

Art and Cake February 28, 2017

Llyn Foulkes, *Old Man Blues*
Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles
By Jody Zellen



Llyn Foulkes is a Los Angeles icon whose diverse practice— he is both an artist and a musician— is celebrated locally, nationally and internationally. Foulkes' mixed media tableaux were included in the infamous exhibition *Helter Skelter*, curated by Paul Schimmel for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 1992 and since then he has continued to confound audiences with his technical prowess and acute yet poignant commentary on the American psyche and the state of the world.

Foulkes is a scavenger; a collector who often collages found objects onto the surface of his paintings. Whether large or intimately-scaled, his pieces are terse narratives that draw from art history and popular culture, as well as his personal archives. Exploring ways to make a two-dimensional surface sculptural, his layered works are more assemblages than flat paintings with real, as well as illusionistic depth.

The themes that traverse through the thirty-plus works in the exhibition are quintessential Foulkes— riffs on current politics and corporate greed, as well as self-exploration during trying times. While the larger pieces are more bombastic statements, it is the smaller, more intimate and at times self deprecating works that reveal Foulkes' fears, delights and inner conflicts. Foulkes paints nature as well as culture— nature in a more celebratory way than culture as it is a place of refuge and powerlessness, rather than control with respect to corporate culture. How Foulkes makes sense of these opposing forces and how he navigates both visually and conceptually through them is what makes his works so relevant and impactful.

In the magnificent 71 x 80 inch *Night Train*, 2016, Foulkes juxtaposes found objects including a yellow street sign for a school crossing atop a black velvet background dotted with white specs representing stars in the night sky. An ambiguous landscape recedes into the distance, populated by political billboards, grassy knolls and a glowing

television that illuminates a figure with a Mickey Mouse mask. Foulkes' silhouette, presented as a delicate outline, peers into the scene— a voyeur in a world of nonsensical, yet uncanny relationships.

The similarly sized *Untitled Dinghy*, 2016 is just as unsettling. It depicts a bas relief replica of the artist with oversized-cartoony yellow booties laying in the center of a dinghy holding a crumpled American flag. The work is a political commentary questioning the abilities of our 45th president as the lifeboat (sitting on the cropped deck of a larger ship adrift on a light brown body of water suggested by the grain in a piece of luan) bears the label "TRUMP LIFEBOAT CO."

While these larger works didactically illustrate Foulkes' world view, the smaller works including, *It Used to Be Me* (2014), *Smile Though Your Heart is Breaking* (2014), *Didn't Think it Would Take Me So Long* (2014) and *I Only Have Eyes for You, Dear* (2015) are simultaneously heartbreaking and poetic. In these pieces, Foulkes often begins with an old sepia toned photograph over which he collages found objects, drawn elements, toy eyes and other photographic fragments as well as blobs of paint, obscuring the image below. He turns these historic portraits into something unrecognizable that oscillates between the sinister and the humorous. The discomfort that perpetuates Foulkes' work is purposeful and heartfelt, not ironic. His message and presentation stems from his experience in the world and express his concern and uncertainty for what is to come.

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