

# Feldsott's Threshold

Robert C. Morgan

The expressive emancipation found in the paintings of Yisrael K. Feldsott offers a deeply investigative and profound articulation of essential humanist values. In addition, his work holds two important qualities: The use of the intuitive gestures, marks, and forms that carry a highly charged manner of delivery; and, secondly, a sense of critical consciousness derived through the exploration of a fundamental mythical content on which his paintings largely depend. The integrity found in Feldsott projects an innate wholeness through the integration of diverse, sometimes unknown materials, formal clarity, and expressive feeling. To experience such works, we need to sense – indeed, to discover – what is really there, what is on the surface and, symbolically, what is within the work. Not only are we expected to open our eyes, but also our minds. This process may take time. It rarely happens in an instant. There is a famous French expression -- *Il est temps* (or “it takes time”). This further implies that time is the basis of feeling and that feeling is essential to the manner in which we see these paintings.

To feel the integrity of a Feldsott means that we somehow connect with the truth of the painting by observing insofar as possible, the layering of embedded time, as in the artist's early *Hunter Series*. These cave-like inscriptions of human figuration and animal function are a kind of subjective archaeology whereby we move through time until we discover that moment when the painting suggests a timeless suspension. Even so, the process is not

an automatic one. There is no guarantee that the time one spends in front of his paintings will produce quantitative results. This is because there are no quantities worthy of measure in Feldsott's paintings. Rather what we perceive is largely contingent on an openness of mind, the sustained ability to look, absorb, and feel. In Feldsott's case, the method of work – including the way the finished work is perceived. It neither conforms to current trends nor accepts any proscribed limits or mediated standards.

On some level, Feldsott was born a rebel, a pariah in search of his own standards. On another level, his point of view as an artist is not outside the parameters of recognized criteria that connoisseurs would choose to call significant. His paintings are less about art as a detached postmodern idea than about the artist's uncanny mediumistic ability to simply allow works of art to evolve. In contrast to the quasi-spontaneous look of academic work being promoted in galleries today, Feldsott is able to signify meaning in his work without depending on an *a priori* text. While others continue to batter the walls of theory – writing texts to prove the importance of their art– such artists do not seem to produce anything remarkable, or, for that matter, do they become better artists. Feldsott has removed his work from the kind of overdetermined discourse frequently associated with “advanced” art today. He is not interested in art that becomes fixated on various notions of theory. Rather he makes work that admits an inventive form of language, independent of any presumptuous theory or superficial marketing requirements.

While gazing straight on into the shaman's face in a painting called *Medico*, one may feel the presence, if not the omnipresence, of this universal

and ineffable, mystical herbalist. On the other hand, one is not actually there, meaning that the herbalist is there in spirit, but not in fact. The viewer is merely in the presence of a highly potent signifying image that the artist has created. In this sense, painting is only a semblance of reality. To achieve this effect – the kind of effect one might experience in such a painting – the creator needs considerable skill and knowledge in addition to a heightened sensory awareness in order to know intuitively how to get “inside” the painting, to make the herbalist as convincing as possible. Feldsott knows that painting such a figure requires a style and manner consistent with the expressive quality of his actual subject. Therefore, a realist depiction would not work. This suggests that every stroke, dribble, splash of color, texture, and flattened rendering of figurative form take on a special significance. Reality is suddenly transposed into a new language of expressionism that becomes a transcendent order of *magical* realism.

The artist’s method of getting “inside” a painting refers to a kind of intense, though even-handed restraint. As Feldsott has explained, when he is simultaneously inside and outside the painting. He is both there and not there. The conditions of thought, physicality, and feeling are completely unified into a single process, an ineluctable human phenomenon. The fluidity of his pigments reveals messages on a deeper substratum than normally expressed. His message unabashedly comes from the artist’s unconscious, inexplicably wrought and embedded in the crust of his paintings. In *Crack in the World* (2013), a male figure, swirling within a planetary ovum, descends through a fiery sky, ignited by lightening, as a large bird sits in prey overhead on the bare branch of a tree. The artist cannot explain the origin of this painting nor

can he clearly explain how it came to be. Even so, we are tempted to ask: How can the artist be there and not there at the same time?

Less than a hoax, Feldsott's paintings have more to do with paradox. The paradoxical aspect of his paintings – I am reminded of *Hanged Man* -- is integral to its effect. Indeed, the best expressionist paintings (here I spell the term without a capital "E") – whether Tintoretto or Goya, Beckmann or DeKooning – are filled with ambiguities and incongruities that move beyond the comfort zone of feeling. Instead their tendency is to set our tongues and minds adrift, often sputtering without an adequate language. Feldsott's paintings are paradoxical – not through any rational intention – but through an activist sensibility that desires to move to the core of reality. On a philosophical level, one may recall the paradox regarding faith and doubt -- doubt that eludes the medieval mysticism of Thomas Aquinas -- articulated by the nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. In his case, the paradox was slightly different, namely that there can be no faith without doubt. To have faith is to doubt the existence of God.

In Feldsott, there is also doubt. For the artist, there can be no transmission of feeling or healing without doubt, no clear access toward grasping the realities of the human condition without testing the limits of what is fundamental and essential within the construct of the human mind. Such a statement might also apply to the work of Leon Golub, specifically the *Salvador* paintings from the 1980s, or to Fernando Botero's *Abu Ghraib* paintings from the early 2000s. In each case, there is a remarkable tension between the painters and their subject matter that incites a fierce comment on the realities being confronted in these war-torn regions of the world

where atrocities run rampant. Here I would further point to paintings by Feldsott, such as *The Terrorist* (2006) in which an Islamic woman grieves over an assaulted family member while a soldier stands on guard while bombers fill the sky overhead, and another, titled *Wheels of Democracy* (2006) in which we witness the raised arms and faces of the victims but not those of their tormenters and murderers. Instead we given guns and crosses. Themes of violence and mindless human destruction are present throughout Feldsott's career, as seen in related paintings, such as *Path of Sorrows*, *Border Crossings*, and *Law and Order*. In each painting, we see signs of exploitation, confrontation, and death where natives are harassed, burned, tormented, and shot. There are no texts to be read or reasons given. The artist simply reveals the sorrow and horrendous circumstances to which innocent people are subjected when war is declared between tribes, parties, or nations.

The connection between the artist's role as healer and painter carries an internal logic. They are intrinsically related to one another. While some may regard these aspects of the artist's career as separate, in fact, they are functionally interactive. For Feldsott, healing and painting are inseparable: to paint is a means toward healing, and healing lends itself naturally to the practice of painting. Even so, the integration of painting and healing should not be misunderstood in commonplace terms, as some form of therapeutic indulgence. It is far more complex than complicated. When Feldsott is not painting, he is often practicing psychotropic therapy. According to the artist, this means he is attempting to help patients "re-align interior frequencies" that somehow have gone out of whack. The connection between these practices – healing and painting -- is more a complement than a conflict.

Whether Feldsott is a painter/healer or healer/painter, it doesn't matter. Priorities as such are irrelevant. Spelling out priorities in terms of what one does, rather than what one is, was the kind of language rejected by the Rumanian Dadaist Tristan Tzara during his exile in Zurich at the time of the Great War. Tzara called this tendency "bourgeois intellectualism." This meant it was a type of language bent on rationalizing the truth, rather than simply stating it. It was the language of avoidance, the kind of middle class indulgence that avoids real communication, where frequencies disappear or vanish from the radar through neglect and denial.

Feldsott appears on a similar track, but coming from an entirely different angle of vision. He believes his paintings exude a potential for healing, based on results told to him by viewers. Rather than therapy, his paintings argue in favor of letting go of all the things that bind us to the past. Instead paintings like *Ghosts of My Ancestors* open the threshold to the present moment – paradoxically while attending to the past. But to open this threshold of seeing and feeling, or seeing *through* feeling, one must discover the hidden eye within oneself. As a painter/healer, Feldsott stands at the threshold of what is essential, what it means to be human. Therefore, he attempts to endow his paintings with mythic eloquence – much like the early Pollock. Thus, Feldsott regards paintings, such as *Chant of the Long Journey* (2008), where three Bodhisattvas hold a horizontal figures above their heads, as agents or vehicles of spiritual transmission – precisely given to hidden depths of consciousness normally outside our grasp. Rather than employing the linguistic acrobatics of postmodernism, Feldsott points his visionary attributes in another direction where conflicts are more pressing as when deeply repressed feelings require reactivation and thereby rediscover

life. In essence, Feldsott's paintings are harbingers whereby we travel to the interior of ourselves, as once indicated by the Irish bard Yeats, in order to come out again, ready to confront the obvious blockages that have stood in our way. Feldsott paints as he heals, opening new thresholds of sensorial cognition intent on awakening a sense of well-being.

If one is to regard the paintings of Feldsott as exemplary of passion – as in the Eastern idea of focus and concentration – then surely the Buddhist notion of compassion functions as its counterpart in terms of how he sees the world. This theme runs throughout his career beginning with his important *Hunter Series*, literally inscribed with repetitive marks of white and black pigments, from the early 70s. One might consider these rough-hewn works in relation to more recently refined metaphorical paintings, such as *River* and *Dark Water River Guides* (both 2011), which appear as ruminations on the process of dying and transport to another world. With nearly 40-years of separation from the artist's early works, these later, magnificently eloquent paintings are more than likely influenced by the artist's experiences while living with tribal shamans found along the Amazon in Brazil and Ecuador in the late 70s. These years were, of course, life changing experiences that confirmed for Feldsott a new way of seeing and thinking and further provided him with the necessary confidence to pursue his direction as an artist. One might refer to these years as a period of intimate learning, which is the foundation for how Feldsott has painted ever since. All knowledge emanates from within himself. Painting is therefore a profoundly human task as in the art of healing.

A recent multi-paneled painting, *Bearing Witness*, represents the recurrent theme of chaos resulting from the eruption of natural and man-made forces. The central core of the painting reveals the image of a Bodhisattva (disciple of Buddha) who sits in a meditative pose (Samadhi) off-setting the disasters around him. Currently, at this writing, the painting is still in the process of being completed. It measures approximately 8 feet high and 6 ½ feet wide. *Bearing Witness* is a work related to earlier paintings by Feldsott, such as *Fire + Manwolf* and *Burning Monk*. One might reflect on this painting as a culmination of many of the issues, both psychic and social, that makes living on this planet a challenging, if not tumultuous undertaking. Still, the balance of forces is clearly addressed in this impressive work as a means to carry on in spite of the ambiguities that confront human beings in the twenty-first century.

*Bearing Witness* is less a negative recapitulation of history than what Freud acknowledged as sublimation, that is, the ability to transform internal conflicts by consciously repositioning them as positive forces in relation to the exterior world. Artists, such as Shiele, Picasso, Beckmann, and Pollock, revealed the truth of this approach. It may also be true of Feldsott, whose grasp of subjectivity through an in-depth perception of consciousness that offers not only a fiercely aesthetic directness in representing the destructive aspect of human beings, but also an awareness of the spiritual and ethical values that will sustain us in an increasingly distraught, negligent, and incoherent global society. This proposition alludes to the threshold on which this painting exists – a threshold that offers the potentiality for recognition towards the kind of inner-directed painterly vision necessary to discover a more humane and integral future.

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