

TOM FELLNER

Please introduce yourself.

« I'm a 55-year-old American/Swiss painter who lives in Zürich and has a studio in the Red Factory. After graduating from Columbia University I showed for several years in New York. In 1998 I moved back to Switzerland. I had a long dry spell in terms of my artistic career, but am now labeled as "re-emerging" and things are looking up. As Joseph Heller put it: Go figure. »

You grew up in New York. What made you move to Switzerland?

No - only the first part of my childhood was spent in the U.S. I was born in N.Y. but my parents soon moved to Madison, Wisconsin. After their divorce, my mother, brother and I returned to her Swiss hometown. I have few memories of my early childhood in the States. It was strange to arrive in this small, very "bünzli" (petty bourgeois) town in Switzerland and, at the age of seven, be called the small "Ami" in school. My grandfather (Otto Wyler) was a locally known Swiss painter. Unfortunately he died a year after our arrival. My mother is a painter, as well as my oldest daughter, now studying at the Art Academy in Leipzig, Germany - so that will make us four generations! My Dad was a psychiatrist. My mother has had life long problems with schizophrenia. When I was 19 I couldn't get away soon enough. I left Switzerland, traveled around Greece and Israel and, on an offer from my father, went to school first in Seattle and then later in Paris and New York. As an adult I spent twenty years in the U.S.

In your current series "Monster Paintings" you paint trivial plastic toy monsters that live in landscapes referring to artworks from art history. A bizarre mix. What's your intention?

Actually, I would never call them trivial. There is a whole subculture of kaiju ("strange beast") or monster toys, mostly from Japan and the West Coast, particularly L.A. They are made of vinyl and sprayed with automotive dye paints. They are highly artistic - and not cheap either. Usually they start at \$100 or so. It's a whole subculture and in L.A. relates to skaters, graffiti artists and the tattoo scene. It's popular art and very creative, often whimsical, sometimes bizarre. I actually don't know much about the scene. I don't have any of the figures, nor am I very interested in collecting them. I originally became aware of kaiju when I was researching Godzilla. Both Godzilla and Hedorah (one of his enemies) are based upon nuclear and environmental (toxic) catastrophes. Because Godzilla was too iconic I looked at other kaiju. I use exclusively photographs from the internet. Also, I like the challenge of translating the automotive paints and high gloss plastic texture into a traditional painting technique. They are contemporary cultural artifacts of a sort of subculture.



Der Holzfäller (self portrait), 2011, 152 x 111 cm, watercolor, gouache on paper



Dead Disney, 2011, 111 x 222 cm, watercolor, gouache on paper

« Young and sexy sucks over the long haul.
Hasn't anybody noticed that yet? »

Tom Fellner

I think a monster is some form of hidden self. It's part human and part animal or machine. In public culture we both fear and love to hear about vampires (sex), zombies (death), and serial murderers (violence). Children have an instinctive understanding of this. Everybody has an experience of at least once behaving like a monster. We don't like it, but we have all done it. We are very good at hiding from ourselves what we do not want to know.

To take a classical European portrait painting and replace the wealthy aristocrat by a plastic monster poses the question of how we see ourselves and others. It also subverts the visual depiction of power, of image as propaganda.

What do you hope people take away from your work?

Well, I hope it makes them think. They are drawn in by color and perhaps a sense of fun, sensuality and humor and maybe, at second glance, they also see something else that's going on. Some darker part? Perhaps they reflect upon what the work could mean or what they see in it. Look a little deeper.

Do you have a special affinity to the toys you paint - I mean, do you especially love or hate them? How do you choose them?

Similar to a child playing with toys, I make up little stories in my head. I sort of identify or sympathize with parts of them. Or I want them to act out something. I choose them for reasons of projection and their mix of ugliness/beauty, violence/empathy etc. The background often contradicts the toy, adding another layer of meaning. Mostly it is pure projection on my part. Also the color combinations are important.

I think your work combines "low" and "high" aesthetics. How important is this theme in what you do?

That is a good question. My work is a mixture of American and European sensibilities. The high/low art issue has not been debated in American Art for several decades now - cartoons are art as well as film etc. There is no clear boundary. I think this is more of a European thing and it's completely foreign to me. I am more at home with so-called "Bad Painting" (started, I think, by Rene Magritte shortly after the war when he was desperate and making fun of the paintings that sold well in the galleries at the time - while he was having a hard time selling his work). The subject matter is "bad", but these artists can paint the pants off anybody around.

I know you like to compare painting with music. If your art was music, what would it sound like?

Over the years, I have acquired quite a collection of Chicago and Delta Blues. (By the way, I also love their double-edged lyrics, i.e. there is another mule kicking in my stall). I often listen to blues when I paint, but I guess if the art work was music, it would probably sound more like Spike Jones and His City Slickers, i.e. his William Tell Overture (Switzerland should have some place in here too, no?)

Your work has an ironic value. Are you an ironic person?

Decidedly no. My humor is more of the Marx Brothers type - a sense of the anarchic, the zany, the subversive. According to Slavoj Zizek, Harpo is pure id, Chico the ego and Groucho the super ego. I'd love to put Harpo in one of those big Rubens paintings, i.e. The Rape of the Sabine Women or The Foxhunt and see what would happen. By the way, the Chapman Brothers already put him in several Goyas. Humor is a direct line to the subconscious.

What is important to you as an artist?

Color, color, color. I love color. To make this world of my own. To have learned to paint well (technically).

What do you love about being an artist?

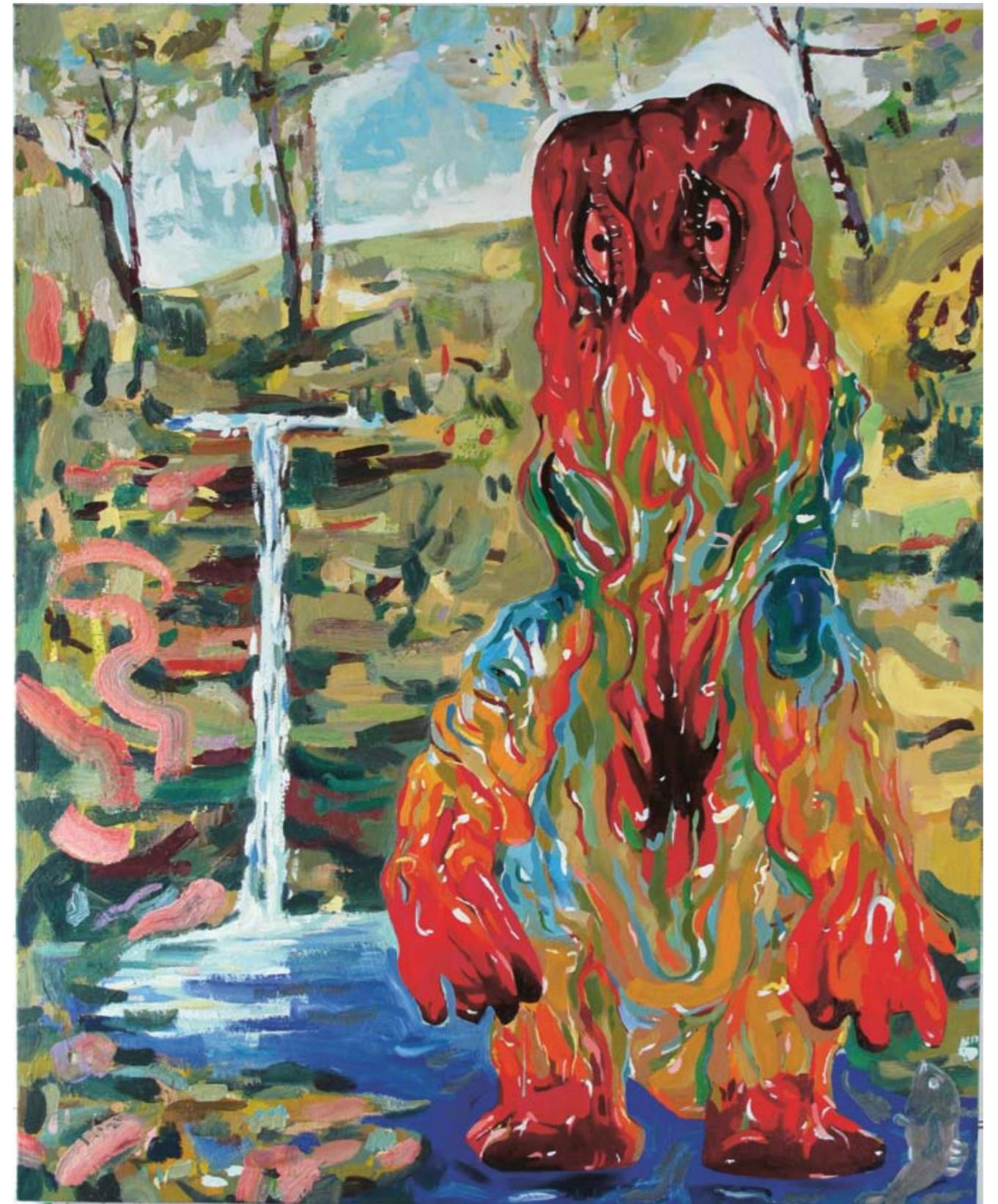
The freedom - and challenge - to say and do what I want. In the studio at least. To explore the subconscious. To try not censor myself.



Monster Painting 7, 2010, tempera & oil on canvas, 130 x 100 cm



Monster Drawings 8, 2010, 36 x 23 cm, pencil, watercolor and gouache on Japanese print (Kabuki)



Monster Painting 5 (Valer Morgana), 2010, tempera & oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm



Monster Drawings 41 (Val Rosegl), 2011, 30 x 21 cm, pencil, watercolor, gouache, ink on reproduction



Pornohäschen, 2011, 111 x 152 cm, watercolor, gouache on paper

What do you hate about it?

Having too many ideas. I will never be able to realize all of them! Problems with money. The art world. Where success is defined by how much money you throw at something. The youth cult. Young and sexy sucks over the long haul. Hasn't anybody noticed that yet?

If you could be a thing, what would you be and why?

A small axe.
 "If you are a big tree we are the small axe sharpened to chop you down".
 (Bob Marley)

What's next on the horizon for Tom Fellner?

Lots of ideas: Yoga for Dead People. Some more Disney backgrounds with death & sex. Swiss mountain paintings with monsters (a new form of tourism?). A children's book? More collaborations with other artists such as "Future Drop" which I did with Cody Hudson from Chicago.

What do you love?

Being able to laugh. If you can laugh I think you are in a good place, even if it's just maybe inside yourself.

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Photos: Tom Fellner
 Interview: Lain