in the mid-eighties, he met a ravaged cultural and political landscape and an art world dominated by a declining East Village scene, a nascent academic post-structuralism, and burgeoning albeit short-lived interest in neo-expressionist painting. The artist made his first work incorporating drugs in 1989; the primary point of reference was not, as is widely assumed, his own ecstatic post-hippie salad days in southern California. In fact, the immediate frame was darker, more dystopic, and scary. Speaking of this time, Tomaselli has frequently admitted his acceptance of a beauty riven with infection, pathology, pain, pollution. "It [the use of drugs in paintings] came out of my life experience [at that time]. My friends were dying of AIDS and taking masses of pills ... at the time I started making this work drugs had morphed from agents of enlightenment and pleasure to tools of survival. There was the rubble ... of Studio 54 while the terror ... of the crack epidemic raged through a crime-ridden city ... That's sort of what got me into doing it."[3] The promises of sixties counterculture and the romantic associations of drug consumption with personal exploration, mind expansion, and other utopian pursuits were distant, faded clichés—to be either abandoned, or resurrected in a new context. Tomaselli chose the latter and painting provided the vehicle for the attempt.

The language of the sublime has been attached to painting in Europe since the eighteenth century, and took on a particular American cadence in the nineteenth century. In a more immediate context, the flowering of Abstract Expressionist painting in the forties and fifties gave abstract painting a spiritually advanced standing. The notion of the abstract sublime has dogged conversations about painting, with skeptics and believers alike, ever since. Tomaselli's work with drugs simply offers to substitute the idea of a psy-

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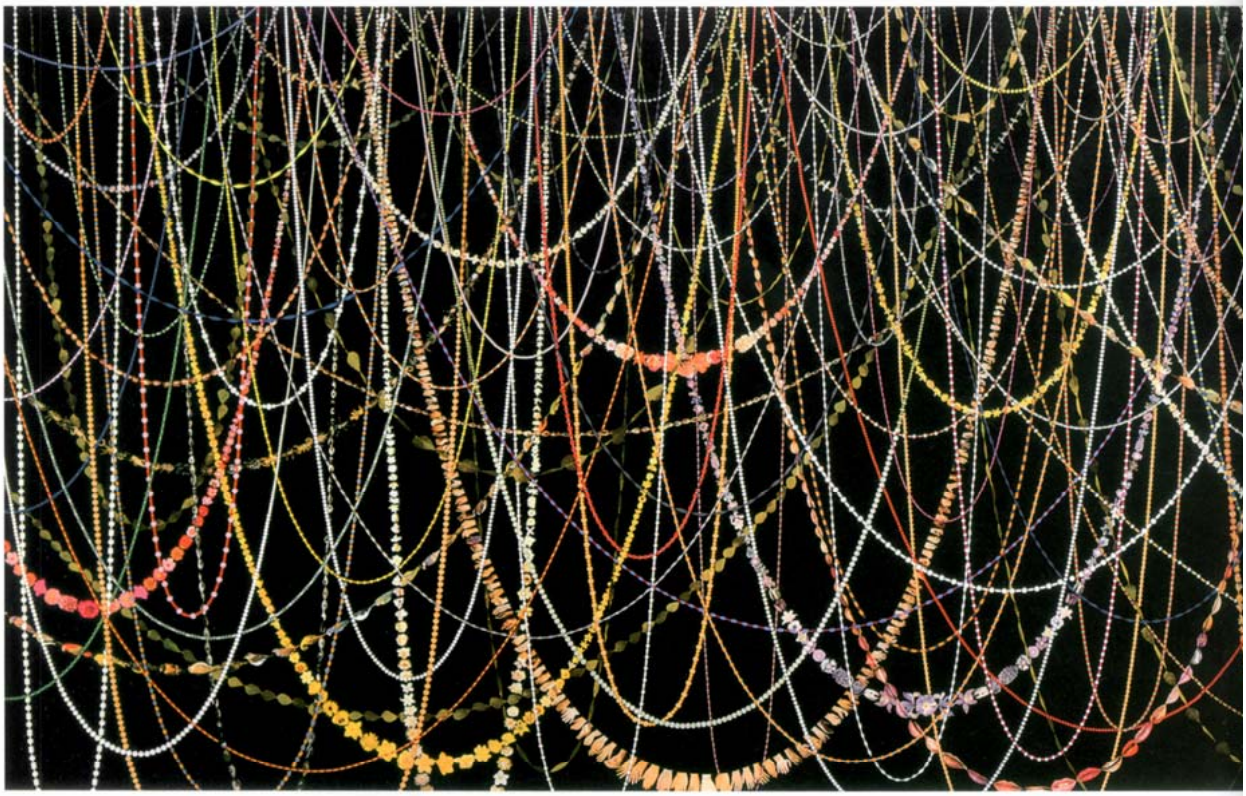

FRED TOMASELLI, GRAVITY'S RAINBOW, 1999, photocollage, leaves, pills, insects, flowers, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 96 x 240" / REGENBOGEN DER SCHWERKRAFT, Photocollage, Blätter, Pillen, Insekten, Blumen, Acryl und Harz auf Holzpaneel, 244 x 610 cm. (PHOTO: ERMA ESTWICK)

chotropic trip for the old-fashioned transcendental lift. As critic Peter Schjeldahl has stated, Tomaselli's work offers a "cartoonish vicariousness, a travesty of mythical rapture..."[4] Or as the artist himself has said, the works posit a "notion of reality modification inherent to the best drugs and the best art."[5]

The resulting works, however, were never intended as hip in-jokes or sardonic incentives to drug use; simply put, they contain drugs but are not about drugs. Tomaselli himself stopped ingesting psychedelics in 1980, nearly a full decade before reaching his mature statement as an artist. The various materials contained within his intensely decorative compositions are, after all, hermetically sealed—petrified like an archaeological find under durable layers of resin, visually present but totally inaccessible, if not destroyed. The artist offers these controlled substances as artifacts for purposes of retinal, not chemical, stimulation. To literally consume the painting would, indeed be foolishly anachronistic, or lethal, or both.

A broad, unavoidable irony notwithstanding, Tomaselli's early recognition as an artist also had an inevitably sensational aspect, connected as it was to 'the drug thing'. Although the effect was a dazzling, instantly recognizable style, the anxiety of the gimmick hung over some early criticism. (Peter Schjeldahl, in the same Village Voice review quoted earlier, perfunctorily writes, "Tomaselli is the guy who puts drugs in his paintings..."[6] And yet, the drug ques-

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tion, and its attendant issues of style and content, has always been something of a blind alley in terms of the critical reception of Tomaselli's art. As 2003 begins, he is preparing a body of work for his next major exhibition in which drugs are hardly present. In fact, most of them are, to borrow a phrase, "drug-free." The contraband may have evaporated, but the themes, the processes and subjects are completely consistent with the roots of the artist's project. In the last several years, a diverse range of sources—including printed, field-guide images (colorful bugs, butterflies, birds); pop culture clippings (smiling lips, shiny white teeth, and wide open eyes); journalistic allusions (the Una-bomber, Waco, and Ruby Ridge); and quotations from art history (Masaccio, Arcimboldo, Dalí)—have overtaken, or over-written drugs as the constituent elements of the work. As objects productive of visionary, epiphanic wonder, they are as trippy as they have ever been. The bio-chemical metaphors are still applicable: Tomaselli's works continue to function as self-contained, self-sustaining nervous systems—anxious, wired, high-keyed, pulsing, freaked. Synapses of painterly form and collaged stimulants connect to other, myriad forms of cultural information. In fact, with the absence of drugs, the paintings evidence a new degree of confidence, freedom, and experimentation. In short, we are compelled to discard reductive formulations based upon biography or manufactured scandal and to recognize Tomaselli in broadly art historical terms as an eminently convincing craftsman and innovative artist.

To be sure, Tomaselli is indebted to a range of art historical sources, eastern and western, ancient and modern, decorative and fine. He can be imagined as much a contemporary disciple of the great conceptual innovator, Sol LeWitt, as he can be regarded a visionary folk artist of sorts. His work, although intellectual and serialized, also finds its meaning in the ways it is made. "My work starts out as a blank thing, a piece of wood, and through thousands and thousands of little micro-moves, this thing builds itself up like an organism out of cells."[7] One can imagine that simple incidents and complex accretions, organic and mechanical gestures—themselves sources of endless hybridity—ultimately offer Fred Tomaselli the most rewarding, generative potential.

1) In: James Rondeau, "Interview with Fred Tomaselli" in *Fred Tomaselli*, (Berlin: Galerie Gebauer, 1999), n.p.
2) Tomaselli in conversation with Chris Martin, *The Brooklyn Rail*, Winter 2003, p. 15.
3) Ibid.
4) Peter Schjeldahl "Street Value," *The Village Voice*, May 6, 1997, p. 97.
5) Tomaselli, in conversation with the author, 1999.
6) Schjeldahl, op. cit.
7) "Interview" in *The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward: Selected Works by Harry Smith, Philip Taaffe, Fred Tomaselli* (New York: James Cohan Gallery, 2002), p. 65.

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