

COILHOUSE

A LOVE LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

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INTO THE ~~WOODS~~: *The Wisdom of* Madeline von Foerster



THE MYSTICAL PAINTINGS OF MADELINE VON FOERSTER INVOKE NAMES LIKE VAN EYCK, BRUEGHEL, BOSCH, REMEDIOS VARO, ERNST FUCHS. IT'S VIBRANT, MULTI-LAYERED WORK, FILLED WITH OCCULT AND MEDIEVAL SYMBOLISM AND RENDERED IN THE PAINSTAKING EGG TEMPERA AND OIL TRADITION OF THE FLEMISH OLD MASTERS. AGELESS, YET THEMATICALLY TIMELY, SCHOLARLY BUT ALWAYS DEEPLY PERSONAL, HERS IS SIMPLY SOME OF THE MOST MOVING MODERN WORK IN THE MEDIUM.

ENDANGERED SPECIES II (under painting), 2008 (12 x 15.5 inches)

IF YOU'RE FAMILIAR WITH THE PAINTING TECHNIQUE OF THE OLD MASTERS, CLOSELY EXAMINING PAINTINGS LIKE THESE CAN BE MIND-BOGGLING... SO MANY SMOOTHLY-PLACED, MINUSCULE BRUSH STROKES, PATIENTLY LAYERED, CULMINATING IN PORTRAITS THAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS HAVING AN UNEARTHLY INNER GLOW.

THE FIRST TIME I SAW MADELINE'S WORK UP CLOSE WAS AT A TYPICAL, OVERCROWDED NYC GALLERY OPENING: PLENTY OF CHEAP WINE AND FABULOUSLY DRESSED PEOPLE, ALL TALKING A LITTLE TOO LOUDLY OVER ONE ANOTHER. THEN THERE WAS MADELINE HERSELF, STANDING OFF TO ONE SIDE, AS ELEGANT AND LUMINOUS AS ONE OF HER PAINTINGS.

SINCE THAT TIME, I'VE COME TO KNOW HER AS ONE OF THOSE EXCEEDINGLY RARE EXAMPLES OF A PERSON WHOSE LIFE REFLECTS PURELY IN THEIR ART. SHE HAS A BIG BRAIN, BUT AN EVEN BIGGER HEART, AND IT'S A CERTAIN, ACHING SOULFULNESS AS MUCH AS THE RIGOROUS CRAFTSMANSHIP, THAT MAKES HER WORK SO EXCEPTIONAL.

RECENTLY, I STOPPED BY MADDY'S COZY STUDIO IN THE GREENPOINT NEIGHBORHOOD OF BROOKLYN TO VIEW HER NEW WALDKAMMER SERIES, AND WE CHATTED OVER A POT OF TEA. IN HER OWN WORDS, MADELINE HAS PAINTED A VISION OF "NINE IMAGINARY CABINETS IN WHICH TO EXPLORE HUMANITY'S OFTEN DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE (IN PARTICULAR, THE CRISIS OF DEFORESTATION). THESE WOODEN CABINETS INTENTIONALLY ALLUDE TO THE ONCE-LIVING TREES THAT WERE THEIR SOURCE. MEANWHILE, THE 'CURIOSITIES' DISPLAYED ARE ACTUAL SPECIES, DEPENDANT ON THE TREES FOR SURVIVAL."

INTERVIEW Meredith Yayanos

Can we talk a bit about your studies/schooling as a painter?

I have an art education, but I didn't start painting 'til after art school, on my own.

When I began, I knew how I wanted my paintings to look – a sort of Surrealist/Northern Renaissance mix – but I didn't know how to paint. So I would sweat out a painting and it would take me months. Ninety percent of the time, painting was a laborious, punishing exercise; really hard work. In 2004, doing some research on the internet, I found out about Philip Rubinov-Jacobson's Austrian seminar in the Mische technique. This is a 15th century technique developed by the Flemish Masters, the same ones I was trying to emulate, using alternating layers of white egg tempera and oil glazes. I rushed to sign up, and I'm so grateful to have had the chance. This is the way I make every painting now. Naturally, large paintings still take months, but the work is much easier and more enjoyable now. I don't think the method would be optimal for every painter, because it works best with careful drawing and planning, but it is certainly the one for me.

What attracted you specifically to the Northern Renaissance school?

I could give you the academic answer, but I am going to give you the honest answer, which is really silly. I was looking at the way they painted nudes, very idealized, with a tiny top, long spindly legs, and big bloated bellies.



Clockwise from top left, four compositions in oil and egg tempera on panels: **Redwood Cabinet**, 2008 (24 x 32.5 in), **Essentia Exaltata**, 2006 (9 x 12 in), **Specimen Cabinet**, 2008 (12 x 16 in), **Resurrection**, 2008 (16.75 x 24 in)

I thought, "That's me with PMS!" The fact that their iconic female figure resembles mine when my self-esteem is lowest, somehow was an invitation to investigate these paintings further, and I also marveled at the details and the drapery. These painters' minds worked in the same way my mind works. It was recognition.

There's such loving attention to detail in all of your work, down to the very last drop of dew on a flower petal, a cabinet's grain, the hair on a tarantula's leg. Many of the pieces in this recent Waldkammer series are quite large. I feel like I'm viewing, not months, but years worth of hard work here. It's breathtaking. It also looks like a rather formidable physical and mental endurance test! How do you keep your eyeballs from falling out of your head?

First of all, thank you, Mer. I am so glad you've gotten to see the works in person. It was a push to get these paintings done. For the final six months I worked seven days a week. Regular exercise was crucial. I decided it was more important to go running regularly, than to have a day off. I also tried to do things in batches – all the drawings, all the underpaintings, etcetera, in order to develop the body of work as a whole, and keep myself from getting bogged down on any single painting. But I would be lying if

I didn't admit there were many hours wasted staring at a panel, trying to motivate myself to do the next task.

I think my gallerist Yasha Young was a great assistance, here. Knowing that

the show was coming, knowing that she had made an investment in my work, and that I wasn't just working for my success alone now, was a great incentive. I'm sure you find the same thing true with yourself and the other *Coilhouse* women, since a magazine is also a giant undertaking. If you want to make impossible things happen, the way to do it is to commit to them and to involve others in that commitment. Then you can move mountains.

Or die trying! Do any of your body parts ever go numb?
My hand did, at the end! But I bought a wrist brace for it.

Do you ever hit either a physical or a mental wall and just go "AAAAGH"?

All the time! Several times a day, probably!

How do you work through it?

I have to talk myself out of it. My favorite recent tactic is to remind myself, when there is a challenge, that these are the moments when we are most alive – when we are pushing for something beyond our capabilities and comfort zone. That's all the "wall" is. It is the same for an athlete or indeed for anybody. To grope through that wall is to reach into aliveness and growth. But I also have to give myself permission (when



THE EYE: a flip book made by the artist at a very precocious six years of age.

“WE ARE MOST ALIVE WHEN WE ARE PUSHING FOR SOMETHING BEYOND OUR CAPABILITIES AND COMFORT ZONE.”



ROYAL PASTIME, 2007 (6 x 7.25 inches, not including frame)

"What can I say. I was inspired to create this painting upon learning how Karl Rove spent his first day of retirement: hunting doves. I thought, if the symbolism isn't too obvious for him, well..."

that tactic just doesn't work) to do something that may not be the best anyone has ever done, but is what I can manage at that moment. There will be other paintings.

Again in keeping with the Flemish masters, as well as the Medieval Alchemists, you'll often make very careful, conscious symbolic choices. As opposed to merely suggesting something with broad strokes, you render your allegories explicitly. Would you call yourself a classicist? A perfectionist? A control freak? [laughter]

I am probably all three, but I just know that that's how my art comes out. All my creativity seems to come out through this narrow aperture of highly detailed and specific imagery. Perhaps I'm too literal sometimes. At one point I went so far as to write captions for my paintings, and a friend told me, in essence, "you have to leave something for the viewer to bring to the experience!" And she was so right.

This whole issue is demonstrated perfectly at the Frick Museum here in New York, where perhaps my favorite painting of all time, Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, hangs directly next to a Flemish Renaissance painting... a Van der Weyden, I think. As you know, my paintings more resemble the Van der Weyden – full of information – but the Rembrandt blows me away. The background is this giant murk of brown tar with only a few hints of landscape. But in trying to discern that environment, you become part of it. It is a collaborative magic between the painter and the viewer. I don't know if it is something I can ever achieve, but I am inspired and humbled by it.

There's an edge of surrealism to your work as well. So many scrumptious mutants, monsters, angels... How much of your work springs from the subconscious, from visions or dreams?

I love the Surrealists, but they probably wouldn't have approved of my process, which is less "automatic" or instinctive than theirs! I typically approach a painting intellectually, sometimes even writing down what I want to say, and then envisioning how best to express that visually. I make use of all those angels

