BY TIMOTHY J. STANDRING

BECOMING SCOTT FRASER

EDITOR'S NOTE: Scott Fraser: Selected Works *is the handsome book published this autumn to highlight the four-decade career of one of America's leading still life painters. Illustrated inside are more than 200 paintings and drawings, accompanied by a preface from scholar William H. Gerdts, an essay by curator Timothy J. Standring, and an interview of Fraser by his fellow artist Robert C. Jackson. We invited Dr. Standring to excerpt his essay, which traces how Fraser evolved into the master who created such mature works as* Reign *and* Goldfish Arc *(both 2012).*

Scott Fraser (b. 1957) finds painting irrepressible. He may not have read Horace, but he embodies that Roman poet's dictum "Ut Pictura Poesis" (as is painting, so is poetry). This phrase can mean that paintings are mute poems, that the artist's image tells a story, just as poets create pictures with words. Much has been written about Fraser's visual poems, with their themes ranging from the personal to the philosophical. Poets gather material from a variety of sources, and Fraser's comes from life experiences, dreams, and family life.

Realists like Fraser trace their lineage to a curriculum established in the 16th century and refined ever since by national academies and private ateliers. The basic rules remain unchanged: learn to replicate the seen world with a hierarchy of instructive components. Mastering chiaroscuro, for instance, allows one to learn how color interacts with form. Along the way, students enhance their knowledge with heightened sensitivity to unifying the composition in tone and

Reign, 2012, oil on canvas, 82 x 76 in., private collection

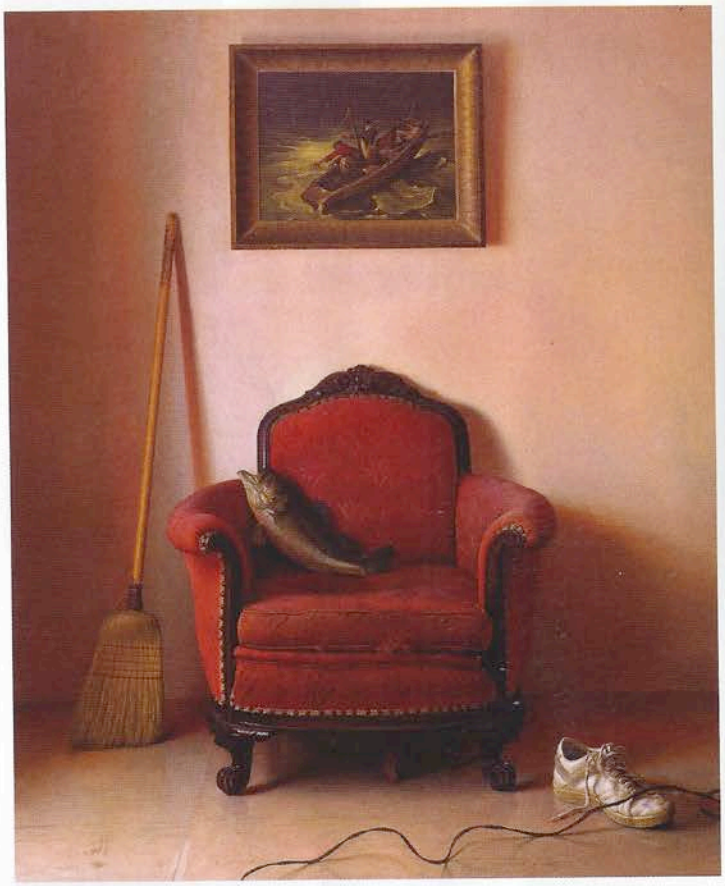
Goldfish Arc, 2012, oil on board, 21 1/3 x 21 3/4 in., private collection

lighting. Working with such elements is like juggling a series of algorithms that recalculate with each subtle adjustment. Painting in this way is keenly intellectual, wildly anticipatory, and nerve-wracking. It requires discipline to weather the years of trial and error. Fraser would be the first to admit that painting is a full-time job, day in and day out.

GETTING STARTED

From his earliest memories, Fraser wanted to be an artist, and he has spent his life achieving that goal. Art was in his genes: "My paternal great-grandfather was a painter in his retirement, and my mom has two of his paintings in her home. They inspired me when I was young." Other paintings in his grandparents' home worked a special charm, including one that Fraser inserted in *Three Fishermen* of 1992. "The painting of fishermen within my painting was a copy made by one of my dad's high school friends, which he gave to my grandmother. It always hung in her living room, where I would visit them as a kid."

Like the story of young Giotto showing Cimabue his perfect circle, Fraser has his own precocious piece of juvenilia: a petite composition of *Roses*, painted when he was 3. It hangs proudly, framed, in his studio, reminding him how early his life mission began. This work has a painterly sensibility reminiscent of Renoir's bold impressionism. But one needn't seek a precise source; its significance is its testimony to Fraser's earliest love of painting.



Three Fishermen, 1992, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 in., Denver Art Museum

Interchange, 1978, lithograph on paper, 17 3/4 x 14 3/4 in., private collection

Fraser benefited from nurturing family members and art instructors, a reminder of the importance of arts education for children. Although he didn't take lessons during elementary school, he was fortunate to interact with many artists who worked for his father's advertising agency. He benefited from their advice just as much as he did from one art teacher at Bear Creek High School in Lakewood, Colorado: "Lars Trahnstrom was a standout — very dedicated and generous with his time, but not one to put up with any crap. He was one of those teachers who would take on troubled kids and give them a new sense of direction and self-worth. He would come in on weekends to give students extra time to work." Trahnstrom not only introduced Fraser to printmaking, but also exposed him to the closely observed works of Andrew Wyeth and Thomas Eakins.

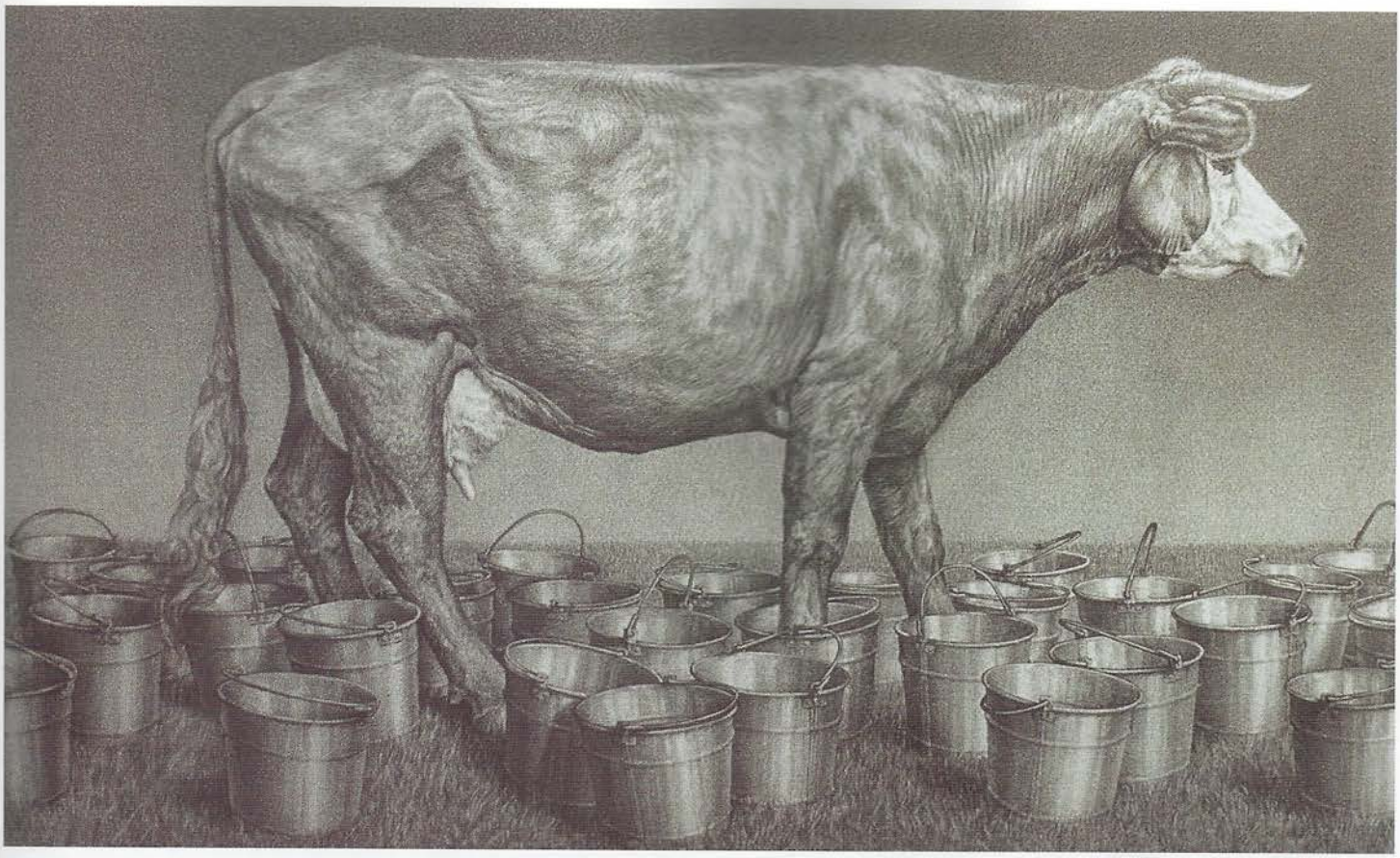
He also encouraged Fraser to attend the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI), where he began developing his own artistic personality. There he was asked to suspend his beliefs about what constituted art, and he experienced the rigorous first-year foundation course, then one of America's best: "That first year was especially helpful in kick-starting my brain and setting a pace for the next two years."

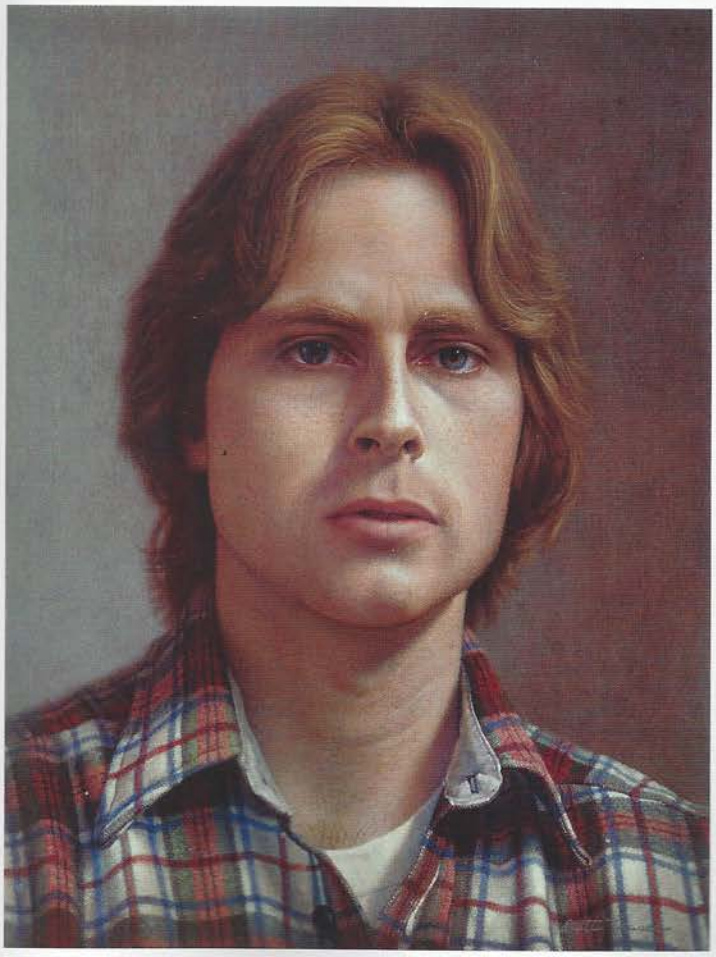
At KCAI he found instructors as influential as Trahnstrom. Bill McKim had been a student of Thomas Hart Benton and taught Fraser the brittle medium of egg tempera while mentoring his development in printmaking. He also taught Fraser to consider carefully how to orchestrate the components of a composition, which developed into one of the most salient features of Fraser's art. His 1978 lithograph depicting the railroad shunt yard that he drew many times, *Interchange*, shows Fraser's early preference for structured geometric compositions. He laid it out as if it were a jigsaw puzzle of roughly 20 pieces, dividing it into balanced parts, according to certain percentages, a habit that has become one of his key organizing principles.

Throughout his second year at KCAI, Fraser experimented with more painterly projects, exemplified by the abstract canvas *Untitled*, a 1979 work

Figure in a Room, 1979, graphite on paper, 8 x 10 in., collection of the artist

strongly reminiscent in palette and gestural handling of Willem de Kooning's paintings of the 1960s. Such works allowed Fraser to sustain a painterly counterpoint to those executed with a more polished finish, and may have been instigated by the instructor Lester Goldman, who urged Fraser to see the big picture and think in terms of bold shapes. Such advice helped Fraser find the means to produce *Figure in a Room*, a 1979 drawing that took its cue from Richard Diebenkorn, who "held great interest for me in that





Cow in the Buckets, 1980, graphite on paper, 26 x 36 in., private collection ■ (LEFT) *Self-Portrait*, 1985, acrylic on board, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 in., private collection

he was both a realist and abstractionist. That opened my mind to a more conceptual understanding of realism."

Across the street from KCAI is the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, where Fraser found other influences. Richard Estes was working toward similar formality and resonated strongly with Fraser, especially after he saw the 1977 painting *Ansonia* in Estes's 1978 solo exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins. Fraser admired its clever geometric precision, finished surfaces, and adherence to reality. Estes's mirrored reflection of an urban setting may also have reminded Fraser of the fleeting observations we absentmindedly make, but fail to remember, a theme that has recurred frequently in his art. (As fate would have it, Fraser received a 2009 fellowship from Estes's Acadia Foundation, which allowed him to work in a studio on the grounds of Estes's beautiful summer home on Mount Desert Island, Maine.)

At the Nelson-Atkins, Fraser discovered his affinities to two other artists, namely Joseph Cornell and Wayne Thiebaud. He admired Cornell's *A Pantry Ballet (for Jacques Offenbach)* of 1942 for its whimsical humor and tight compositional arrangement of lobsters with skirts dancing in a conga line, though he did not quite realize it was the quirky inexplicability in his own constitution that attracted him. In the gallery beyond were paintings by Thiebaud, such as *Cakes* of 1963, which provided an inkling of what would become another Fraser hallmark: vibrant, luminescent colors.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

After three years' hard work in Kansas City, Fraser decided he had mastered enough to return to Longmont, Colorado, where his family moved during his late teens. There he painted in their basement. A romantic might compare him to the young Rembrandt in his tenebrous quarters, but not Fraser, who says he "was nowhere near Rembrandt. I was a hang-dog kid feeling completely lost. I was green but determined, and I just wanted to

(AT LEFT) *Homage to Cotán*, 1987, oil on board, 12 1/2 x 14 1/4 in., private collection ■ (BELOW) *Vortex III*, 1998, oil on board, 35 1/2 x 58 in., private collection

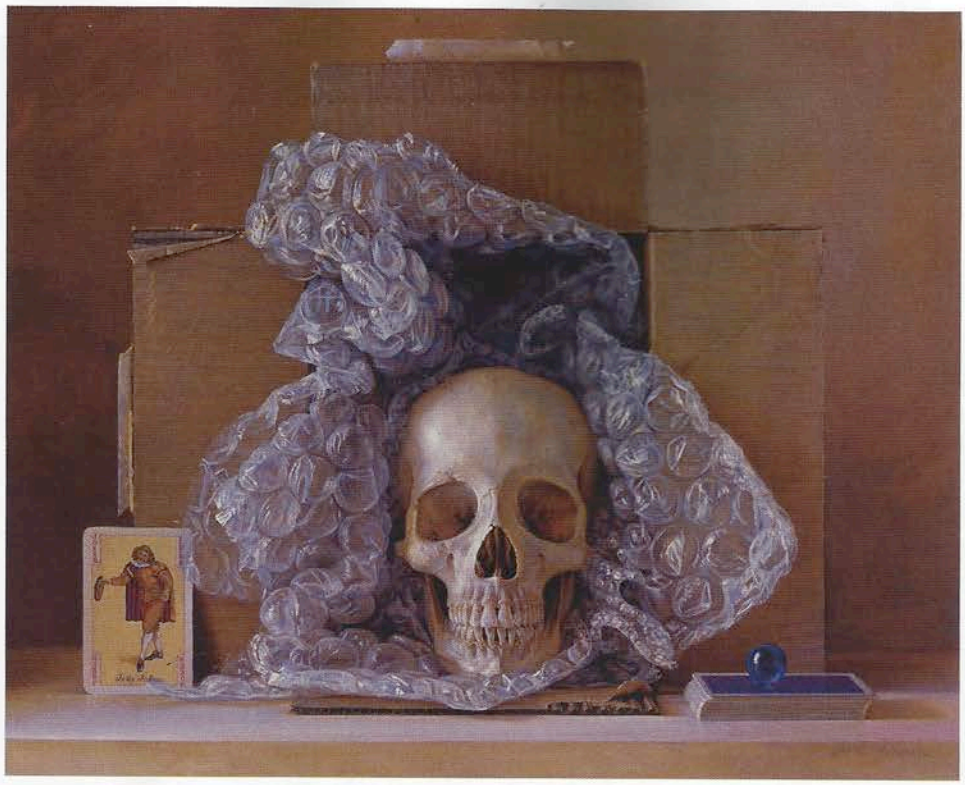
Catenary Curve, 2008, oil on canvas, 59 x 71 1/2 in., private collection

paint all the time hoping someday to make a living from this art thing." The move brought him full circle, back to the land of his high school years, terrain punctuated with agricultural incisions — irrigation canals, plow patterns, and farm equipment tracks — alongside undulating berms and hills. These quilts spread out before the foothills of the Rockies, etched against dramatic skies.

Fraser saw here a landscape that suited some of the tenets he had formed in Kansas City: linear templates ready to be colored in. He returned, stylistically and iconographically, to artists first encountered in high school. For example, he pored over a Wyeth volume that contained *Trodden Weed* of 1951: "I looked to him when I started working in egg tempera." Fraser recalls. And of Eakins's *Pushing for Rail*, he says, "Shying away from the more obvious mountain vistas, my landscapes included man-made aspects such as fields and irrigation patterns. Perhaps that's why I loved *Pushing for Rail* so much, with its flat horizon line." Fraser took cues from Wyeth's and Eakins' highly structured compositions, sharing their mindset if not their particular kind of landscape.

Fraser had something else in mind in 1980 when he painted *Cow in the Buckets*. The beast's balletic navigation through the field of milk buckets is one of those quirky images that might make sense to someone raised on a farm, but is curious, if not improbable, to a city-dweller. Regardless, its essence makes us pause: it points to Fraser's poetic voice, which owes more to Cornell and Thiebaud than to Wyeth and Eakins.

As in Kansas City, Fraser was firing on all pistons available, painting landscapes and livestock, working in acrylic, tempera, and ink and wash. His return to Colorado was brief but modestly promising. Even though he was winning awards and succeeding with dealers in New York and Denver, his nature was to seek out something else. That life-changing experience occurred in 1985–86 with his European *wanderjahr*, which came about when he met Peter Eichner-Dixon, "a very intelligent German painter who opened my eyes to a lot of things. He helped me look deeper into the artists, museums, and galleries in New York City and abroad, as well as the art market itself — something not taught in school." Fraser accompanied Eichner-Dixon to the Künstlerhäuser Worpswede, a German art colony he used as a home base while traveling. Experiencing in person works by such historical masters as Vermeer, Holbein, and Rembrandt, as well as modern ones like Anselm Kiefer, Francis Bacon, and Lucian Freud, was an education in itself. Most significantly, it helped Fraser shift from painting landscapes toward still lifes. It also



Thin Fragile Line, 1992, oil on board, 16 x 20 in., private collection

encouraged him to "work from life and offered up more concept-based possibilities."

Fraser's 1985 *Self-Portrait* conveys his determination to succeed on this artistic journey, as had earlier travelers like Dürer. He visited museums throughout Italy, Spain, France, Holland, Belgium, and England, and began to focus on oils: "I wanted to be an *alla prima* painter, keeping my colors strong to maximize luminosity. I loved the Hamburger Kunsthalle's paintings by Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900) — complex pieces all done in one shot, wet into wet. For the first time I saw Antonio López García (b. 1936) and the Spanish realists. I love Isabel Quintanilla (b. 1938), and probably borrow from her more, but I have always felt that López García is one of the most important living realists."

ALWAYS ON

Fraser resettled in Colorado, married in 1988, began showing at Manhattan's Grand Central Galleries, and focused on still life. This genre offers him the perfect convergence of interests: working from close observation of the object — including nature's detritus; luxuriating in oil painting; and conjuring up subjects true to his nature. He has been painting this way for the last three decades.

Other masterworks continue to inspire Fraser, particularly Juan Sánchez Cotán's mysterious still life *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* of 1662. It became the springboard for many paintings, including *Monkey Inferno* (2010) and *Homage to Cotán*, which dates back to 1987. "I first experienced Cotán's work in a book way back," Fraser says. "I have seen his paintings in Madrid, San Diego, Boston, and New York, but it's his still lifes that really speak to me." It might well be that Fraser connected the structure of this Spaniard's compositions with Cornell's whimsical boxes, or perhaps it was the simple pleasure Fraser's children took in Cotán's subject matter. (For details, see the August 2015 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*, p. 96.)

As studios go, Fraser's is a rather tidy affair, perfectly endowed with clear northern light. This is his personal cabinet of curiosities, the laboratory where he mixes poetry and science among desks and shelves adorned with Post-Its and sheets inscribed with notes and pencil drawings of possible compositions. On one sheet, he has placed two lemons side by side, set off with graphite cross hatching: one whole, the other sliced into thirds. Some compositions — horizontals of cups grouped together — evoke Giorgio Morandi. In its organization of strewn objects, *Catenary Curve* (2008) recalls Cotán, though the scalpel in its lower right corner also references Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic*. A tidier, though no less dynamic, arrangement appears in *Vortex III* (1998).

Elsewhere, framed graphite drawings relate to such iconic paintings as *Thin Fragile Line* (1992); a shelf with a plaster hand recalls one that figures prominently in his *Icon* series. Constructions of still life compositions — in one instance, a shiny gold egg with chicken feet walking across a plank above an array of cups — seem to be Fraser's own Cornell boxes waiting to be painted. Another is an arrangement of crayfish carapaces atop an elegant cup and saucer resting on a serrated sheet of paper. Two bite-size Milky Way bars are glued to a square of blue origami paper atop a stiff white sheet held down with tacks. All of these set-ups are examined with magnifying optics, placed on the object he is studying, and also on the surface he is painting. Fraser always has "at least half a dozen books scattered around, depending on what I am painting at the time." Recently there was a tome on Diebenkorn.

Fraser can never turn his "art button" off. He is constantly conjuring and sketching dozens of ideas, many of them lining the studio's walls. He reminds one of the writer Vladimir Nabokov, who kept index cards under his pillow so he could quickly record ideas that emerged in his dreams. Surely Fraser has Post-Its at the ready, even on vacation. By now his family knows such behavior will not change, because every picture tells a story. ●

Information: *To order* Scott Fraser: Selected Works, *visit schifferbooks.com.*

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