

Art interview  
Fred Tomaselli

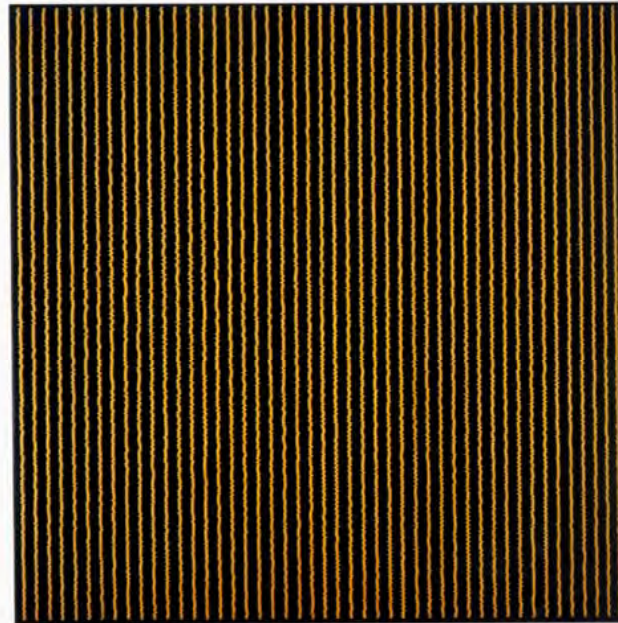
# Magick Realism

*opposite page*  
Summer Swell, 2007  
Work specially commissioned for  
this article, using images from  
issues 1-12 of *Another Magazine*

**Artist  
Fred Tomaselli  
meets author  
Siri Hustvedt  
at his Brooklyn  
studio to talk work,  
psychosis and the art  
of giving up smoking**

# ANOTHER MAGAZINE





13,000, 1996

**Siri Hustvedt:** The first thing I ask myself when I look at any work of art is, 'What am I seeing?' Looking at your work makes me think about perception in general; how do we see what we see? Cognitive scientists seem to agree that there are two essential aspects of perception: expectation and attention. Much of the time, we see what we expect to see, what we have been trained to see – the cultural and linguistic legacy that we carry around inside us. People miss a lot in their visual fields unless they're really paying attention. Am I right that you are playing with both expectation and attention in your work?

**Fred Tomaselli:** Absolutely, and I think that was a big part of my sensibility long before I found my voice as an artist. Let me tell you a story. Back when I was a high school philistine, skateboarding around California's Venice Beach, some friends and I happened to go into a gallery that was showing the work of James Turrell. The entire exhibition appeared to consist of a single, large black rectangle painted on the wall of the dimly-lit space. We all thought it was the stupidest thing we'd ever seen and began laughing at it. I reached out to touch it, and to my surprise, my hand passed through the wall and into a limitless void. Solidity literally vanished into thin air. My laughter disappeared into awestruck silence. Turrell taught me to pay attention. He taught me that what you see isn't always what you get.

I think great art involves a little magic on the road to altering perception. I personally like to create a fictive premise for the

work that breaks down on closer reading. I think my resin-paint-collages read as pure painting from across the room, but when you get right up close to them, you find that they're composed of a multitude of bits that combine the real, the photographic and the painterly. I've also done some paper collages, that from across the room, look like Audubon prints or field guides, but close up, you realise that the feathers are composed of nylon-based outerwear. Many of the works seem calm and innocuous until you get closer to them and see the conflicts inside them. Sometimes, my work becomes the reliquary for secret performances that are alluded to by the titles. One such work, which I made ten years ago, is entitled *Dermal Delivery or How I Quit Smoking*. At a glance, it looks like a large, pinkish, abstract grid, but if you look, its base ingredients are the nicotine patches that I was tearing off my body daily while trying to quit smoking. I was thinking about the old notion of paint as skin, and I started combining little photographic squares of epidermis with band-aids and skintoned pigment until the object accumulated into the finished picture. Incidentally, I was going crazy from nicotine withdrawal at the time, so maybe the work is also a reliquary for my imbalanced mental state at that time.

Each week, I teach a writing class to psychiatric in-patients at New York Hospital, which has been a very interesting experience for me. I've discovered a couple of things. Firstly,

# ANOTHER MAGAZINE



Abductor, 2006



Tropical Buntings, 2001

psychotic patients are far more creative than the non-psychotic ones, and they are often cosmologists, that is, they're very interested in mythologies that explain how the world is organized. I know you've drawn upon your own experiences with drugs in your work and, as you may know, there is a connection between drug-induced hallucinations and those due to psychosis, probably because of shared neurochemical activity. Is psychosis something that interests you?

I guess you could say that I'm interested in all kinds of altered states, which of course, would include psychosis. I love the work of many lunatic outsiders like Henry Darger or Adolph Wölfli. Primarily, I'm attracted to how vividly they depict their inner states, but then, that would apply to any great artist whether they were nuts or not. Maybe it's because I've suffered through my own bouts of bad neurochemistry and self-medication, but I don't believe you need to be crazy to be insanely creative. I am, however, fascinated by charismatic madmen and their ability to create mass hysteria. In many respects, the history of the 20th century is defined by madmen – from Hitler to Pol Pot to our current situation. I'm intrigued by how easy it is to manipulate individuals so they lose themselves to a mob or a mass movement. We humans think we know who we are, yet our psyches end up being such porous, leaky things.

Wherever there are charismatic, deluded leaders, you also have the struggle of utopian ideologies. The utopian struggle was

also central to modernism, which was just beginning to crash and burn as I was stepping up to add my voice. I've been kicking through its wreckage ever since. Works like *Goth* try to address this issue by looking at the imposition of utopian ideology on the American landscape. The seemingly peaceful painting of a town is actually composed of various dwellings that depict different radical religious and political ideologies – everything from Thoreau's cabin to the Aryan Nations compound. Instead of a bucolic piece of heaven, it's a town of hate and conflict.

**In my own work, I'm obsessed with the fact that distinguishing between the imaginary and the real is ultimately impossible. We have a cultural code for making this distinction, but looking at your pieces, I get the feeling that you are similarly obsessed with the blur between these categories. I loved the archive sheets of eyes and ears – the photographs of both real and artificial eyes and ears that you have used in your work. The effect it creates is uncanny. Can you talk about your interest in the border between fantasy and reality, nature and artifice?**

I guess it comes from growing up close to Disneyland. I've often told the story of how, after hiking miles into the wilderness and discovering my first real waterfall, I immediately began looking for the pumps and conduit that made it work. My assumption growing up was that everything was a construct. As I've become older, technology keeps adding to the menu of artificial realities.



I'm Not Nicole Anymore, 2006  
opposite Monsters of Paradise, 2001

Plastic surgery is getting better and more routine, computers are getting more powerful, drugs have become more sophisticated, and politics have been reduced to advertising. Our culture of escapism has irrevocably shaped our world. It has helped elect our leaders, and is also one of our dominant commodities. Under these circumstances, the 'real' is the strangest thing there is.

I had been pondering your work in preparation for our talk, later, when I was daydreaming in the kitchen, it came to me very suddenly – Hieronymus Bosch. I was in Lisbon last year and sat for a couple of hours in front of his great triptych on Saint Anthony. I've also spent a good deal of time in front of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado. Is Bosch a conscious influence on your work, or has he merely been hiding out in your unconscious?

It's funny, but one of the few times I almost fainted in front of a piece of art, was when I was at the Prado gazing at *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. I could look at it every day, and I know I could never get to the bottom of it. In addition to Bosch, I've also directly quoted from Archinboldo and Masaccio. There are a host of other influences such as conceptualism, Finish fetish, performance, pattern and decoration, underground commix, punk graphics, pop and op, German Romanticism, Hudson River School, minimalism and even abstract expressionism. Then there's Tibetan, Persian, east Indian and American Indian art

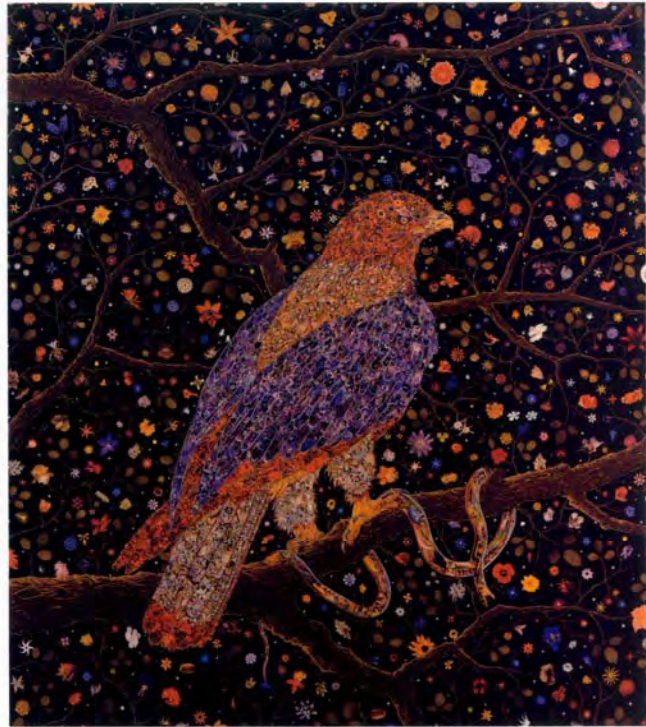
and my personal gateway to non-Western art, psychedelic kitsch. This is in addition to the light and space, outsider and folk art traditions that I referred to earlier. In other words, many of my influences are ideologically opposed to one another; just like the buildings in *Goth*.

I think it's important to ask you about the conceptual role that materials play in your work. You use all kinds of things, and the surprise of discovering them is part of the pleasure your work gives. How do you decide what to use? Or rather, how does the choice of materials influence the subject matter? And which comes first – picking what to use or the idea?

In the late 80s and early 90s, I started using pills in minimalist compositions as a way to talk about how art alters consciousness. In that work, instead of the chemicals travelling through the bloodstream to alter perception, they travelled through the eyeballs. The pills just took a different route to the brain. It was all very self-conscious, but it gave me a way into painting. I started adding marijuana leaves, since I didn't see much difference between the underlying desires that fuel both illicit and sanctioned drug use. I also loved how the soft organic forms of the leaves contrasted with the hard manufactured geometries of the pills. I had inadvertently allowed nature into the work, and from there it was a slippery slope. Eventually, I started adding images from field guides and gardening catalogues. Followed by

# ANOTHER MAGAZINE





Avian Flower Serpent, 2006

images of body parts cut from magazines. Then it was different kinds of mind-altering botanical elements like ephedra twigs, datura and mushrooms, followed by leaves that had no mind-altering properties whatsoever, like rose and fig leaves. I also started adding a lot more paint into the process. As my arsenal of materials grew, I began working more intuitively and the work became more complex. Before I knew it, I was just making art. At this point, it's hard to say what comes first in the working process. Sometimes, the conceptual will jump-start a piece, but the act of making art involves intuitive and evanescent impulses that I don't fully understand. Now, I'm finding out that it's much more interesting to not know what I'm doing.

**Making patterns is human. Symmetrical patterns appear in every culture, from tribal cultures to capitalist ones. It's an impulse – a physiological and universal one, I'm convinced – towards order. Making patterns or repetitions is what our minds do, and it's the ground of all meaning. How does pattern function in your work? And to return to cosmologies, how is it related to ideas about the grand scheme of things?**

When I see the different indigenous art found throughout the world, I can't help but notice their commonalities. I also can't help being seduced by them. It's almost as if these archaic patterns are encoded in our DNA. I'd like to think, that by using these archetypes, I can save my work from the passive-aggressive

strategies that seem to define so much contemporary art. Pattern can be quite musical, almost trance-inducing and hypnotic. Hopefully, it can suck the viewer into the work long enough for some thinking to occur. Sort of like a pop song – melody first, lyrics second. It's fine with me if the viewer wants to absorb the work on strictly formal terms. In my pictures, I may imbed pattern with personal and social content, but I've also come to believe that pattern is its own content.

**I'm a great fan of *Gray's Anatomy*. I like to look at the bodies and elaborate renderings of organs. In some of your more recent works, you've included a number of fascinating human bodies – the poor fellow in *Expecting to Fly*, for example. In his transparent body, the viewer sees more body parts, representations of insects, birds, fruit, and flowers of various sizes, and a fairly large snake that is both phallic and mythological. How did the human body become part of your work?**

The human body has been present in my work from the beginning. I always saw my shows as a sort of disassembled world that was weighted towards landscape and abstraction, with a sprinkling of one or two figures. I also made the occasional narrative picture whose stories were acted out by birds or bird armies. I guess I wanted to make things a little more overt, so a few years ago, I completed a body of work that was weighted more heavily towards the figure. A lot of that work dealt with

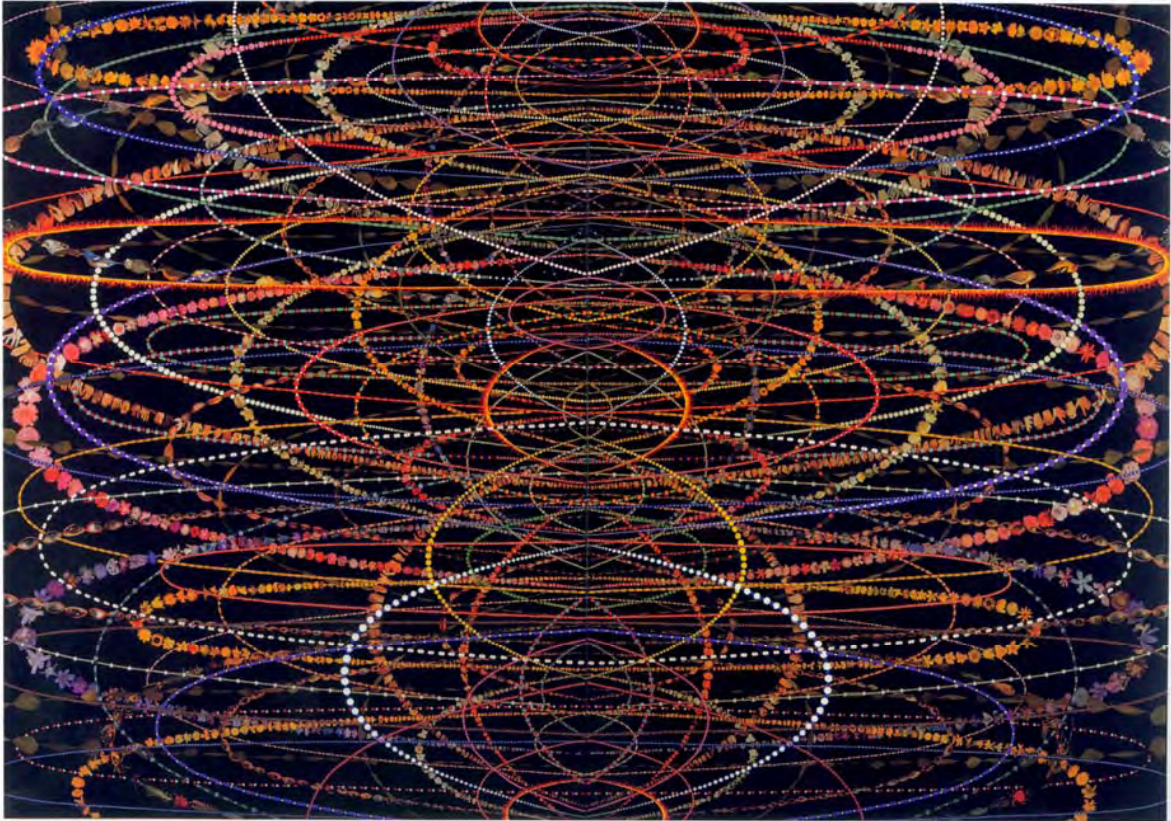
# ANOTHER MAGAZINE

Bird Blast, 1997



Ocatillo Nocturne, 1993

Echo, Wow and Flutter, 2000



Another Magazine 421



Expecting to Fly, 2002

death, oblivion, the grotesque and the sublime. I was watching my son growing up and getting stronger. Meanwhile, I had a health scare and my mother died, and then there was the war in Iraq. I felt as if I was falling apart.

Collecting interests me because it fetishises category. It's an urge born of the Enlightenment with its encyclopedias, museums and optimism that everything can be ordered and named. Contemporary popular culture, at least in the US, largely retains this faith. There's a line in Jonathan Lethem's story 'The Collector' in your book *Monsters of Paradise*: 'Category errors nagged his psyche.' In your art, I feel an intense tug-of-war between a love for the encyclopedic and an awareness of its failures. Teratology, the study of monstrosities, is a kind of oxymoron – the investigation of that which resists category. Can you talk about your sense of the monstrous? Earlier, I referred to the charismatic madmen who try to define history, but we are also dealing with the monstrous in the realms of science and technology. It's interesting that you bring up 'category errors' as they conjure a kind of monstrous hybridity. Category errors make me think of genetically-altered life forms, bad clones and Franken-food. Hybridism is central to my work; in the materials I use, in the combination and clotting of those materials into different forms, and in the differing ideologies and pictorial traditions at play in the pictures. I also come at the work

422 Another Magazine



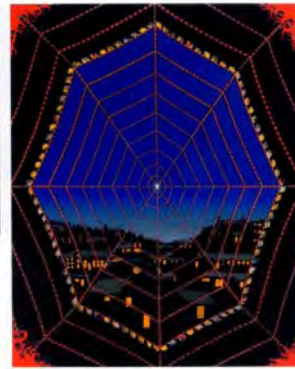
James  
Cohan

# ANOTHER MAGAZINE





Migrant Fruit Thugs, 2006



Goth, 2000  
*opposite* Airborne Event, 2003

with a hybrid consciousness morphed by drugs and media. I don't know how monstrous it all is, but category errors abound.

**Your paintings are beautiful. I often wonder why we find some things beautiful and others not. Beauty is a mysterious business. For me, there is often something a little dangerous and alien about it. What does the idea of beauty mean to you?**

I agree that true beauty is always a little strange. If it's not strange enough, it's merely pretty. If it's too strange, it's just alienating. Beauty is all about balance. I tend to like a little pathology with my beauty, and when it gets a little dangerous, beauty can become sublime. For me, beauty also lies in a conversation between the senses and the philosophical mind.

**Finally, I wanted to ask you about your childhood. You mention coming of age during the 70s and the hedonistic counterculture of that time, but I'm interested in what came before. Did you draw or paint or cut things out or build or collect when you were a child?**

My current practice is a culmination of my lifelong interests and hobbies. As a boy, I spent a lot of time in the garage escaping from sadness and conflict. I would spend endless hours in there tinkering, experimenting, building and collecting. I tinkered with surfboards, skateboards, soapbox derby cars, custom bikes, and when I got a little older, cars. As a matter of fact, I worked my

way through art school as a mechanic. I built models, did science experiments, got lost in books, and drew all the time. Like a lot of boys, I was always building structures; tree forts, underground forts, bamboo forts and tumbleweed forts. Often, I'd get bored the minute I finished building something, and I'd destroy it. I found things out. I discovered that you could preserve a scorpion forever in surfboard resin, and that a tumbleweed fort will burn to the ground in about 45 seconds. I collected stamps, coins, rocks, licence plates, and eventually, records. I also had a kind of low-rent garage zoo that housed various creepy animals including scorpions, tarantulas, lizards, frogs and snakes, all of which I would catch around my neighbourhood.

Now that I'm a middle-aged family guy, I'm glad to say that I still go fishing and I still get in the surf. I'm still wild about music, and I still buy records. I'm still drawing, painting, tinkering and building. My studio is a continuation of my garage, and my garden provides me with the collection of plants that find their way into my work. In terms of what I do, my life has changed very little since I was a kid.

*Fred Tomaselli's work will be on show at the New Orleans Biennial; from early October to December 2008.*

*Siri Hustvedt's new book The Sorrows of an American will be published by Sceptre in the spring.*

# ANOTHER MAGAZINE

