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It Has to Be a Photograph! Sorry, It's a Painting by Max Ferguson

Max Ferguson's art preserves moments of New York life that are being vaporized faster than he can paint them --- secondhand bookstores, Lower East Side delicatessens, shoe repair shops, doll hospitals.

By Jesse Kornbluth, Contributor

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At the height of Rudy Giuliani's reign, my stepson and I went downtown for an art opening. The artist was Max Ferguson, one of my former screenwriting students. He is, without doubt, the hardest-working of that ambitious crew.

I say this because Max Ferguson paints 10 to 16 hours a day, working on a single canvas for as long as five months. When he's done, he's got the modern equivalent of a Vermeer --- a moment of ordinary life, exalted by technique so exacting that his painting could pass for that most modern medium, photography.

Or a single frame in a feature film directed by, say, the Bertolucci of [The Conformist](#).

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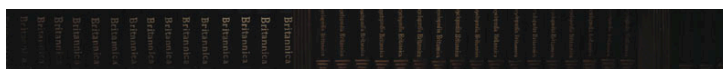
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Max's art may be eye-popping, exciting, fun to look at and, only under the surface, serious and challenging, but surrounded by his work and a crowd of admirers, he's a funny guy and great talker. (Sample: "Why do I live in my head? The rent is cheap and I enjoy the view.") So my stepson and I left the gallery in high spirits. A little later, so did Max.

He stopped to paste some posters for his show on the wooden wall of a construction site.

The next time we saw Max was a few days later in the *New York Post* --- he'd been arrested and jailed.

Max's poster? "Graffiti."

Putting it on a temporary wall? "Defacement."

Fortunately, Max was arrested carrying pens, ink and paper --- very useful in making friends in jail. "Two days," he says. "The most terrifying experience of my life."

In court, the judge voided the arrest.

"If I didn't know better," Max says now, "I would have thought I'd paid off the judge."

(Needless to say, Max is not pining for the political rebirth of Rudy Giuliani.)

There's an irony here: Max Ferguson's art preserves moments of New York life that are being vaporized faster than he can paint them --- secondhand bookstores, Lower East Side delicatessens, shoe repair shops, doll hospitals.

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But its creator is a Long Island kid who now splits his time between New York and Jerusalem, where he lives with his wife, an Israeli art historian, and their three children.

How did this happen?

Max graduated high school at 16. Obsessed with animation, he got hired to fill in the cells of an animated feature film, **Raggedy Ann and Andy**. This was in the days before computers made movies; the work was repetitive, repetitive, repetitive. "I wasn't great when I started," he recalls. "But I very quickly got much better."

At 19, after a few years at NYU, he went to Amsterdam to study the paintings of artists who were beginning to obsess him --- Rembrandt and Vermeer. The city staged an art competition, so Max entered a painting. The city bought it. Max returned to New York and asked the renowned art scholar, H. W. Janson, to assess his work. Janson bought a painting. And Max was off.

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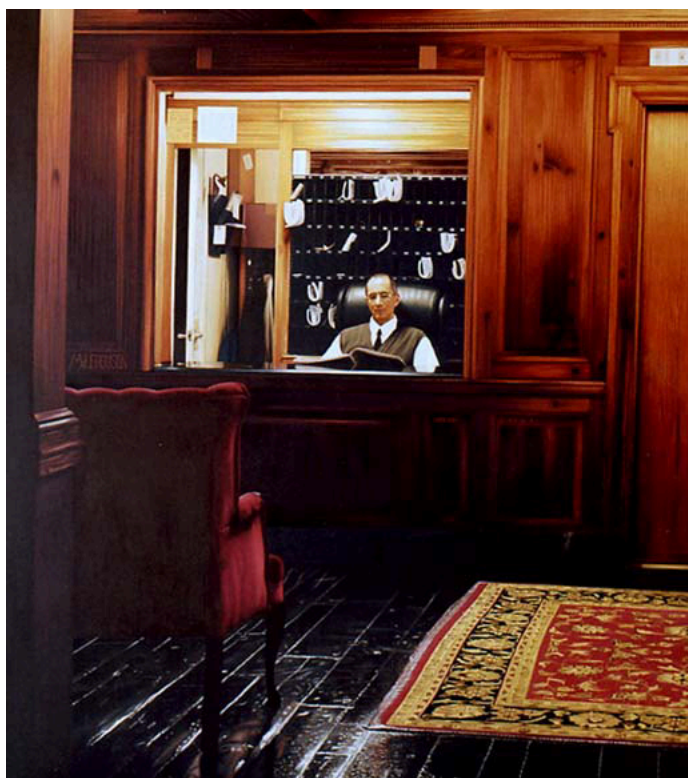


With recognition comes misunderstanding. In Max Ferguson's case, the trouble is classification --- he's not, he insists, a photo-realist. That is, he doesn't take a photo of his subject, project it on a canvas and fill it in. He prefers to work with models. And if he takes a picture, that's just the start of his process. He tweaks an image, changes elements, adds details that weren't there. The painting of his living room in Jerusalem, for example:

Over a course of a year, I took well over a thousand photographs of infinite variation (seasons, times of day, clothing), until I felt I knew what would work best. While a devoted student of art history, I have rarely made any direct art historical references in my paintings. In this case, however, there are many. For example, the sandals in the foreground refer directly to the Van Eyck Wedding Portrait in the National Gallery in London. There are also a number of Vermeer and Hopper allusions. The scene depicts my wife Sharon, our son Michael and me. To my right, hangs My Father in Katz's [one of his best-known paintings]. The vase belonged to my paternal grandfather. Next to the television are two photographs of my father's grandparents; the great-great grandparents of Michael. And so, the painting makes reference to five generations in my family.

Very thought out. And it might make you think Max Ferguson is calm and deliberative. So very not.

"I'm the most impatient person you ever met," he told me. "And it's not that I especially enjoy the process of painting. I spend so much time on my work because I'm desperate to see it."



As am I. As are many. Max Ferguson has a show in New York from November 11 to December 4 at Gallery Henoch, 555 West 25th Street. [Click here](#) to see some of the paintings on exhibit. For more, go to Max Ferguson's web site.

All images courtesy of Max Ferguson.

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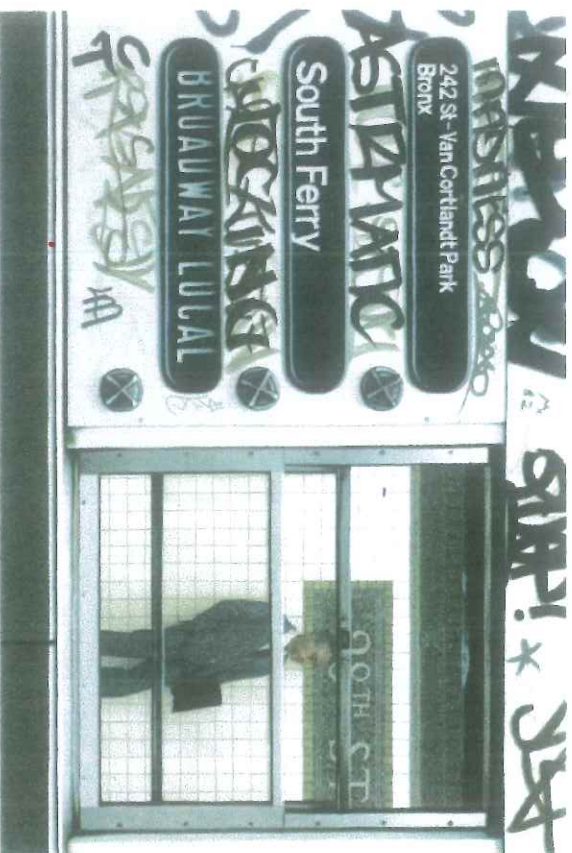
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1982 "My Father in the Subway I," the first time Max Ferguson painted his father.

30 Years of Paintings Of a New York Everyman

Moses is described in the Torah as the most modest man who ever lived. My father was the second most. He thought of himself, and wanted others to think of him, as simply ordinary. Perhaps that inspired me to often depict him as Everyman." — Max Ferguson

Born in 1912 and congenitally mild-mannered, Richard Ferguson enjoyed the simple pleasures of New York City: the Sunday paper, a pastrami on rye at Katz's Delicatessen, boardwalk games in Coney Island with his wife. He was a father of four, and his youngest, Max, became an artist.

The first time he painted his father, a lawyer, Max used him as a model for a 1982 painting of a businessman on a subway platform. The success of that piece led to more sittings and more paintings, in oil or watercolor on wood. Inspired by Edward Hopper and 17th-century Dutch genre painting, many of the resulting images were real-life scenes — Richard visiting the post office, waiting for an elevator — while others, like that of father and son playing a game of pool, were painted from the imagination. Richard Ferguson was a devoted father, his son said, but he wasn't demonstrative. "Perhaps," he said, "painting him was one way of trying to elicit more love and approbation."

In "Painting My Father," opening Monday at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum in Greenwich Village, Max Ferguson offers 30 years of these realist snapshots. The show, Mr. Ferguson's 13th solo exhibition, captures his father as he was, and as he wished him to be — all against a backdrop of a fading midcentury New York. Five weeks after losing his wife of 58 years in 2005, Richard Ferguson died at 92. An opening reception on May 8 will commemorate what would have been his 100th birthday, and honor New York City's everyman.

MARIA ELENA MARTINEZ



1986 "Me and My Father," part of Mr. Ferguson's "Painting My Father" exhibition.



2006 "My Father in Katz's," at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum.



1990 "My Father at Coney Island."



1999 "Saturday Night/Sunday Times."



2011 "My Father at Mount Sinai." Mr. Ferguson's father, Richard, would have been 100 this year.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Immortalizing a Life in the City

By SAMEER REDDY

The popular perception of contemporary art often involves a conceptual caricature that can leave a viewer scratching his head. (See the Whitney Biennial and New Museum Triennial for current examples.) But a new exhibit by Max Ferguson at the Hebrew Union College Museum on West Fourth Street, "Painting My Father," shows that fans of hyperrealism haven't been altogether forsaken.

A fourth-generation New Yorker, Mr. Ferguson has painted more than 200 hyper-detailed canvases grounded in Old Masterly technique during his 33-year career. The paintings, many of which capture New York City's fading, old-world character, straddle the past and present by documenting a city that is perpetually erasing itself. "Painting My Father," which opens Monday and runs through June 29, showcases 23 works featuring the elder Ferguson, whose twilight years serve to illustrate the artist's central theme, which he described as "a hyperconsciousness of time passing, and [an awareness] of the transience of life."

"He was not only my father, but my main muse," said Mr. Ferguson, who is 52, of his father's significance to his art. "While he was alive, I painted him over a 23-year period, so I saw him aging. I suppose, in a sense, there is a Dorian Gray aspect. I'm freezing time and immortalizing him through the paintings."

Where the elder Ferguson inspired much of the emotion in his work, Mr. Ferguson has found his artistic motivation in 17th-century Dutch genre painting, his technique echoing masters like Jan Vermeer and Gerrit Dou.

"Max uses old-master painting techniques, but combines these processes with his own photographic studies, so that he is at once both traditional and contemporary," said Gail Levin, an art historian at Baruch College who contributed to the exhibit's catalog. "When so many artists today employ assistants and fabricators, it is very special to have a painter who values and practices his craft with such meticulous attention."

Mr. Ferguson, who initially



Max Ferguson/Bridgeman Art Library (2)



studied film animation at NYU's film school, grounds his approach to painting in the hard realism of the city, often depicting solitary figures plying their trades—a barber, a busker, a clockmaker. But that unflinching observational style also conveys a desire to evoke the lives that

Above, Max Ferguson's 'My Father in Katz's' (2005). At left, his 'Skee Ball' (1990). Both paintings are on display in the exhibit 'Painting My Father' at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum.

are lived below the clamorous surface of the city.

"I would like to believe that there's a subtle, quiet emotion to my work," he said. "There's an irony in how crowded and overpopulated New York is, yet I so often paint people alone. What I'm showing is that there's a real sense of quiet and tranquility to be found."

"Painting My Father" includes some poignant work—a 2011 piece, "My Father at Mount Sinai," depicts Richard Ferguson on his deathbed at Mount Sinai Hospital—but the majority of the work on display captures the meaningfully mundane moments on which lives are built. In "My Father in the Empire State Building" (1998), Richard Ferguson awaits the arrival of an Art Deco elevator. "My Father in Katz's" (2005) immortalizes a lunch in the Lower East Side deli.

"I love the one of my father in Katz's as a painting, but it was also the first that I created after he died," Mr. Ferguson said. "It has great emotional importance

to me. I kept asking myself, 'Is this my way of dealing with his death or not dealing with it, by trying to keep him alive?'"

Mr. Ferguson is known to use the rear of the canvas as a kind of scrapbook, assembling quotations, photographs and notes that relate to the genesis of the work. The newest painting in the exhibit, "Shuffleboard" (2012), includes a note that he found while clearing out his parents' house, written by Richard Ferguson and describing his own childhood, along with other photos of the artist's childhood.

"On a certain level, it's crushing knowing that things I've painted have gone. And at the same time it's gratifying that I've preserved them two dimensionally in paint," Mr. Ferguson said. "Ultimately New York is about its soul, and it's disturbing to me the degree and speed with which it's changing. Like all New Yorkers, I mourn for things that were here and are no longer. But certainly, in terms of cities, it remains my great love."