FAIRFIELD PORTER : *WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS*

JUNE 5 – AUGUST 18, 2026

THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

ARTWORK LABELS

Fairfield Porter

Self-Portrait in the Studio, c. 1950

Oil on canvas
45 x 30 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter was born on June 10, 1907, in Winnetka, Illinois, an affluent suburb near Chicago. His father, James Porter, was an amateur architect whose family owned much of the land under the commercial district known as the Chicago Loop, and his mother, Ruth Porter (née Ruth Wadsworth Furness), belonged to a distinguished New England family whose members included Revolutionary War generals, abolitionists, and the poet T.S. Eliot.

The product of an affluent and intellectually ambitious upbringing, Porter was admitted to Harvard College at 16, where he studied fine art, art history, and philosophy. Although he listed his future occupation as "painting" in his 1928 yearbook, Porter would remain dissatisfied with the paintings he produced during the 30s and 40s, destroying most of them.

In this self-portrait from around 1950, we see Porter, then in his early 40s, in a moment of guarded anticipation. While he shows himself in his studio, the painting is in many ways a portrait of an individual whose artistic identity is still forming. Porter's face is concealed by shadow, and we notice that he is not holding a brush and that the canvases behind him have either not yet been painted or have been turned to the wall. Porter would refine his artistic practice over the course of the next 25 years, developing his approach to painting while also establishing himself as an influential critic and poet. The work that Porter would produce during those two-and-a-half decades would be lush, subtle, and challenging, and would cause his friend, the poet and critic John Ashbery, to reflect eight years after Porter's death in 1975 that he was "perhaps the major American artist of this century."

Thomas Hart Benton

Sunday Morning, 1934

Oil on hardboard
18 x 24 in.
The Art Students League of New York, New York, NY

This painting is a classroom exercise that Thomas Hart Benton made while he was an instructor at the Art Students League of New York. Benton began teaching at the Art Students League in 1926 and would remain an instructor until 1935. He quickly attracted a generation of talented students including Fairfield Porter, who began studying with Benton in 1928, taking life drawing classes in Studio 9 on the 5th floor of this building. Benton would become well-known for his association with the public murals that would define the progressive spirit of the New Deal. In 1930, while Porter was still a student, Benton was commissioned by the New School for Social Research to produce his first mural cycle, *America Today*, a 10-panel painting depicting rural and industrial workers engaged in heroic acts of labor, all rendered in Benton's signature regionalist style. The hallmarks of that style, including Benton's sculptural approach to figures, which seem as dense and manipulable as soil and steel, can be seen both in *Sunday Morning* and in the black-and-white reproduction of Porter's own classroom exercise, *Male Nude*, in the nearby vitrine.

While Porter was influenced by Benton during his time at the League and would go on to produce his own mural, *Turn Imperial War into Civil War*, for the Socialist Party headquarters in 1935, he would later find Benton's approach to art and politics constraining, arguing that it was too rigidly systematic to account for the nuance of the real world.

Jackson Pollock

Deposition, c. 1930–33

Oil on canvas
7 1/2 x 16 in.
The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, courtesy of Olney Gleason

Jackson Pollock enrolled at the Art Students League in September 1930. Like Porter, Pollock took classes with Thomas Hart Benton in Studio 9 and was deeply influenced by his instructor, studying with him until March 1933. In this small painting, which Pollock likely made while he was a student at the League, we can see Benton's influence in the curved rendering of the figures and their seamless integration into their surroundings, qualities that can also be seen in Benton's classroom exercise *Sunday Morning* which is hanging nearby.

As important as Benton was during these formative early years, Pollock would, like Porter, eventually find Benton's systematic approach to painting confining. In the 40s and 50s, he would develop an improvisational mode of abstraction that would result in some of the most radical and influential paintings of the twentieth century. Although Porter stopped studying at the League a few months before Pollock arrived, he remained a member of the League through 1937, and the two artists would have crossed paths regularly.

Fairfield Porter

Looking Through the House, 1961

Oil on canvas
20 x 18 in.
Private Collection, Chicago

Although Porter would be involved in socialist politics for much of the 1930s, contributing short essays to the party-affiliated magazine *Arise* and funding another radical magazine *Living Marxism*, his views of art and politics would change over the course of the decade. That change had several causes. One was the Moscow Trials, which revealed what Porter saw as an authoritarian impulse in Stalin's government and in Communism more broadly. The second was Porter's encounter with the French Impressionist painters Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, whose work he saw at a 1938 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Associated with the artistic movement known as "Intimism," Bonnard and Vuillard were known for their depictions of domestic interiors that, despite the modesty of their subjects, were emotionally layered and visually rich. Porter later described his encounter with Vuillard's paintings as "a revelation of the obvious." "I looked at the Vuillards and I thought... why does one think of doing anything else when it's so natural to do this?" The encounter with Impressionism would inform many aspects of Porter's practice, including how he understood "reality" and "realism," complex concepts that he would continue to examine throughout his career. Bonnard and Vuillard's paintings reminded Porter that attending to "reality" meant not only attending to the grand historical struggles that preoccupied Social Realists like Benton, but also to what was most familiar and close-at-hand: the people, things, and spaces that make up our everyday lives. Bonnard and Vuillard's work also alerted Porter to the way even that familiar "reality" could change and proliferate as a result of being seen. The Impressionists understood that "you know what you can know only in your sensations," Porter explained, and for that reason were "not interested in what was out there, but in how, whatever it was, it looked to the one who was looking."

The impact of Bonnard and Vuillard can be seen in many of Porter's paintings, including *Looking Through the House*. A depiction of a coastal landscape seen from the darkly-shadowed kitchen of Porter's summer home on Great Spruce Head Island in Maine, the painting captures the everyday reality that preoccupied Bonnard and Vuillard, as well as the ways that reality could change based on when it was being seen and by whom. Writing about *Looking Through the House* in 1967, the poet James Schuyler would point to the work's evocation of Bonnard and Vuillard in particular, calling the painting "an intimist masterpiece."

Fairfield Porter

Untitled (View Outside Southampton Studio), 1968

Oil on Masonite
18 x 20 1/2 in.
Collection of Ron and Patricia Padgett

In 1949, Fairfield and his wife Anne bought a white, two-story house at 49 South Main Street in Southampton. Close enough to New York to allow Porter to participate in the city's cultural scene, and large enough to accommodate a family that would soon include five children, the house became both a frequently recurring subject in Porter's paintings and a hub for some of the most important artists and poets of the period. Among the guests who stayed there, some for months at a time, were James Schuyler, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, Alex Katz, and Ron and Patricia Padgett.

In this painting, Porter depicts the view from his studio at the Southampton house. As in *Looking Through the House*, Porter takes as his subject what was familiar and close-at-hand, in this case his own backyard. And yet, as familiar as that subject was, there is a mysterious quality to the painting as well. The hedges in the foreground seem to quiver in the light and shade, and for all their solidity the buildings in the distance seem somehow demur or evasive, slipping beneath the layers of paint that are meant to represent them.

Fairfield Porter

Children in a Field, 1960

Oil on canvas

45 1/4 x 45 1/16 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest

Fairfield Porter

Katie, 1969

Oil on Masonite

32 x 26 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

Jimmy and John, 1957–58

Oil on canvas
36 x 45 in.
Collection of Barbara Kratchman

In 1952, Porter was introduced to a generation of poets who belonged to what came to be known as the New York School. It included John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler, poets who, like Porter, were alert to the richness of everyday life and often associated that richness with visual experience. Even though they were as much as twenty years younger than him, these poets became some of Porter's closest peers. In a letter to his son Laurence, Porter remarked in 1956 that Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler had a "point of view" that he found "more sympathetic" than artists of his own generation. That sympathy likely had to do both with their homosexuality, which allowed Porter to explore his own bisexuality, and with their shared artistic project.

We can see elements of that shared project reflected in this portrait of Schuyler and Ashbery, which Porter painted around 1957. By that time Schuyler had published poems in small literary magazines and *The New Yorker*, and had recently started writing criticism for *ARTnews*. Ashbery's first collection of poems, *Some Trees*, had been published in 1956. In the painting, both poets are shown seated on a couch, likely in Porter's Southampton studio. The setting is ordinary, even banal, and yet the painting hums with quiet vibrancy. The floral pattern on the couch crests and curls, shadows wrap themselves around the objects that cast them, and the blank wall in the background pulses off-white and peach, adding a visual intensity that is increased by the intensity of the poets' gazes.

Fairfield Porter

The Screen Porch, 1964

Oil on canvas
80 x 80 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest

This painting is among the largest and most fully realized in Porter's career. It shows members of Porter's family on the screen porch of their summer home on Great Spruce Head Island in Maine. On the left is Porter's oldest daughter, Katie, with her hands clasped at her waist. Next to her, Porter's younger daughter, Elizabeth, stands with her back to us, her hand on the back of a wicker chair where James Schuyler sits reading a book. On the far right of the painting, Porter's wife, Anne, stands outside the porch, looking in.

The Screen Porch reflects an advance in Porter's style toward a lighter palette and freer brushwork that is visible in the virtuosic strokes of cream, beige, and pink paint on trees to the left. With its subtly discordant composition and dark central passage, the painting can also be seen as registering the tension caused by Porter's deepening relationship with Schuyler, which had developed both intellectual and romantic currents. When the painting was made, Schuyler had been living with the Porters for more than two years. Following a nervous breakdown that left Schuyler briefly hospitalized, Porter offered to help Schuyler recuperate, and what started as a temporary stay became a prolonged cohabitation. As Anne remarked, "Jimmy came for the weekend and stayed for eleven years."

The painting is not simply confessional, however. Instead, *The Screen Porch* incorporates these qualities into a reflection on the variedness of everyday reality. While it includes four figures, those figures do not seem to occupy a shared space. Each is absorbed by their own subjective experiences, which appear to be largely unavailable to the others. We can even see a suggestion of how Porter's own subjective experience colors the scene. On the lower left-hand corner of the painting is a table with a tube of paint, a palette knife, and a tin of brush cleaner, a composite self-portrait in which Porter suggests that his subjectivity infuses the work at its most fundamental level, the material level of paint as such.

Fairfield Porter

A Day Indoors, 1962

Liquitex on canvas

71 3/4 x 54 7/8 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

Katie, 1964

Oil on board

15 x 14 1/2 in.

The Art Students League of New York, New York, NY

Fairfield Porter

Anne 1971, 1972

Oil on board
15 x 11 7/8 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Anne Porter was 60 years old when this portrait was painted. In addition to being a devoted wife and mother of five children, Anne was a talented poet. Having studied literature at Bryn Mawr and Radcliffe, she published her earliest poems in the influential magazine *Poetry* in 1938 when she was 27, preceding Porter's debut in that magazine by two decades. While her obligations as a mother and wife limited the time that she was able to devote to writing, Anne returned to writing poetry seriously after Fairfield Porter's death in 1975. Her first collection of poems, *An Altogether Different Language*, was published in 1994 and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Many of the poems in that collection, including "At the Shore," reproduced below, are perceptive reflections on the subtly shifting landscapes around the homes she and Fairfield shared in Southampton and Maine.

At the Shore

A slow Atlantic spring
A lingering coolness
Trees quenched and stripped
As if for winter
The leafless bushes grey
Or brown as animals

But here and there
I see a field
That's newly plowed
Or one that's fresh and green

And under bramble thickets
The early daffodils
That have escaped from gardens
Are lighting their small fires.

Fairfield Porter

The Garden Road, 1962

Oil on canvas

62 1/8 x 48 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The Greylock Foundation

Fairfield Porter

Table, 1970

Watercolor on paper
30 x 25 in.
Collection of Elizabeth Feld Herzberg

In addition to being an intimate rendering of table just-before or just-after a meal, *Table* reflects Porter's complex approach to composition. While the work is balanced, we notice that the water glasses, lemons, plates, and butter dishes are distributed haphazardly rather than in a central group as one would expect in a typical still-life. This apparent disorder concealed what Porter regarded as a deeper, worldly order that underpinned daily life.

Porter discussed that worldly order-in-disorder often. In a letter to the poet and critic Claire Nicolas White, which was reproduced in an issue of *Parenthèse* that is on display in this gallery, Porter paraphrased a passage from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, writing, "Every sentence is in order as it is." "Order seems to come from searching for disorder, and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following of a system," Porter continued. "The truest order is what you find already there." This remark becomes even more relevant when we recall the paragraph that precedes the one Porter cites. In that earlier passage, Wittgenstein reflects that since when we use everyday language we do not find ourselves "striving after an ideal," we admit simply by speaking the existence of "perfect order even in the vaguest sentence," an argument that he makes having likened grand words like "language," "experience," and "world," to humble words like "lamp," "door," and "table."

In addition to being remarkable in its own right, *Table* became the basis for one of Porter's most ambitious lithographs, reflecting the important place he assigned the work in his career.

Fairfield Porter

Lunch Under the Elm Tree, 1954

Oil on canvas
78 x 59 7/8 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Although Porter considered himself a "realist," he thought the aims of "realism" were often misunderstood. Most realists interposed between them and the world they portrayed "concepts" that dulled their acuity and led to what Porter called "a steely equality of detail" that made their work remarkably unrealistic. In many ways, Porter thought that abstract painters were the more successful realists because they were sensitive not only to the subjective qualities that most realists overlooked, but also to the materiality of paint as such. This was especially so in the work of Willem de Kooning, who, along with Édouard Vuillard, was one of Porter's most important influences and one of the few artists who Porter collected. Paint was "as real as nature," Porter wrote, and by calling attention to the ridged furrows of their stokes and the dense facture of their surfaces, paintings by artists like de Kooning bore greater resemblance to reality, alerting us to the "variety of the sensible world."

While this painting shows a group eating lunch in the shadow of an elm tree, it does not present a conventional representation of that scene. It does not create a convincing illusion of shade sweeping across the lawn or individual branches swaying in the wind. Instead, it strives for a deeper and more idiosyncratic "realism," one in which Porter uses the materiality of paint, the way that it drips, pools, dries, and thins, not to represent the natural world but to call attention to the texture and specificity that made that world unrepresentable.

Fairfield Porter,

Still Life of Flowers on a Mirror, 1966

Oil on canvas

20 x 18 in.

Private Collection

Fairfield Porter

Peonies, 1973

Oil on board

21 5/8 x 18 in.

The William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT

Jane Freilicher
Still Life, c. 1965

Oil on canvas
14 x 16 in.
Collection of Loring and Diana Knoblauch

Joe Brainard
Untitled (Still Life), 1968

Watercolor on paper
14 x 11 in.
Collection of Avo Samuelian and Hector Manuel Gonzalez

Jane Freilicher and Joe Brainard belonged to the growing circle of artist-peers that would surround Porter in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Porter wrote the first review that Freilicher ever received, praising her solo exhibition of paintings at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1952, and Freilicher in turn introduced Porter to many of the poets who would become his closest friends.

Joe Brainard belonged to the latter group. A talented poet, Brainard was also a close friend of James Schuyler, who would alternate between living with the Porters in Southampton and Maine and with Brainard and his partner Kenward Elmslie in Vermont. Like Porter, Brainard had studied at the Art Students League and belonged to a growing number of emerging artists who turned to Porter as a mentor. In 1968, when *Untitled (Still Life)* was made, their relationship was particularly close. In addition to exchanging letters throughout that year, with Brainard asking detailed questions about Porter's technique and approach, Brainard lived in Porter's Southampton home that summer while Porter and his family were in Maine. It is possible that this painting was made while he was there.

Both Freilicher and Brainard's paintings of flowers, like Porter's own paintings nearby, at once casual and attentive, displaying the breezy receptivity that makes their work so fresh and inviting. But, for all their breeziness, the paintings have a sophisticated, literary quality as well. The flowers in Brainard's paintings, for instance, are pansies, likely an allusion to, among other things, D. H. Lawrence's 1929 collection of poems *Pansies*, a book widely admired in Porter's circle whose title was a pun on the French word pensées or "thoughts."

Fairfield Porter

Landscape, 1956

Oil on canvas

32 1/2 x 38 1/2 in.

Private Collection, New York, NY

Fairfield Porter

Farmhouse, Great Spruce Head Island, 1954

Oil on canvas

45 x 40 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

Oak Tree, 1969

Oil on canvas

22 x 20 in.

Gift of Susan S. Small (Susan Spencer, class of 1948).

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA

Fairfield Porter

On the Porch, 1961

Oil on canvas

45 x 40 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

Armchair on Porch, 1955

Oil on canvas
37 1/2 x 45 in.
Private Collection, New York, NY

Among Porter's most important influences were the French Impressionist painters Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. In addition to their emphasis on everyday subjects, Porter admired what he called the "Impressionist shimmer" that characterized Vuillard's work in particular. Porter used that term to describe the charged and personal quality in Vuillard's paintings that took an essential but fragile aspect of vision, the aspect that allowed reality to proliferate in our many perceptions of it, and made it "solid and enduring" in a work of art.

In *Armchair on Porch*, Porter explores his own variation of the "Impressionist shimmer." At first, the painting seems empty. All we see are two chairs on the vacant porch of Porter's summer home in Maine. But as we look at the painting, other facets come into view. We notice the varied tones and shades that play across the floor, the specificity of the light that seems to be suspended between late-afternoon and early-evening, and the trees in the background, which seem to be refracted not only by the mesh of the porch's screen but also by the casual inattention of a particular person seeing them on particular day.

Fairfield Porter

Trees in Bloom, 1968

Oil on Masonite
20 x 18 in.
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Fairfield Porter

View of Studio with Elm Tree, 1962

Oil on canvas
24 x 22 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

These two paintings depict the same, seemingly unremarkable scene: the trees that stood across from Porter's studio in Southampton. However, their similarity starts to diminish the longer we look. The texture of the bark shifts from thin to thick. The green of the grass transforms from subdued to saturated. The shadows that cross the lawn hover between gauzy and stark. Porter used repetition often to bring out these kinds of unsuspected details. By painting ordinary subjects again and again, he shifted attention from those subjects to the visual sensations that made them fresh and distinct each time they were encountered.

Fairfield Porter

The Orchard, 1964

Oil on linen

22 x 24 in.

Gift of Mrs. William A. Small Jr. (Susan Spencer, class of 1948),
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA

Fairfield Porter
Islands, 1968

Oil on canvas
28 x 32 in.
Collection of Helene B. and J. Whitney Stevens

Fairfield Porter
View from the Front, c. 1969

Oil on Masonite
12 1/2 x 22 7/8 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter
Morning Sky, 1972

Oil on board
14 x 16 in.
Private Collection, Chicago, courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY

In addition to domestic interiors, still lifes, and portraits, Porter devoted much of his energy to painting landscapes. The paintings in this part of the gallery demonstrate some of the qualities that made Porter's approach to landscape unique. One is his preference for painting landscapes during unconventional times of day like late-morning or early-evening, and in unconventional atmospheric conditions, showing fields, islands, and coastlines wrapped in mist, fog, and cloud. Both are related to Porter's interest in "the specific," the sensuous part of experience that resists generalization. Among the most specific and least generalizable parts of experience is the weather. "The weather never exactly repeats itself," Porter wrote, and by painting the same landscape in different conditions he shifts our attention from that landscape in general to the specific variations of it. *Islands*, *View from the Front*, and *Morning Sky*, for instance, all show the same rocky coastline around Porter's home in Maine, but the shifting weather conditions give each its own unique and untranslatable quality, creating the impression that we are seeing not one landscape but many.

Fairfield Porter

Penobscot Bay with Yellow Field, 1968

Oil on canvas

38 1/4 x 55 1/4 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Watermill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

View from the South Meadow, 1969

Oil on canvas
48 x 60 in.
Private Collection, New York, courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY

Another feature of Porter's landscapes is that they were often deliberately empty. Not only do they lack recognizable landmarks, in many cases there is nothing that would suggest why one view was chosen over another. This too is related to Porter's interest in "the specific." Discussing Alex Katz's shared preference for painting empty fields, Porter remarked, "A field is not an object." For Porter, this lack of an "object" encourages the viewer to focus not on what a painting represented but on the specific qualities of the painting itself.
In *View from the South Meadow*, for example, the emptiness of the coastline causes our attention to shift to other elements of the work, like the band of green on the left, the flecks of yellow on the right, and the gradations of blue on the horizon, each of which has a specificity that we both appreciate in themselves and extend to the scene.

Fairfield Porter

Double Portrait (Mr. and Mrs. Reynold Hardie), 1970

Oil on canvas

24 x 28 in.

James Barron Art, South Kent, CT

Fairfield Porter

Farmscape, 1966

Oil on board

5 x 7 in.

Courtesy of Roland and Lori Pease

Fairfield Porter

Laurence at the Breakfast Table, 1953

Oil on canvas

15 3/4 x 18 3/4 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter

Untitled (Seascape, Ocean Waves), c. 1972–74

Oil and graphite on paper

13 1/2 x 17 in.

James Barron Art, South Kent, CT

Fairfield Porter

Self Portrait, 1968

Oil on canvas
59 x 45 3/8 in.
Dayton Art Institute, Museum purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and by Mrs. T. Lawrence Saunders, The Honorable Jefferson Patterson and his late mother Mrs. Harrie G. Carnell, the late Mr. Brainerd B. Thresher and the General Operating Fund

In this painting from 1968, Porter shows himself standing in his sun-filled Southampton studio. In contrast to the nearby self-portrait from 1950, he appears confident both in himself and in his identity as a painter. He looks out at us calmly, and in the background we see a table with his painting materials, including brushes, as well as examples of his work.

In addition to being a statement about Porter's identity as an artist, the painting can also be seen as a statement about his art. The composition is dominated not only by Porter himself, but also by the large window behind him through which we see a lattice of leafless branches and neighboring building covered in a warm, amber light. However, the window does not present an unmediated encounter with nature. The thickly applied paint, which is denser in that part of the composition than anywhere else, the dark frame-like border, and the proximity between the window and the table and brushes, cause the view to resemble a picture not so different from the pictures that flank it on the nearby walls. In presenting things this way, Porter articulates some of his deepest convictions about art. A painting is an "analogy," Porter insisted, something that does not represent the natural world, but that exists alongside it with its own texture and specificity. By attending to that texture and specificity, we can become attentive to the texture and specificity of the wider world.

As Porter wrote one of his last artist statements from 1974, a painting is, like the world, a "fact."

> The most prominent things in a painter's experience are right in front of him, like the paint on the canvas. It is better if he does not achieve a plan, and that the painting eludes him, with a life of its own. The painting unfolds, gradually and with difficulty, and he doesn't quite know what it is even for quite a while after he stops paintings it. Then it falls into place for him, or it doesn't; but for another person who looks at it it may have a peculiar character right away. So far as it has merit, a painting is a fact, arbitrary and individual.

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THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

VITRINE LABELS

ART STUDENTS LEAGUE EPHEMRA

Fairfield Porter

Art Students League Enrollment Card

Porter enrolled at the Art Students League in 1928 after graduating from Harvard College. Traveling each day from a rented room in Greenwich Village to the League's limestone building on West 57th Street, Porter studied life drawing with Boardman Robinson and Thomas Hart Benton. You can see a record of the classes Porter took at the League on this enrollment card, which lists the date, instructor, and price for each. Although Porter attended his last class in May 1930, he remained a member of the Art Students League through 1937.

Fairfield Porter

Male Nude, c. 1929

Oil on board

36 1/8 x 24 in.

Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

[Photographic Reproduction]

Fairfield Porter

Sketchbook Studies, c. 1928–30

Charcoal on paper

Approx. 8 1/2 x 11 in.

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

[Photographic Reproduction]

FAIRFIELD PORTER : *WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS*

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THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

VITRINE LABELS

POETRY

Poetry

March 1955

This issue of *Poetry* marks the first publication of Porter's poems. It includes three works: "The Pyromaniac," "The Island in the Evening," and "Great Spruce Head Island." While this is the first time that Porter appeared in *Poetry*, Anne's poems had been published in the journal more than two decades earlier, with five poems appearing in the October 1934 issue.

The Island in the Evening

At the gathered ends of rooty paths
The wharf attracts the playing children
Voices call across the water
Starting games on a summer evening
A gull that drops on another island
Calls down the day below the sky

As the light rises into the sky
Softness comes to mossy paths
A breeze slides off the island
Against the faces of the children
Who use the withering light of evening
Reflected from the shadowless water

Their games are new on the permanent water
And children under the yellow sky
Have no fear of the friendly evening
Who feels their way on darkening paths
Over roots that precious children
Knew as the shape of the sheltering island

Shadowed forests of the island
And beaches worn by tidal water
Keep some strangeness from the children
Under the candid giant sky
And all familiar forest paths
Are edged by strangeness in the evening

The yellow primroses of evening
In brushy clearings on the island
And yellow mullein beside the paths
In rocky meadows with little water
Focus all the covering sky
And start again the life of the island
Eroding under moving water
And running feet on rocky paths

Worn paths bring home the children
From tidal water on a summer evening
Across the islands below the sky

Locus Solus

Winter 1961

The literary magazine *Locus Solus* was conceived by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Harry Mathews and James Schuyler. Borrowing its name from a 1914 novel by Raymond Roussel, the magazine would appear in four issues, each overseen by one of its founding editors. This inaugural issue was overseen by Schuyler. In addition to four poems by Porter, “The Mountain,” “To Laurence,” “At the End of Summer,” and “When the Morning Train,” the issue features writing by John Ashbery, Rudy Burckhardt, Edwin Denby, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara, as well as the poem “The First of May” by Anne Porter.

The Poets of the New York School

Ed. John Bernard Myers, 1969

The poems in this anthology were selected and assembled by John Bernard Myers, the visionary co-founder of the influential Tibor de Nagy Gallery where Porter had his first solo exhibition in late 1952, having been recommended to Myers by Willem de Kooning, Jane Freilicher, and Larry Rivers. In his introduction, Myers notes the "thoroughly symbiotic" relationship between the poets and painters of the period, a relationship that his gallery was instrumental in facilitating. In the anthology, work by painters and poets appear side-by-side. Reproductions of drawings by Porter appear next to poems by John Ashbery, and other pairings include Kenward Elmslie and Joe Brainard, Barbara Guest and Robert Goodnough, Kenneth Koch and Alex Katz, and James Schuyler and Jane Freilicher.

Parenthèse

1975

This issue of *Parenthèse* reproduces two letters that Porter sent to his friend, the poet and critic Claire Nicolas White, in April 1972. In one of the letters, Porter paraphrases the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's comment that "every sentence is in order as it is," a remark that Porter suggests came close to capturing his own "aesthetic ideas." Porter elaborated: "Order seems to come from searching for disorder, and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following of a system. The truest order is what you find already there, or that will be given if you don't try for it. When you arrange, you fail."

James Schuyler
freely espousing, 1969
Cover by Alex Katz

James Schuyler
The Crystal Lithium, 1972
Cover by Fairfield Porter

James Schuyler
Hymn to Life, 1974
Cover by Fairfield Porter

James Schuyler published his first collection of poems, *freely espousing*, in 1969. Schuyler had been living with Fairfield and Anne Porter for seven years by that time, and in addition to dedicating the collection to them, several of the poems allude to the lush lawns and landscapes around their homes in Southampton and Maine. In "May 24th or So," Schuyler evokes vivid details of the Porters' house on South Main Street, describing the "green-gold spaces of sunlit grass" and "the shade side of a clothes pole" that resembles the "dark innards of a light-violet shell." But as vivid as these details are, Schuyler also draws our attention to the materiality of the poem in much the same way that Porter draws our attention to the materiality of paint. He describes a passing robin as "punctuating the typescript of today," indenting the words "zip" and "thud" and giving them the density and weight of a metal typewriter key striking a page. These self-reflexive moments imply that, although remarkably sensitive, Schuyler appreciated that his poems were things unto themselves, allowing the reality they described to remain distinct and elusive.

In addition to describing the landscapes around the Porters' homes in Southampton and Maine, Schuyler also occasionally wrote poems about Porter's paintings. In "A Blue Shadow Painting," he describes a painting Porter gave him while he was recuperating from a nervous breakdown at Grace New Haven Hospital in 1961. In addition to elements of the work, the poem captures the relationship between the fleeting sense impressions or "swift indecipherables" that made the world so rich and varied, and the painting itself, the "small oblong stretch of canvas" where those impressions could be, however obliquely, appreciated.

May 24th or So

Among the white lilac trusses, green-gold spaces of sunlit grass.
The shade side of a clothes pole, dark innards of a light-violet shell.
Everything trembles
everything shakes
in the great sifter:
bud scales, pollen, all the Maytime trash
whose sprinkles are clocks that tell
the time of the dandelion take-over generation,
never quite coming to pass.
A man passes
in calendula-colored socks,
A robin passes
zip
thud
punctuating the typescript of today with a comma on the too-close cut
grass.
Then erases it for a full stop in a lilac.
in Y's and V's and W's
an elm ascends
smoothly as an Otis Elevator.
Other trademarks blur in the gone-over forsythia hedge.
A table and a chair, carved chunkily in the lawn,
are the colors of an oystershell as though beneath the sod were chalk
not sand.

Why it seems awfully far
from the green hell of August
and the winter-rictus,
dashed off, like the easiest thing

A Blue Shadow Painting
for Fairfield

of an evening real as paint on canvas.
The kind that makes me ache to have the gift
for dusting off clichés:
not Make it new, but See it, hear it, freshly.
The context (good morrow, haven't we met in this context before?)
in which, squelch, a brush lifted a load
of pigment from the thick glass palette, and, concentrated,
as though he saw neither the work in hand nor the subject,
the painter began. A rapt away look, like a woman at the theater
who sorts laundry, makes a mental note, while the stars anguish,
to buy a bottle of Scuff-Coat tomorrow at Bohacks.
The painting is of a sloppy evening in a burst of daily joy:
at the left orange flames—were they bushes?—a black-gray tree,
at right, houses, buildings, no more there than, well,
two gray strokes together, casual as a scribble, make a slate-
roofed tower. Then there's one place where light pink came to rest
under a faded buttercup sky.
It's like this: the orange assertions, dark there-ness
of the tree, malleable steel-gray blueness of the ground; and sky;
the helter-skelter of rust brown, of swift indecipherables. The day
is passing, is past: mutable and immutable, came to live
on a small oblong stretch of canvas. Blue shadowed day,
under milk-of-flowers sky, your talisman, my Calais.

FAIRFIELD PORTER : *WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS*

JUNE 5 – AUGUST 18, 2026

THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

VITRINE LABELS

ART CRITICISM

ARTnews
May 1952

Porter began writing for the influential magazine *ARTnews* in 1951 following a visit to an exhibition of work by Arshile Gorky at the Whitney Museum of American Art with Elaine de Kooning. While de Kooning and Porter disagreed about Gorky's work, she liking it and he disliking it, de Kooning was so impressed by Porter's perceptiveness that when Thomas Hess, the magazine's editor, asked de Kooning who she would recommend to replace her as a contributor, she gave Porter's name. Porter would write for the magazine for the next eight years, contributing as many as ten reviews a month on Paul Cezanne, Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning, and Henri Matisse, among many others, and becoming one of the decade's most prolific critics. "The best criticism is simply the best description," Porter explained, and his reviews are studded with evocative passages noting "a woman melts into recession" in one painting and comparing his experience of space in another to "the feeling of not being quite sure where, under the sheets, one's feet are." Porter was proud of his criticism. In a letter to his sister-in-law Aline written when he had been at *ARTnews* for less than a year, he reflected, "I think I could be the best art critic now writing in English."

This issue of *ARTnews* includes Porter's review of Jane Freilicher's debut one-person show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. It was the first review Freilicher ever received. In it, Porter praises her paintings remarking that their ambiguous passages "add to one's enjoyment, as the underlying depths in a friend's character makes the relationship richer," elements that can also be seen in Frelicher's Still Life, hanging at the other end of this gallery. Porter and Freilicher would themselves become close friends. Freilicher visited Porter regularly in Southampton and introduced him to the painter Larry Rivers and the poet John Ashbery. Porter would publish a second, longer article, "Freilicher Paints a Picture," in 1955.

ARTnews Annual
1956

This 1956 issue of *ARTnews Annual* features the essay "U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions" by the magazine's editor, Thomas Hess. In the essay, Hess considers a group of twenty-one painters whom he regards as the most compelling and important artists in the country. In addition to Fairfield Porter, whose photograph appears in the lower right-hand corner of the accompanying spread, the group included Robert Goodnough, Wolf Kahn, Elaine de Kooning, and Joan Mitchell, as well as Nell Blaine, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, and Milton Resnick, all of whom also studied at the Art Students League.

While these artists did not form a movement or school, they shared a number of traits. While some experimented with "traditional realism" and others with "extreme abstraction," they all sought what Hess described as "a new sense of freedom from doctrinal aesthetics in the middle ground." As Hess explained, this striving for "freedom" was a response to decades when American artists were beholden to what he argues was a stifling orthodoxy imposed first by the Communist Party in the 30s, and then by an avant-garde tendency in the 40s that, while stripped of explicit political commitments, nevertheless "expressed itself in a number of converted radical-political techniques: the manifesto, appeal to historical necessity, trust in coups and destiny." Breaking with these constraints, the artists who Hess selected developed idiosyncratic styles that were untroubled by overarching theories. "What had been revolutionary is adapted to expressions of personal charm," he writes, and attempts to reach a "mass audience" are replaced by something resembling "an intimate dialogue" among friends. Several works by Porter are reproduced in the essay including *Lunch Under the Elm Tree*, which is hanging at the opposite end of this gallery.

It is.
Autumn 1958

This issue of *It is*. includes "The Short Review," an essay in which Porter describes his approach to art criticism. Porter begins by outlining the limitations of approaches that focus on questions of "importance" which have the effect of "restricting" art either "morally" like a "preacher" or "pseudo-scientifically" like a "social worker." As an alternative, Porter sketches what he calls an "impressionist criticism." "A genuine and ordinary reaction to paintings and sculpture, like one's first impression of a new person, is usually very much to the point," he explains. Reviews that begin from these impressions would not try to assess the importance of a work but would instead suggest its "character." Rather than stating a work's meaning explicitly, these reviews would work by implication, aware that when the evaluation of the critic is "explicit" something is "almost unavoidably left out." Most importantly, a review grounded in a critic's impression of a painting would not attempt to give a comprehensive account of that work. Instead, it would present a "parallel creation" that would give a sense of the work while allowing it to stay elusive. "Criticism creates by analogy," Porter writes, "and by examining the analogy you see what the art essentially is."

Art and Literature
Summer 1964

Art and Literature was published by the painters Anne Dunn and Rodrigo Moynihan and edited by the poet John Ashbery. This issue includes one of Porter's most ambitious essays, "Against Idealism." In it, Porter contrasts the kind of knowledge that is accessed by art, which associates "reality" with "appearances," and the kind of knowledge that is accessed by science, which associates reality with "ideas." Having criticized science for arriving at its ideas through a process of "reduction" that strips the world of both its volatility and its vitality, assuming "what you know immediately is only the shadow of something beyond that is more real," Porter turns to art where that volatility and vitality can be restored. "There is an artistic theory of knowledge different from a scientific or philosophical one," he explains. "The artist can direct his attention to what he is sure of. This is not an idea, not an eternal object, it is actual, and it has immediacy," he continues. "The artist can profitably forgo the scientific or philosophical attempt at grandeur and keep to what he knows, which is what everyone knows but does not dare accept, because he fears that knowledge is not reliable until it is explained, or rationalized, or proved; until, that is, it can be controlled by repetition like a scientific experiment." "Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy, and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and the ideal," Porter concludes in the essay's stirring final lines. "When this occurs, the effect is exalting."

Art and Literature

Spring 1966

This issue of *Art and Literature* includes an essay on Joseph Cornell, one of the most insightful accounts of a contemporary artist that Porter published. In the essay, Porter argues that Cornell's enigmatic boxes "escape the classification of criticism." Each work resembles "a room," Porter writes, "a subjective container of the soul," their components alluding to emotions and memories that "have no verbal equivalents" and cannot be reduced to a "verbal program." Cornell approved of Porter's essay and shortly after it was published he gifted Porter one of his boxes, which Porter hung in the living room of his Southampton home.

Art in America
Summer 1962

This issue of *Art in America* features the essay "Recent Painting USA." In it, Porter gave his fullest account of his opposition both to Clement Greenberg, the most influential art critic of the day, and the politically motivated criticism that Porter felt Greenberg represented.

Taking issue with Greenberg's claim that abstraction had, for political reasons, become the only legitimate form of painting and that figurative painting was irrelevant, Porter countered: "To say that you cannot paint the figure today, is like an architectural critic saying that you must not use ornament, or as if a literary critic proscribed reminiscence. In each case the critical remark is less descriptive of what is going on than it is a call for a following—a slogan demanding allegiance." Instead of attending to art, Greenberg mistakenly "thought the critic's role to be of an especially competent interpreter of the Will of History." Giving his opposition a sharper inflection, Porter continued, "This criticism is so much influenced by politics that it imitates the technique of a totalitarian party on the way to power."