

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Fred Tomaselli

October 8, 2010–January 2, 2011



Fred Tomaselli



Photograph: Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery

About the Artist

Fred Tomaselli (born 1956) grew up in Orange, California. The California desert, Disneyland, and surfing continue to inspire aspects of his complex body of work. In 1982, he graduated from California State University, Fullerton, with a B.F.A. in drawing and painting and moved to downtown Los Angeles, where he developed ties to the punk and new wave music scene while creating installation art. He moved to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg in 1985 and since that time has lived and worked in Brooklyn.

About the Exhibition

This exhibition focuses on work that Tomaselli created between 1990 and the present. Tomaselli's art draws on a wide range of sources, from popular culture and art history to his own hobbies, including bird-watching and gardening. Tomaselli describes himself as a "maximalist" who tries to throw as much information as possible into his art. He describes his works as "windows into a surreal, hallucinatory universe." "I want the viewer to be in the work, to be lost in the work," he says. "My desire is for the work to become a transportive vehicle to take the viewer somewhere else. They can think about what it means later."

About the Artwork

Tomaselli creates works on wood panels that are described as "paintings" but in reality include several different processes. Each work includes a wide range of collage materials—such as plants, pills, and botanical, anatomical, and bird imagery cut from books—that he meticulously scans, resizes, and organizes in flat files in his studio. After arranging and gluing a collage and sometimes adding paint to it, Tomaselli seals it with a layer of clear epoxy resin. He then carefully heats the resin with a blowtorch, dries it, and then lightly sands it before adding another layer of resin. One work may have anywhere from five to twenty or more layers of resin. This technique was inspired by his days making surfboards with friends, when they would apply coats of resin to the different layers of surfboard materials to strengthen, waterproof, and preserve them.

Description of the Artwork

Field Guides depicts a man using a golden hoe to harvest mushrooms in a field edged with green, leafy trees. The scene takes place under a night sky filled with stars shining and kaleidoscopic patterns evocative of fireworks. The horizon glows luminous red, perhaps from sunset or the lights of a nearby city. The entire interior of the man's body is visible—organs, muscles, and bone—though there are many additional body parts in unexpected places. Emerging from the man's face, head, neck, and back is a trail of butterflies. The trail curls back over the field until it vanishes in a point somewhere in the trees.

Questions for Viewing

Look closely at this work. What's going on in this painting? What surprises you?

Find three details in the artwork that appear in unexpected places. Describe them as though you were writing a description for a field guide, a handbook for nonscientists to use when exploring nature. Then describe them again as though you were writing a personal diary entry about something changing before your eyes.

Discuss different ways in which field guides—books or people—may have inspired the title of this painting.

Transformation (a marked change in appearance, character, condition, function, or state) is a recurring theme in Tomaselli's work. Identify different moments of transformation within the painting, such as:

changes in the human body

optical effects

the life cycle of butterflies

Tomaselli envisions his viewers becoming lost in his work, transported to another place through the experience of looking. Imagine becoming part of the painting. How would your heart, mind, and body respond to the experience shown in this work? Where have you traveled by looking at this work? What did you discover that you didn't see when you first looked at it?

Activities

Art Activity for Younger Students

Create a self-portrait with collage. Imagine giving yourself special powers. Make a collage with a mix of human and animal imagery torn or cut from magazines or other sources to show how you would change with your new powers.

Art Activity for Older Students

Make a collage that shows something about your spirit, beliefs, or hopes for the future using images torn or cut from magazines or other sources. What surprises you about your collage? What do your choices about colors, objects, and details say about you? Did you discover something new about yourself because you made this collage?

Writing Activity for Younger Students

Imagine that the man in *Field Guides* is looking at you, as though you were a work of art. What would he say about you? Write his thoughts in a poem, short story, or letter.

Writing Activity for Older Students

Literature provides many examples of imaginative transformation, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. After reading a work of your choice, return to Tomaselli's art. Spend a long time looking at one of his paintings and compare and contrast the ways that he and the author of your choice create a view into an altered world.

Resources

Berry, Ian, and Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson. *Fred Tomaselli*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009.

Catalogue to the exhibition.

www.jamescohan.com/artists/fred-tomaselli/

Website with information about Tomaselli and an engaging video of him at work in his studio.

www.artinfo.com/news/story/34410/fred-tomaselli/

Article about Tomaselli's life, intellectual interests, and artistic process.


Text by Youth and Family Programs Manager Allison Day, with assistance from School Programs Manager Alexa Fairchild and Curator of Contemporary Art Eugenie Tsai.



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Presenting sponsor **Bloomberg**

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Cover: Fred Tomaselli (American, b. 1956). *Field Guides* (detail), 2003. Photocollage, gouache, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 60 x 84 in. (152.4 x 213.4 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Fractional and promised gift of Vicki and Kent Logan and Accessions Committee Fund purchase

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