

THE ART WORLD

FAIRFIELD PORTER'S LUSH, LONELY VISION OF THE WORLD

The painter was rich and cloistered, and used color like few others before or after him.

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"Islands" (1968). Art work by Fairfield Porter / Courtesy © Estate of Fairfield Porter / ARS / Stevens Collection



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The poet John Ashbery, in 1983, said that Fairfield Porter was “perhaps the major American artist of the century.” It’s not praise you can take at face value—Ashbery and Porter were good friends—but it’s a tempting thought. How might a painter of limited technical skill, who mostly depicted coastal landscapes and living rooms in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, be considered a major American artist? “Perhaps” is the key word in Ashbery’s phrase, a little escape hatch that admits how improbable the judgment is while conveying the ambivalence felt by those of us who admire Porter and can’t always say why. I think if you saw a lone painting of his in a junk shop, unsigned and unframed, you’d find it perfectly pleasing and mediocre.

The new exhibition at the Art Students League, “Fairfield Porter: What Everyone Knows,” has the ideal selection to show why he’s often better than his individual pieces. Porter studied at the League under Thomas Hart Benton—one of his classmates was a fellow named Jackson Pollock—and the experience of seeing his work here, as students hustle by with their backpacks and the perfume of turpentine wafts through the air, feels organic and just right. The gallery is evenly and fluorescently lit, and all thirty-five or so of Porter’s featured paintings are in a single room, concentrating his palette of lime greens and creamy yellows and oxblood reds into one bright, soul-cleansing burst.



"Oak Tree" (1969). Art work by Fairfield Porter / Courtesy © Estate of Fairfield Porter / ARS / Smith College Museum of Art

Everything happened for Porter when he was about forty-five. After flopping around for a few decades and getting zero traction as a painter, he was invited, in 1951, on the recommendation of Elaine de Kooning, to be a critic for *ARTnews*. The following year, on the recommendation of Elaine's husband, Willem de Kooning, he had a solo show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. The gallery's director, John Bernard Myers, gave Porter the show without even looking at his work, and was baffled when Porter showed up with half a dozen still-lives and landscapes. In the fifties, to paint anything but a full-throttle abstraction was an efficient way to derail your career. But Porter's art grew on Myers, a not uncommon experience. Let the paintings breathe for a

while, let them interact with one another and with your thoughts, and they'll meld together with salt breeze and summer light.

An unusually late bloomer, Porter did his best work in the last decade of his life, from the mid-sixties to 1975. Until then, he was still processing his influences. Sometimes he'd channel a bit of Edward Hopper, albeit with a looser wrist—see the lonely house in a field in “Landscape” (1956)—or borrow some lumpy shapes from Marsden Hartley, but the main hurdles were two Frenchmen, Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. Porter saw their work in an exhibition in Chicago, in 1938, and never let them go. Like his forebears, Porter painted bourgeois interiors with flat areas of color and dancing floral patterns on wallpaper and furniture. The problem is that, in much of his early work, the colors are drab. Sometimes a dark mustard or pale green sinks a painting, but often there's a dampening effect applied to everything, so that in a piece like “Armchair on Porch” (1955) all optical sensation is dulled to a minimum.



"Amherst Campus No. 1" (1969). Art work by Fairfield Porter / Courtesy © Estate of Fairfield Porter / ARS / Parrish Art Museum; Photograph by Gary Mamay

Thankfully, in the sixties, a light flips on. An extreme case is “Oak Tree” (1969), where sunlight crashes through the branches onto the grass and becomes its own radioactive organism. There’s a whole subgenre of these high-contrast works in Porter’s late style, but my favorites are pieces like “Untitled (View Outside Southampton Studio)” (1968) and “Amherst Campus No. 1” (1969), with their cartographic splotches of foliage. It hadn’t occurred to me until seeing “Amherst” at the Parrish Art Museum, a decade ago, that a painter could use color as a chronological instrument. In “Untitled,” a row of yellow-green trees are painted so phosphorescently on top of the other layers that they effectively chirp: *Look here first!* Only then can your eye move to the brick-red house, the pale sky, the pockets of shadow. The effect is to re-create not the trees but the flow of the painter’s own aesthetic experience.

Porter credited the Impressionists with being the first to use color as a vehicle of subjectivity, and Bonnard and Vuillard with intensifying that subjectivity, painting their private lives with an anything-goes palette. But the colorist who gave Porter an extra edge was Willem de Kooning. In the fifties, when de Kooning started doing his big, slashing abstractions with wide housepainter’s brushes, Porter said they recalled landscapes in which the colors are “intensely themselves, as if each color had been freed to be.” Colors didn’t have to represent reality or make concessions to it; they were packets of immediate sensation. Porter said he found his own feelings in de Kooning’s hues: a patch of blue expressed the delight of a Maine summer; pink was the way he felt on the seacoast; a harmony of warm tones bottled up the sensation of autumn. He once compared de Kooning’s use of paint to the “perfect orgasm.”

Most artists enchanted with de Kooning try to paint like him. But Porter somehow passed through the needle’s eye of abstraction and returned to his own eccentric realism on the other side, churning out images of starched Southampton interiors and Penobscot Bay. There are pieces in the show, like “Islands” (1968) and “View from the Front” (ca. 1969), where you can see Porter using what he called the “dry speed” of de Kooning’s brushwork. In “Islands,” there’s an excellent sky-blue brushstroke that horizontally slices the green bush (or is it a tree?) near the middle of the painting. That single stroke implies either that the water is *behind* the shrub, visible only in patches through the leaves, or that we’re looking at a retinal afterimage of the water *over* the shrub, as the painter swivels his head between the landscape and the canvas. There’s also a little geyser on the far left, shooting upward like the vertical blast of paint through de Kooning’s “Merritt Parkway” (1959). Ocean spray doesn’t look that way, but it feels like it.

Good painters rarely make good critics, but Porter was both. His writing was rhetorically pungent and had a rare jargon-free poetry. His most exotic idea was to delete fiftyish years of art history and suggest that Impressionism—not Cubism or Surrealism or any other stylistic eruption—was the real forerunner of Abstract Expressionism. A painting obtained reality just by transmitting the artist’s own “kinetic and visual sense of the world,” Porter wrote. This was an indirect jab at his favorite nemesis, the critic Clement Greenberg, whose lockjawed aesthetic program presented *Ab Ex* as an expression of History itself, which marched in only one direction: from figuration and depth to abstraction and flatness. Greenberg represented the greatest sin for Porter—letting ideas overrule experience. Ideas made painters and critics impervious to seeing what was in front of them. Porter’s mission was to make people see again.

For whatever reason, Porter couldn’t see people. His portraits are almost comically bad. The painter Larry

Rivers described Porter's portrait of him as "flat and rather empty," and that applies to pretty much all of them. (For the comic element, consider his painting of Frank O'Hara, who looks a bit like a salami sliding off a couch.) None of Porter's talent for shadow, light, and air transfers to bodies and faces. With "The Screen Porch" (1964), a large group portrait that desperately wants to be a masterpiece—it has a number of auteur touches, like a cannister of turpentine in the bottom left which signals "the painter was here"—Porter's family had the right idea, nicknaming it "The Four Ugly People." The only portrait in the exhibition with a spark is "Jimmy and John" (1957-58), of the poets James Schuyler and John Ashbery. Their friendship isn't visible, nor are their personalities, but the way their bodies are angled away from each other evokes two ships crossing in open water. Just that simple arrangement makes the distance between them ache.



"A Day Indoors" (1962). Art work by Fairfield Porter / Courtesy © Estate of Fairfield Porter / ARS / Parrish Art Museum

Although Porter was kept at arm's length by most of the Abstract Expressionists, he was embraced by the

New York School poets—in particular Ashbery, Schuyler, O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch—who, almost twenty years his junior, adopted him as a mixed-use transferential figure. To Schuyler, whose relationship with him was the most complicated, Porter was a father figure, a lover, a caretaker, a friend, and a rather sullen, insecure man who needed cheering up. The phrase “conflict of interest” doesn't begin to describe the kinds of transactions that took place, as Schuyler boosted Porter's paintings in exhibition reviews even while he was staying at the painter's house in Southampton, with Porter's wife and children, and living on his dime. Porter's family wealth came from land around the present-day Chicago Loop, and he spent much of his life supported by a trust. From the late forties on, he shuttled between his family's private island in Maine, Great Spruce Head, and the chilly, Federal-style house in Southampton, along with frequent stays in New York City. His wealth worked like a “cotton padding” between him and the world, a friend once said.

Porter didn't disagree. By some accounts, he was an odd guy. Pleasantries eluded him. If he wasn't silent altogether, he might start talking intensely about one subject or another, and then fall silent again. He had a kind of estranged personality, with thick walls separating him from different parts of himself and from other people, and it can be felt in not just the portraits but the landscapes. Whether it's “Looking Through the House” (1961), a darkened interior with a window facing a bay, or “A Day Indoors” (1962), with three sitters in the house on Great Spruce Head, siloed in their own worlds, everything and everyone feels just slightly out of reach. There is a landscape you want to see, as if for the first time, or a person you want to speak to, and for some reason can't. So much of the feeling in Porter's work comes from this stuckness. It's one of the most difficult emotions to convey in art—the emotion that hasn't yet found its expression—but Porter mastered it. ♦

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