

Fairfield Porter



WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS



FAIRFIELD PORTER WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS

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THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK





Fairfield Porter in his late twenties. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

DIRECTOR'S FOREWARD

Artists associated with the Art Students League of New York have had an impact on nearly every major art movement of the past two centuries. Still, the legacy of the artists who attended the Art Students League in the early-to-mid 20th century looms larger than any other period in our history.

The League has been and continues to be a nexus where the great cultural figures of our times have been meeting and influencing each other since 1875. As this groundbreaking exhibition curated by the League's Gallery Director Sam Sackeroff shows, Fairfield Porter was himself a nexus who connected many of the most important figures of his period, including painters, poets, and critics, to one another. Moreover, many of those connections were formed or shaped here at our school. They are a testament to the importance of the League's mission and to the depth of its impact. Yes, the League has been a home to fine artists, including remarkable painters like Porter. But whether they attended the League themselves or were inspired by a fellow artist who took classes here, the League and its alumni have played a role in the development of great authors, actors, and designers, as well.

This exhibition would be momentous enough were its focus limited to the genius and work of Fairfield Porter. That we have the opportunity to also feature works by some of the other most famous League artists of the period, including Jackson Pollock, who was Porter's classmate, and Thomas Hart Benton, who was an instructor to them both, makes the show a true milestone for our school. I am proud to say that the spirit of artists supporting each other that contributed to the formation of these towering figures still exists at the League today, an energizing current that runs through our galleries, halls, and studios.

Michael Hall

Artistic & Executive Director

Sam Sackeroff is the Gallery Director
and Curator at
the Art Students League of New York

PALPABLE FACTS

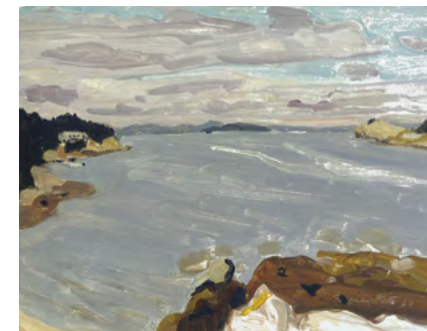
Sam Sackeroff

I.

In 1967, Fairfield Porter exhibited a selection of recent paintings at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. The subjects were familiar: intimate portraits of family and friends, domestic interiors and still lifes, the rocky coastlines near his homes in Southampton and Maine.

Reviewing the exhibition for *ARTnews*, the poet and critic James Schuyler described one of the works on view, a small oil on Masonite painting of Penobscot Bay. “In *Northwest Wind* the paint has its own

movement, as brushed, stirred and rippled as the windy grass, trees and water it describes,” Schuyler wrote. The prose is crisp and easy, and we expect a more-or-less conventional account of the landscape to follow. But it doesn’t. “The paint is not, however, merely a vehicle for description,” he continued. “Nor is it that there is a harmony between matter and manner. It is that there are two distinct things, and if the island and water are, in any sense, an illusion, the paint is itself a palpable fact that holds an imprint of life and infuses life into the image. And anyway, what is an illusion?”¹



Fairfield Porter, *Northwest Wind*, 1966, oil on Masonite, 14 x 18 in.
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In this passage, Schuyler distills many of the concerns that would guide Porter throughout his two-and-a-half-decade career as painter, poet, and critic. Given its richness, it is worth pausing over.

What Schuyler describes is not just a work, but an experience of looking, an experience that begins simply and becomes more complex. At first, the painting seems to be aligned with the landscape it depicts. As Schuyler notes, the paint is “brushed, stirred, and rippled” in a way that recalls the wind, grass, and trees of the New England coast on an overcast morning. But that alignment becomes less certain as other facets come into focus. We notice how the paint pools and thins. We see the ridges of the individual strokes.

And as we do, we realize that paint is not “merely a vehicle for description.” There is no “harmony between matter and manner.” The painting and what is painted are, indeed, “two distinct things.”

And the longer we look, the more distinct they become. The painting thickens and comes forward, pressing against us as

a “palpable fact.” And as it does, the scene that had been painted, the “islands and water” of the wind-swept bay, recede, slipping behind the “illusion” or “image” that the painting presents, a piece of the world that has been implied but that stays elusive, infusing the work with a liveliness part of which it reserves for itself.

If Schuyler’s comments seem unusually perceptive, that is because, in addition to being a masterful writer, when he published his review he had been living with Porter and his family, including his wife, Anne, and their children, Johnny, Laurence, Jeremy, Katharine, and

Elizabeth, for six years. A romantic partner and an intellectual peer, they spoke about their work often, and the substance of those conversations is reflected in Schuyler's remarks.

When Porter spoke about his work, he used a consistent set of terms. The paintings that he made were "analogies." Instead of representing the thing seen, they were meant to give a sense of what seeing that thing might have been like in a particular moment, on a particular day, for a particular person without standing in for that thing or being a substitute for it.

Take another painting of Penobscot Bay that Porter made the year after Schuyler's review, *Islands* from 1968. With both Schuyler and Porter's words in mind, our experience of looking at it can be said to unfold along two paths. We see how the painting calls attention to what the bay might have looked like on that, clearer day. The way the light caught the top of the tree on the left and was almost immediately wrapped in shadow. The way the water, un-stirred by wind, formed an even, glass-like sheet. The way the rocky forms in the distance blued and softened as they met the horizon. But we also see all the ways the painting announces that it is not an adequate representation of any of them.

We see the dark green dabs in the foreground, and the striped furrows of the brush. We see the passage of lighter green nearby, and how it drips. We see that shock of blue that cuts through that light-flecked tree, and how it sits there, assertively, flush on the surface.

And again, the bay recedes and it is the painting that comes forward as a palpable fact. But even though the bay recedes, a fugitive piece of the world that has slipped behind its illusion, we have still come to know something of it, albeit obliquely. We have gotten a sense of its texture and specificity at one degree of remove, by analogy, as paint on canvas.

This knowing by analogy, this understanding of a painting as a palpable fact that attests to the



Fairfield Porter, *Islands*, 1968, oil on canvas, 28 x 32 in. Collection of Helene B. and J. Whitney Stevens

specificity of things in the world while also admitting that those things elude representation, was part of Porter's investment in what he called "empiricism," a drive to know the world not as a concept or an idea, but as it actually appears to us in sense impressions that are both intense and fleeting. He explored that empiricism in his own reviews for *ARTnews*. He refined it in longer essays with titles like "What Is Real," "The Immediacy of Experience," "Art and Knowledge" and "Against Idealism." And, most importantly, he came to terms with what it meant, and how it felt, in the paintings themselves.

Porter's investment in empiricism, his insistence on attending to reality in all its lush and raw irreducibility, would pull him into the turbulent political climate of the day, put him at the center of debates about realism and abstraction, and result in a body of work that cut an idiosyncratic path through Modernism, prompting another friend, John Ashbery, to describe him eight years after his death in 1975 as "perhaps the major American artist of this century."²

By tracing the development of Porter's empiricism, by following the path he cut through Modernism and recovering the abundant and unruly reality he found there, we can come to

appreciate not only what he offered his century, but also, perhaps, what he still offers ours.

II.

John Fairfield Porter was born in Winnetka, Illinois on June 10, 1907. The fourth of five children, he was raised in an intellectually ambitious home by his father James Porter, an architect whose family owned much of the land under the three-square-mile commercial center known as the Chicago Loop, and his mother Ruth Porter, a fiercely literate graduate of Bryn Mawr College whose ancestors included revolutionary war generals, abolitionists, and T.S. Eliot.

Fairfield went by John until he was three years old, when his younger brother was given that name forcing him to use his middle name instead. He graduated from high school two years early and was admitted to Harvard in 1923 when he was 16. Convinced he was too young, Porter's parents sent him to Milton Academy in Massachusetts for a year and he enrolled in 1924. At Harvard, Porter concentrated on fine arts and philosophy, taking classes with the art historian Arthur Upham Pope and the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead.

In the summer of 1927, Porter traveled to France. While there, he happened to meet a neighbor from Illinois who was traveling to

Sketch of Leon Trotsky, made by Porter during meeting with Trotsky in Moscow in 1927. Photo: Justin Spring



Russia with a delegation of labor leaders. They had run out of money and, left-leaning and curious, Porter offered to provide the funds they needed to complete their trip if he could join them. He flew to Moscow and accompanied them as they interviewed officials including, most notably, Leon Trotsky, who Porter sketched during their meeting, capturing his distinctive glasses and beard.

The trip to Russia marked the beginning of Porter's engagement with Marxism, which would evolve into the more searching empiricism that would become the foundation of his work. Sharpened by Marxism's critical edge, he turned his attention to the material conditions of the world around him. This would motivate him to become involved in various political projects over the next ten years, but it would also alert him to the irreducible aspect of material reality as such, exposing a variety and a volatility that he would find liberating.

Porter returned to Harvard and completed his senior year, taking courses in European history, religion, and fine arts. In his class album, he listed his future profession as "painting."³ With a new sense of purpose, he moved to New York in 1928 and enrolled at the Art Students League. Traveling each day from his boarding house in Greenwich Village to the League's limestone building on 57th Street, he began taking life drawing classes with Boardman Robinson and Thomas Hart Benton. Benton was himself a prominent figure on the left and in 1930, when Porter was still a student, The New School for Social Research commissioned Benton to paint *America Today*, a ten-panel mural depicting rural and industrial workers rendered in his socially progressive, regionalist style. Although Porter would later become critical of the rigidity of Benton's approach (an opinion that was shared by another of Benton's pupils, Jackson Pollock, who also began studying at the League in 1930), these early years were impactful. Along with Benton's

Fairfield Porter's Art Students League enrollment card. Archive of the Art Students League of New York, New York, NY

handling of volume, light, and shade, all of which can be seen in classroom exercises like *Male Nude* from c. 1929, Porter paid close attention to the political dimension of his instructor's work, and would put what he learned into practice when he was commissioned to make his own progressive mural for the Socialist Party headquarters in Queens.

In 1931, Porter took a trip to the Bryn Mawr campus fifteen miles from Philadelphia where he was re-introduced to Anne Channing, a precocious student from an established Boston family who he had met years earlier. Impressed by Anne's beauty and intellect, especially her detailed knowledge of poetry, Porter cultivated her friendship and the two remained in touch while he took another extended trip to Europe that year. By the time Porter returned in the spring of 1932, their relationship had become romantic. He proposed at his family's summer house on Great Spruce Head Island and he and

Fairfield Porter, *Male Nude*, c. 1929, oil on board, 36 1/8 x 24 in. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY. Photo: Gary Mamay. Image courtesy of Parrish Art Museum



Anne were married that fall.

The couple moved into an apartment in Greenwich Village where Porter became more involved in the city's leftist circles. In addition to teaching life drawing classes at the Rebel Arts Center, a small artist-run organization associated with the Socialist Party, he started contributing essays to *Arise*, a socialist counterpart to the communist-run *New Masses*. Among the first pieces that he published was "Murals for Workers," a survey of the politically progressive murals that could be found in New York in 1935. That same year Porter was asked to make his own mural for the Queens branch office of the Socialist Party, a Benton-inspired painting with the Lenin-inflected title *Turn Imperialist War into Civil War*.

In 1936, Fairfield and Anne moved back to Illinois with their two infant sons, Johnny, who was born in 1934, and Laurence, who was born shortly before they left. It was during this period that Porter's political views began to change, reflecting the set of concerns that would shape

his work in the coming decades. The change was prompted by a number of events. One was the Moscow trials, which revealed what Porter, like many others, saw as fascist tendencies in Stalin's government. Another was Porter's friendship with Paul Mattick. A German expatriate who was living in Chicago, Mattick was a member of the Council Communists, a dissident Marxist group that embraced communism while rejecting the centralized power of the party or state. As Porter later recalled, Mattick and the

Council Communists were both brilliant and heterodox. They were, in his words, "among the few people in the world who had really read Marx all the way through."⁴ In a series of letters that he exchanged with Mattick and others in the late '30s and early '40s, Porter described his evolving outlook. He still felt that Marxism provided "an empirical investigation of society"⁵ and continued to fund Mattick's magazine *Living Marxism* through 1940, but he became increasingly suspicious of consolidated power on both the right and the left. Even though he had supported the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, he now agreed with Mattick that Trotsky "believed in all the Leninist lying and authoritarianism and terror,"⁶ and that there was "hardly any difference between Communists and Nazis."⁷ Although flawed, he saw capitalism as preferable to state-run communism because in communist systems "instead of competing capitalists there is only one power opposed to the workers" which reduced them to "the

status of slaves."⁸ Porter articulated his new position to John Wheelwright, a radical poet and editor at *Arise*, in 1939: "I am interested only in helping to free human possibilities, not in the attempt to restrict them."⁹

By 1940, this interest in freeing "human possibilities" from anything that might "restrict" them led Porter to identify as "liberal," someone who, in his words, "put human beings ahead of systems,"¹⁰ and while it would not appear in his painting for another ten years, this insistence became a feature of both his intellectual and moral life. Disenchanted with radical politics,

he stopped trying to fit people and things into generalizations, ideological or otherwise, and became sensitive instead to the ways that they, in their specificity, did not fit.

If Porter's disenchantment with radical politics changed his worldview in one way, alerting him to specificity as an intellectual and moral value, his encounter with the paintings of French Impressionists Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard changed it in another, alerting him to the deep well of specificity that lay concealed in even the most ordinary things. He had seen paintings by Bonnard and Vuillard in Moscow, but it wasn't until he visited the dual retrospective of the two painters that the Art Institute of Chicago organized in 1938 that he

grasped their significance. Vuillard's paintings in particular had a lasting impact. As Porter recalled, seeing works like *Child in a Room* from c. 1900, a painting that despite its small size and modest theme is nevertheless overwhelmingly full, was "a revelation of the obvious,"¹¹ disclosing near-infinite



Édouard Vuillard, *Child in a Room*, c. 1900, oil on cardboard, 17 1/4 x 22 3/4 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

layers of subtlety in what was closest-at-hand.

Porter moved back to New York in 1939, renting a house first in Peekskill, an hour outside Manhattan, and then in Harmon-on-Hudson, where Anne, Johnny, Laurence, and their third son Jeremy would be comfortable. He took frequent trips into the city, and in 1942 bought a brownstone on East 52nd Street. In addition to seeing as many exhibitions as he could, Porter began integrating himself into New York's cultural scene, becoming friends with the photographer Rudy Burckhardt and the poet and critic Edwin Denby, as well as the editors

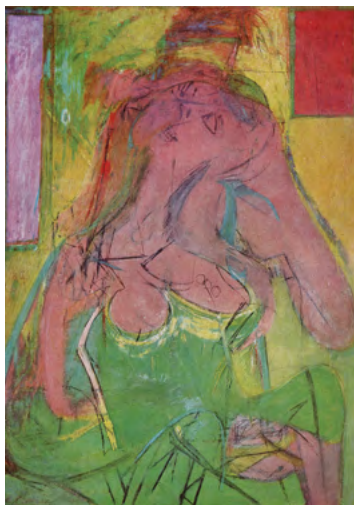
of *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Clement Greenberg, and Dwight Macdonald.

The most significant of these acquaintances was Willem de Kooning, who Porter met in 1939. De Kooning became both a friend and supporter, convincing James Bernard Myers to give Porter his first show at Tibor de Nagy. He also became one of Porter's most important influences, with Porter buying three paintings including *Pink Lady* from 1944.

In 1949, Porter purchased a two-story house at 49 South Main Street in Southampton. Close to the city and big enough for him, Anne, and their children, it soon became a home not only for Porter and his family, but also for his widening circle of artist-peers. Along with the house in Maine, the Southampton house, with its white siding, red brick chimneys, and tree-filled lawn, would become one of the most frequently recurring subjects in his work.

We can see it in *Backyard, Southampton* from 1953, a painting that reflects both Porter's move to Long Island and his deeper reorientation as well. Following a materialist instinct that was no longer constrained by ideological orthodoxy and an empiricism that was now tuned to the everyday, Porter turns his attention in the painting to what was most familiar, his backyard. And the scene is familiar, marked by the stillness and solidity of what is well-known. But it is mysterious, too. The house, huddled in its half-acre, is seen from a distance and in fading light, and there is a sense that the scene is also in somehow fading or turn-

Willem de Kooning, *Pink Lady*, 1944, oil on panel, 48 x 35 in. Private collection



ing away, as if it is on the verge of withdrawing just as it is being painted.

But as the scene withdraws, as it turns toward what seems to be both self-concealment and confessed imprecision, something else comes into focus: the haptic brushy-ness of the painting's surface, a brushy-ness that brings with it a more intimate materialism, a more proximate tactility, one that sharpens our perception not of the house, yard, and trees, at least not directly, but of the painting, which both does and does not take their place.

III.

Although Porter thought of himself as a painter throughout the 30s and 40s, he was not satisfied with the work that he made during those decades and destroyed nearly all his paintings from the period. It wasn't until the 50s with works like *Backyard, Southampton* that he found ways to register the everyday empiricism, the intimate, domestic materialism that would define his practice as an artist. And even then, the breakthroughs that Porter made in his paintings were often the result of insights he articulated first as a critic.

Porter's career as a critic began in 1951, when he and Elaine de Kooning went to see an exhibition of work by the Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky at the Whitney Museum of American Art. They disagreed about the show, she liking it and he disliking it, but de Kooning



Fairfield Porter, *Backyard, Southampton*, 1953, oil on canvas, 42 x 43 3/4 in. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY. Photo: Gary Mamay

was impressed enough by Porter's perceptiveness that when Thomas Hess, editor of *ARTnews*, asked her who she would recommend to replace her as one of the magazine's critics, she gave him Porter's name. From 1951 to 1959 Porter contributed as many as ten reviews a month, writing on Paul Cézanne, André Masson, Alex Katz, and many others.

Paraphrasing a comment made by *ARTnews*'s publisher, Porter felt that "the best criticism is simply the best description"¹² and strove to report what he saw as sensitively as possible without assumption or imposition. Here again his empiricist, materialist instincts came to the fore and put him in opposition to the two leading critics of the time, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom he faulted for being more concerned with politically-oriented theory than the art they were discussing. Even before he started writing for *ARTnews*, Porter expressed his impatience with theory-oriented critics who looked at art through "spectacles of words," arguing that their preference for theory was the result of an inability to deal with art's irreducible sensuality, an inability he attributed to "a failure of sensibility."¹³ Taking issue with Greenberg's insistence that abstraction had

become not only the dominant but the necessary mode of painting, Porter wrote in one essay, "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." In Porter's view, Greenberg wrongly assumed that the role of the critic was to be "an especially competent interpreter of the Will of History," and at its worst his criticism was "so much influenced by politics" that it imitated "the technique of a totalitarian party on the way to power."¹⁴ Porter was similarly disparaging about Rosenberg, who he argued in another essay concentrated on theory because his "visual sensibility" was "weak," a limitation that caused him to aim for "a general and conclusive argument" instead of dealing with how specific and inconclusive art in its sensuality really was.¹⁵

Porter's own art-critical approach prioritized the qualities that Greenberg and Rosenberg overlooked. His reviews combined flashes of insight with accounts of specific works that became invitations to reflect on the dispositions of individual artists. He would note the way "a woman melts into recession"¹⁶ in one work and compare his experience of space in another to "the feeling of not being quite sure where, under the sheets, one's feet are."¹⁷ Bonnard was "an individualist without revolt"¹⁸ whose sense of form came from his "tenderness." Jasper Johns's paintings showed "the reaction to his education of an individual intelligent enough at first to take in all that he is being taught while giving it only part of his attention."¹⁹ Although he strove for descriptive accuracy, Porter admitted that even the most sensitive account risked stripping a work of its particularity. "Visual form, once expressed in words, is form translated," he explained, "and having made this translation, criticism refers to it, and it becomes no longer necessary for the

critic to see what he is talking about. He starts talking about the words that replace his experience.²⁰ To avoid this slippage, Porter developed what he called in a 1958 essay on his approach to writing an “impressionist criticism.” This new mode would not describe a work as such but rather the critic’s impression of it, a description that, no matter how precise, no matter how opinionated, would allow the work to stay elusive. “The evaluation of the critic is most interesting when it is implied rather than explicit,” Porter explained, “because if it is explicit, something is almost unavoidably left out.” A review should function as an “analogy,” he continued, a “parallel creation” that would be similar, but only similar, to the work discussed.²¹

“Parallel creation.” This phrase helps us grasp not only how Porter saw his reviews, but also how he saw works like *Northwest Wind*, *Islands*, and *Backyard*, *Southampton* as well. They too were parallel creations or analogies for the things they depicted. They too worked by implication, providing a proxy, sensitive but partial, for some other thing, some other piece of the world that could not be described explicitly without leaving something out.

Porter was pleased with his criticism. In a letter to his sister-in-law Aline from late 1951, when he had been at *ARTnews* for less than a year, he reflected bluntly, “I think I could be the best art critic now writing in English.”²² And although he admitted in the same letter that he was still “much prouder” of his reviews than he was of his paintings, he continued to use his reviews and essays to develop convictions that would increasingly inform his art.

The most important was his counter-intuitive understanding of “reality” and “realism.” Even though Porter distanced himself from the radical politics of his youth, he retained his early, Marx-derived investment in materialism and would consider himself a “realist” throughout his career. But his sense of what lessons could

be drawn from material reality changed. Instead of generalizable laws, it became the source of an unruliness that escaped generalization altogether. If artists looked closely at “objective nature,” Porter suggested, they would find a “concrete variety” that would inspire not prescriptive certainty but a “feeling for pluralism.”²³ “What one pays attention to is what is real,” Porter explained, “and reality is everything.”²⁴ To render reality meant to render the “wholeness of life,”²⁵ which included not only people, places, and things, but also the moods and temperaments, the threading of attention and inattention, that shaped how they appeared.

Most “realist” artists failed to achieve this because they interposed between themselves and the world “concepts” that dulled their acuity and led to “a steely equality of detail”²⁶ that made their work remarkably un-realistic. “Abstract” artists were in many ways the more successful “realists.” They were sensitive not only to the subjective quality of experience that most “realists” neglected, but also to the objective quality of paint, which gave their works a materiality that allowed them to capture “the variety of the sensible world.”²⁷

No artist exemplified these strengths, the subjective and the objective, more than Willem de Kooning. Instead of “an idea of reality,” de Kooning focused on “the most immediate reality,” his “kinetic and visual sense of the world.”²⁸ This gave his work a subjective dimension that had been noted by many other critics. But it also introduced an objective dimension that had otherwise been overlooked, a dimension that was anchored in the sheer material density of paint-as-paint, which was, Porter insisted, “as real as nature.”²⁹

Porter incorporated both elements of de Kooning’s practice in *Liz Experiencing Nature*, a painting he completed in 1959, the same year he published his longest piece on de Kooning. Although the painting is a landscape and shows a child, Porter’s three-year-old daughter

Elizabeth, standing in the shadow of a tree, it is shot through with gestural strokes that recall de Kooning’s most abstract work. In this case, however, those abstract strokes serve Porter’s realist project. Admitting, again, that “art,” like criticism, “goes no further than analogy,”³⁰ Porter uses the raw sensuality of paint to acknowledge, without representing, the raw sensuality of the material world. The painting becomes a proxy for what the child sees or, more accurately, for how what she sees might have looked to her. The feathered swaths of beige, pink, and brown give a sense, however oblique, of the tree’s frayed and blushing bark; the sheet of matte green suggests, in another register, the disorienting sweep of the dark and still-damp lawn; the top-heavy massing of white captures the too-brightness of a sky streaked with cloud; aspects of reality that, impossible to represent, are alluded to through the materiality of the painted surface.

But here too, as the painted surface brings something of the scene to us, it also pushes something away. The painting, with its density, with its facture, takes the place of the lawn, tree, and sky, which seem to slip away the moment they become real, that is, the moment they become paint. But we don’t feel deprived. It is as they slip away that we know them. And it is as they slip away that we realize they are, in another sense, not ours to know. The experience of the painting, with its wet-dry washes, its worked umbers and blues, is ours. The experience of nature that the painting depicts is Liz’s. The lawn, tree, and sky are hers.

As important as de Kooning was, Porter identified his “realism” even more closely with the Impressionists Bonnard and Vuillard. It was the Impressionists who came closest to an “empiricism” that was deserving of the name. “Impressionism expressed the empirical theory that what you know you can know only in your sensations,”³¹ and while painters like Bonnard and Vuillard paid close attention



Fairfield Porter, *Liz Experiencing Nature*, 1959, oil on canvas, 48 x 43 in. Private collection

to “the world of nature,” they also knew that world was always already refracted through the prism of the individual. They were “not interested in what was out there,” Porter explained, “but in how, whatever it was, it looked to the one who was looking.”³² This was especially true of Vuillard. In addition to turning his attention to his everyday surroundings, Vuillard painted “ultimate reality,” a synthesis of the objective and the subjective that acknowledged not only things seen but also “the implied presence of the artist who sees.”³³ That “ultimate reality” was distilled in what Porter called the “Impressionist shimmer,” a 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 countless perceptions of it, and made it “solid and enduring” in a work of art.³⁴

IV.

James Schuyler was also sensitive to this proliferate, everyday reality. Like Porter, he knew it was profound and fragile and, like Porter,

he knew it was closely associated with seeing.

Porter met Schuyler in 1952, having been introduced to him along with fellow poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara by the painters Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher, both of whom Porter had written about in *ARTnews*. These new friendships marked a turning point. Even though Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler were twenty years younger, Porter felt in their company that he finally had a circle of peers. As he explained in a 1956 letter to Laurence, these "younger writers" had a "point of view" that was "more sympathetic" than that of his own generation.³⁵ In part, that sympathy had to do with their homosexuality, which allowed Porter to explore his own bisexuality, something that, while acknowledged in his marriage, remained a source of tension. But it was also grounded in their shared project.

Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler also found richness in what was familiar and close-at-hand, a similarity Porter registered in a portrait of Ashbery and Schuyler that he painted in 1957-58. The poets are shown sitting on an ordinary couch in an ordinary room (possibly Porter's studio in Southampton). Despite this ordinariness, however, they appear completely absorbed, and what absorbs them is the act of looking. The room 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 pulses off-white and peach, each adding a visual intensity that is increased by the intensity of the poets' gazes.

Schuyler in particular made visual experience a focus of his poems, which are laced not only with nuanced descriptions of people, places, and things, many of which also appear in Porter's paintings, but also with patient and detailed evocations of the act of looking as such.

In "February,"³⁶ which Schuyler wrote in 1955 while he was living part-time with Frank O'Hara in a small apartment on East 49th Street in New York where Porter was also a frequent visitor,



Fairfield Porter, *Jimmy and John*, 1957-58, oil on canvas, 36 x 45 in. Collection of Barbara Kratchman

he describes late-afternoon light playing over a glass of cut flowers on his desk:

The sun, I can't see
making a bit of pink
I can't quite see in the blue.
The pink of five tulips
at five p.m. on the day before March first.
The green of the tulip stems and leaves
like something I can't remember.

In "Under a Storm-Washed Sky,"³⁷ which Schuyler wrote in December 1962, a year-and-a-half after he moved into the Porters' Southampton home having suffered one of several nervous breakdowns that resulted in hospitalization, he describes their tree-filled yard after rain:

An elm and its shadow are one.
The twigs of a pear tree are knotted
and glazed with light. The clothes pole
stands empty of purpose
a faint green on its shadowed side.
A cloud like a slice of mist
slides under the sun and the shadows momentarily fade.

In "Standing and Watching,"³⁸ Schuyler describes how the sheer act of looking seemed to draw individuating details from another rainy-day scene,

bringing with them redeeming depth.

Standing and watching
through the drizzle
how the mist and further
edge of pond merge
into one grayness, a color
called drained-of-blueness

Standing and watching
how the maple leaves
fall, lightly pelted by
drizzle, and turn
in the air, to lie scattered
drained, not quite of color there

However, as subtle as these descriptions are, Schuyler, like Porter, knew that they failed to capture the fullness of the things they referred to. For every account of the "green-gold spaces of sunlit grass," there is an admission that, like all descriptions, they necessarily come up short. "You can't get at a sunset naming colors,"³⁹ Schuyler writes in one poem. "No, it is absolutely forbidden / for words to echo the act described; or try to,"⁴⁰ he reminds himself in another. In "Freely Espousing," which would give its title to Schuyler's first collection of poems, he prepares for another descriptive turn, then stops. "It's. Hmm. No."⁴¹

And yet, by admitting their descriptive insufficiency, Schuyler's poems, like Porter's paintings, become more vivid in their own right, coming into view as massings not of paint but of language with their own shape and weight. "A robin passes / zip / thud / punctuating the typescript of today with a comma on the too-close cut / grass," Schuyler writes in "May 24th or So,"⁴² which he also composed while living with Porter. And as the poems become more vivid, as they become more materially self-referential, as the robin gains the real-world weight of a steel key rising and falling on a typewriter, they also become

more accurate correlates for the real-world complexity that eludes them. They too become palpable facts, asserting their material specificity and, in doing so, suggesting the specificity of everything that slips away as they come forward: the thousand shadowed lawns and blue-gray birches that the poems allow us to sense, in their absence, for the first time.

V.

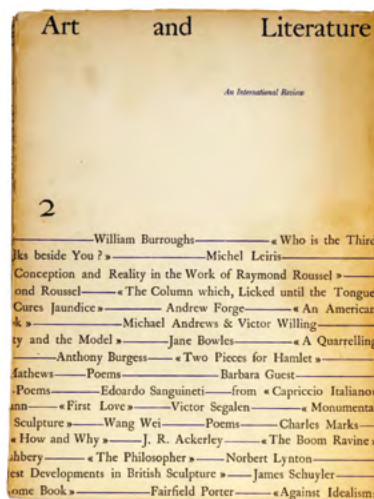
When Porter insisted that his paintings too could never capture the fullness of the things they referred to and that they, like all art, went "no further than analogy," he was not diminishing his skill. Instead, he was defending the un-representable specificity of reality as such, which was threatened by the generalizing impulses of modern technological society.

In a series of longer essays that he wrote in the 60s and 70s, Porter refined that defense, framing it, again, in terms of an empiricism. Whereas artistic realism dealt with "things as they appear," beginning with the premise that "the real is what can be seen," scientific realism dealt with "ideas," beginning with the premise that what can be seen is merely "the shadow of something beyond that is more real." Scientists arrived at their ideas through "a process of reduction" that ignored and suppressed the complexity of reality.⁴³ By reducing the infinitely fine texture of the real world to smooth-edged generalizations, they became "anti-empirical" and "authoritarian," and to the degree that they recognized "the nature and experience of the individual," they misunderstood it as valuable for the "general principles it embodies," missing its deeper value: its "unprecedentedness."⁴⁴

The solution to this reductivity was a return to art. "Science takes you away from the world," Porter wrote, whereas "art forces the world upon

you.”⁴⁵ Whereas science assumed reality was generalizable, a matter of reproducible experiments and repeatable observations, art insisted that “the real is specific.”⁴⁶ “You can only buck generalities by attention to fact,” he explained, and more than any other field, “aesthetics is what connects one to matters of fact. It is anti-ideal, it is materialistic.”⁴⁷ In a society where science and technology were stripping the world of its specificity, works of art brought that specificity back. By attending to the sensual complexity of a painting, to the irreducible nuance of its facture, color, and tone, we could rediscover the sensual complexity of the world, reminding ourselves that “what is real and what is alive is concrete and singular.”⁴⁸

This was a thrilling prospect but challenging as well. To benefit from what a painting or sculpture offered at this deep ontological level, viewers had to admit that it came loaded with a “theory of knowledge”⁴⁹ that was more legitimate than the theory offered by science but also destabilizing. The “material form” of a work of art is “always arbitrary,” Porter explained, which is what made it a correlate for “the material world of fact that is there as it stands.”⁵⁰ But that arbitrariness, that irrepressible current of the unrepeatable and the unprovable that flowed through the “actual” and the “immediate,” was again, suppressed, and not only by modern science but, insofar as we have internalized its assurances of standardization and predictability, by us as well. It is, Porter argued, “what everyone knows” but “does not dare accept” unless we are confronted by it



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sensually in an artwork. Still, as challenging as that confrontation could be, it was for that reason all the more urgent. What works of art made available was an understanding of the world that was not only accurate but liberating, an understanding that restored not only the world's volatility but its vitality, too. “Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy,” Porter wrote in one of his most ambitious essays,

“Against Idealism” from 1964, “and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and the ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting.”⁵¹

VI.

Porter stressed the importance of attending to specificity in his writing, but it was in his paintings that he found ways to actually do so. It was in his paintings that he came to terms with what attending to the world in all its raw specificity would mean: giving up the pretense of representing the world and offering the lush and arbitrary surface of a painting instead.

Porter developed a number of strategies to make his paintings equal to this task, strategies, some of which we have seen already, that informed what he painted and how.

One of those strategies was, as we know, to paint what was around him, the people and things in his everyday life. This reflected his conviction that richness could be found even in what was closest-at-hand, but it served other ends as well. By painting things that were so insistently

ordinary—Anne with an open book, the ragged line of a just-overgrown hedge, two empty chairs on a porch—Porter emphasized those things in some ways, acknowledging the important role they played in his life, and de-emphasized them in others.

By depicting ordinary things, Porter removed a certain kind of referential content from his work and allowed other kinds of content to come into view. The things that he painted are, in a sense, so unremarkable that they do not rise to the level of interpretive interest. Their subjects are, in Porter's words, “normal” and “not sought after.” We are not compelled to read into them any pre-conceived meaning. We are not tempted to enlist them on behalf of any narrative or theme. But the suspension of interpretive interest does not mean we are uninterested, either in the paintings or in their subjects. It means, rather, that our interest remains specific and, for that reason, humane. Liberated from the obligation to interpret, we are free to look at the paintings themselves, to appreciate the accumulation of painterly incident, the plastic lick and pucker of their strokes, seeing there a specificity that we are encouraged to attribute, belatedly and by implication, to their subjects in turn.

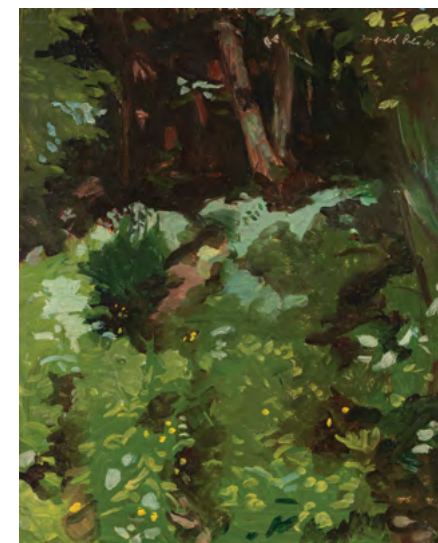
Porter achieved something similar by painting the same things repeatedly, again and again, in some cases depicting not only the same person—Anne, Laurence, Liz, Jimmy—but the same landscape or scene: the same rocky stretch of Penobscot Bay; the same elm-blocked glimpse of his Southampton studio; the same backyard; the same screen porch.

Here too Porter removed a superficial layer of referential content, the layer of mere recognition, exposing hidden specificity underneath. There is nothing more to be gleaned by the third, fourth, or fifth painting of the Barred Islands, assuming that is all we take them to be: paintings of islands. But that is not all we take them to be. The repetition allows the islands to fall back and

each individual painting to come forward. And as they do we stop recognizing and start seeing. We see how the colors sweep along horizontally before coming to an abrupt and bunching stop; how the tones and shades mount and stack, each claiming a space for itself; how they then run together, giving onto the much larger space that exceeds them. And in seeing these qualities of the paintings we, again, seem to see the islands too, or know what seeing them would finally be like, distinct and untranslatable.

In some cases, Porter came close to removing the referent altogether, painting fields and paths that insist on their emptiness. As Porter noted, when Alex Katz painted landscapes he too preferred near-empty fields because, in Porter's words, “a field is not an object.” This object-less quality, again, frees us to focus on the paintings themselves. In *Wood Road* from 1969, there is nothing to see but the thick dabs of green, brushed and yellow-flecked, that rise vertically, ridged and tactile on the panel. But even here, a connection to the world is retained.

Fairfield Porter, *Wood Road*, 1969, oil on Masonite, 22 x 17 7/8 in. Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY



The wood road is a road back to a perceived scene, one that has been displaced by the painting but that is somehow made more visceral as a result.

In each of these examples, Porter uses painting to first estrange us from reality and then, through impasto, through facture, through the raw materiality of pigment, binding, and board, bring us that much closer to it. By drawing our attention to the specificity of the painted surface and to all the ways that surface is itself and not the thing that it represents, he restores to that (un)represented thing both its specificity and its independence as well.

Porter's striving for specificity also shaped his approach to, or, better, his skepticism toward, composition, and it is perhaps in that context that his understanding of specificity becomes most moving and profound. In *Lizzie at the Table* from 1958, it is the lack of composition that strikes us first. The too-high-ness of the angle; the too-crowded-ness of the vase; the too-closeness of the pitcher, dish, and glass; elements that a more composed painting would have corrected. This uncomposed quality slows our viewing. It too stalls the generalizing gloss that recognition would cause, including the recognition of the painting as a still life. It abandons one order—the



Fairfield Porter, *Lizzie at the Table*, 1958, oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 45 1/2 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

order of a picture—for the disorder of the world, which is revealed to have an order all its own, a worldly order found not in geometries and formulas, but in stray spoons, un-peeled oranges, and light behind curtains.

Porter discussed this worldly order-in-disorder often. He described it to the poet and critic Claire Nicolas White in a letter from 1972. “Order seems to come from searching for disorder,” he wrote, “and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following of a system.”⁵² In some cases, Porter associated this order-in-disorder with Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the same letter, he remarked “every sentence is in order as it is,” paraphrasing a line from *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein reminds us 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 he makes having likened the usefulness of our grandest words “language,” “experience,” and “world,” to that of our humblest, “lamp,” “door,” and, notably, “table.”⁵³

In the 1958 painting of *Lizzie*, worldly order-in-disorder is associated with another of Porter's predecessors, Wallace Stevens, who Porter also cited often and whose collection *Opus Posthumous*, was published the previous year, lies green-

Forest path, photographed by James Schuyler, c. 1965. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC



covered in the foreground. In a 1970 letter to the painter Arthur Giardelli, he drew from several pieces by Stevens, including his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” to produce the collaged aphorism, “Without imposing, without reasoning at all (one discovers) the eccentric to be the base of design.”⁵⁴ This is where Porter's empiricism led him: to the discovery that it is the eccentric, the disordered, the arbitrary that lies at the base, at the foundation, of what is beautiful and real, a discovery made there, at the breakfast table, the day just beginning.

There are many more strategies we could mention, many more techniques that Porter developed to make the fugitive specificity of the world appreciable in paint. There is Porter's use of the Maroger medium, a combination of white lead, linseed oil, and mastic that, in his words, “does two contradictory things: it stays wet, and it stays put,”⁵⁵ allowing a painting of apple trees, say, to seem both solid and dripping. There is his interest in the weather, which “never exactly repeats itself,”⁵⁶ in particular his interest in those in-between states where a new atmosphere is

Fairfield Porter, *Apple Trees*, c. 1950, oil on canvas, 21 1/8 x 18 1/8 in. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY. Photo: Gary Mamay



forming, the nearly-overcast, the just-rained, the late-morning, the early-dusk. There is his preference for vacant rooms that seem to be seen through the tissue of the one person who we know was there and who we know we don't see. But to appreciate his project is to go only part way, to go only so far.

For all their freshness, for all their light, there is a melancholy quality in Porter's paintings, an awareness that to appreciate the fullness of reality also means admitting that that fullness eludes us, that our appreciation will always be partial, always displaced, deferred, delayed.

Earlier I quoted a few of Schuyler's poems. On this note, we can quote one of Porter's own:

I do not know what I am or who I am
Any more than a wave does, or a leaf.
I do not see myself as you do, or you
For in the repetition of events
Something is left out.
Yesterday as I walked up to the house
After three weeks, that contained years,
A large bird flushed from a bay bush.
I did not recognize it.
I cannot find it in any book.
It flew off out of the tree tops as I approached.
Yellow spots flashed on top of its wings
The under sides yellow-white.
It stayed too briefly for me to study it.
I do not know what it was
Only that it was unrecognizable
And that it was beautiful
And its startled clatter filled me
With a pang of hope.⁵⁷

VII.

I mentioned that by following Porter's path through Modernism and recovering the unruly and abundant reality he found there we could get a sense not only of what Porter

offered his century, of what he provided that was valuable enough, rich enough, to cause John Ashbery to describe him as perhaps its major artist, but also what he might offer ours. Toward the end of the review that I cited at the start of this essay, James Schuyler suggested what that might be. What Porter's paintings offer, what they are, is "an attitude toward life."⁵⁸

In one of his last statements, given the year before he died, Porter described that attitude. He did not do so directly, but by analogy, an analogy between life and, what else, painting:

Painters are concerned with things. The most prominent things are right in front of them, 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 painting it. Then it falls into place, 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.⁵⁹ ■

Fairfield Porter, c. 1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC



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24. Porter, letter to Claire Nicolas White, April 24, 1972, in *Material Witness*, 297.
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29. Porter, "American Non-Objective Painting," *The Nation*, October 3, 1959, reprinted in *Art in Its Own Terms*, 56.
30. Porter, "Communication and Moral Commitment," *The Nation*, March 18, 1961, reprinted in *Art in Its Own Terms*, 144.
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THE BROKEN ELBOW OF FAIRFIELD PORTER

Alex Nemerov

What is a harmonious work of art? What does it transcend? What does it accept? And why should we care?

Fairfield Porter's *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* is a pretty picture, a harmonious picture. Painted in spring 1968, when the artist was sixty years old, it shows part of the yard of his home on South Main Street in Southampton, Long Island. It came into the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (then the National Collection of Fine Arts) in 1977, two years after Porter's death. Not long after, it was loaned for a time to the Office of the Attorney General in the Department of Justice,¹ where one imagines it occupying an uncontroversial place, a bit of pleasant décor amid the real work of the world.

Fairfield Porter, *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, 1968, oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 29 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC



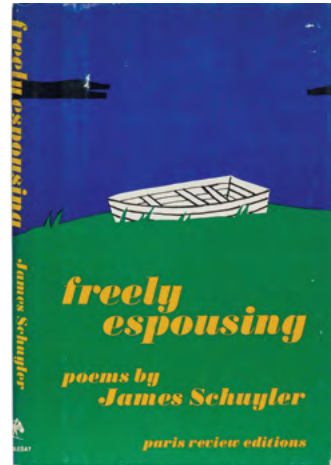
The painting's harmony is matrimonial. The pink of the flowering pear tree, the yellow of the forsythia, the shadows and sunlight of the lawn, wed to one another. "Marriages of the atmosphere / are worth celebrating,"² wrote James Schuyler, the poet who lived in the house of Porter and his wife Anne we see in the background of *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, and Porter thought that way too. "The things in the picture are, as it were, in love with each other,"³ he wrote in 1973, describing the art of one of his heroes, Pierre Bonnard. Love, Porter wrote of Bonnard, is "a basic element of the order of the world."⁴ It is an underlying goodness that our rationalizing sight and predilection for distance have broken into fragments but that remains, even so,

perfectly intact to the person who himself loves. That loving person is one “freely espousing,” to cite the name of Schuyler’s poem, drawn from a book of the same title published in 1969 dedicated to Porter and his wife Anne. Poet and painter freely espouse, wedding their respective art to the world’s union. Poetry and painting love one another, share the same habitation. “With love,” Porter signs his letters to Schuyler.

Music is the voice of this attachment. Porter wrote of the connection between elements—lamp, sky, hair—in a poem by John Ashbery, another friend, as “sub-conscious,” as felt rather than known. The blend of things is “of the body: a cry,”⁵ something other than meaning. It is a mystery, not least, because the elements so mystically blended are distinct from one another, each lucidly itself. There is no mistaking forsythia and pear tree, but they go together, united in the way couples crush: as sign of the mystery “essential to reality”⁶ that Porter felt only a serious artist sought to show.

This is a sensual forthrightness, a kind of nudity, different from sex. Open with a *Luncheon on the Grass* candor, Porter’s work is unashamed amid the blossoms and shadowed lawn. “Everything trembles / everything shakes / in the great sifter,”⁷ wrote Schuyler of the spring, and so it is in *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, one of Porter’s versions of the “everything.” The trembling is different from the naked energies of his friend and Hamptons neighbor Willem de Kooning’s paintings in those years—paintings where slippery abstractions fornicate and uncouple until there is no element in de Kooning’s art that is not erogenous, no “moment” that is not a climax. Irony lubricates the ferocious sendups of lust until the joke turns serious and even desperate, as if the artist feared that the gorgeousness of the world and of painting would fail if the marriage were not always being consummated. Porter, by contrast, is more the minister to what he sees. Tracing his ancestry back to 17th-century New England⁸ he betrothed himself to the world so that it would give itself back to him, shaking, trembling, freely espousing.

This love of being is a present tense affair, yet the past operates there too. The union with the world encompasses all that the artist has ever felt, all he has ever experienced, folded into one moment of spring. Writing in 1973 to his young former Amherst student Ted Leigh, Porter praised the early twentieth-century French photographer Eugène Atget, quoting the curator John Szarkowski’s description of Atget’s work in his book *Looking at Photographs*, which came out that year. Atget’s art is “seductively and deceptively simple, wholly poised, reticent, dense with experience, mysterious, and true”⁹—in short, Porter felt, like his own. He too made a “reticent” art, an art “dense with experience”—i.e. a sense of the past. Our questions of harmony expand: What does it mean for the love of the moment—the moment wedding person to being and to the world—to be also a love extended over time, a love *dense with experience*?



James Schuyler, *freely espousing*, 1969

In *Nyack*, a large painting he made in 1966-67, Porter mulls the role of memory in shaping the present tense. The painting is based on Porter’s recollection of a day in 1954 when he and his wife Anne visited the painter Jane Freilicher and her husband Joe Hazan at their summer place in Nyack, New York. At the time Porter made a pencil sketch that became the basis for a small painting. Dissatisfied with the painting, and having lost track of the sketch, he decided to paint the scene again—big. At nine feet wide, it is one of the largest pictures he ever painted: as if memory itself had grown comparably large for him.

In the painting Freilicher sits at her easel, steady before her subject. On her canvas two trees bend toward one another, romancing the scene. The trees do not correspond to any that we can see, but the forked branches of the small tree to the left of the easel suggest the match of painting and world: they share one another’s being. Anne Porter, by contrast, is off in her own world, sitting on a rounded wooden bench beneath a large tree. Holding a book (Porter said it was a novel by the campy 1920s British author Ronald Firbank¹⁰), she turns away, gray, from the painter’s preoccupation. Contemplative, daydreaming, prim in her ankle-length summer dress, the opposite of Freilicher in her closer-fitting carmine one, Anne Porter trembles in her thoughts, the pattern of the staid dress zigzagging in contrast to the solid focus

Fairfield Porter, *Nyack*, 1966-67, oil on canvas, 82 x 110 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH



of Freilicher at her easel.

The women suggest two aspects of Porter himself—two presences he wished to enlarge upon in a scene he wished to try again. (“It contained a good idea which I couldn’t let go of,” he wrote of the original painting). Aligned on the same plane, each woman is a priestess of what it means to paint: one directly before the thing at hand; the other lost in thought that, like the tree, looms over the whole action, spreading like a living presence of mind. In a letter to a curator at The Cleveland Museum of Art, which had just acquired the painting, Porter wrote of being of two minds: “I am torn between wanting to be spontaneous as the Impressionists, and wanting something large and deliberate, full of the pressure of the world. It is hard to be attentive enough for the first, and knowing enough for the second.”¹¹ Freilicher is attention; Anne Porter is “full of the pressure of the world,” a gray-haired queen of the not-there. Together they make—how to say it?—a life’s work.

In fact, they are more together than apart, this couple of the artist himself. On the same level, of equal importance, they seem elements of the same painterly act—Freilicher painting not only the trees that we do not see but, in effect, the woman on the bench that we do. Oriented to the left, Freilicher appears somewhat as if she is painting Anne Porter’s portrait, painting the “gray” version of herself. The gray person, for her part, might be contemplating the dark-haired person she was and somehow still is. Spontaneity paints deliberation until the two become reversed, and after a while it appears that Freilicher is deliberating and Anne Porter, the thinker, is spontaneous and free. The sitter may be distracted, diverted like the branches above her, but Freilicher persists in the task, which turns out to be a painting of two forms bending toward one another.

The painting’s failure is a success. Porter called it “flat,”¹² telling the curator that because he could not recall the scene very well and was deprived of his source (the sketch) he had no choice but to paint it in planar shapes, disassociating from the roundness, the fullness, of rich recollection. Maybe the oddly negative sound of Nyack, the painting’s place-name title—a word suggesting frustration, something like, “no,” “nah,” “ack,” “ach,” “that’s not it”—speaks to this flatness, this failure. But for this very reason the painting becomes a striking diagram, cold-concocted from no strongly surviving memory to achieve the lucidity of a myth: the painter drawing the spontaneity and deliberation that wed his art to the world.

How then is *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* “dense with experience?” In 1956, laid up with an illness at his family’s home on Great Spruce Head Island, Maine, Porter read Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. As Justin Spring relates, Porter had known of Proust’s novel since he was young, his mother having purchased each volume as it came out in Scott Moncrieff’s translation between 1922 and 1930.¹³ Though bored by the *longueurs* of the novel—some 2700 pages in all—Porter wrote to Schuyler that summer about “the passage of time” on the island, “where all past summers often tend to telescope”—a blend of era and ages. “I confuse my nephews with my brothers, and my nieces with my sister, and John’s boat with father’s.” Exempting his sons Jerry and Laurence from this blend of past and present—they

seemed new to him—Porter went on to say that he confused his autistic first-born son Johnny with himself, that he merged his own father’s disappointment in him (Fairfield) with his disappointment in Johnny, whose malady neither he nor the family’s doctors understood.¹⁴ In the recurrent music of the Porter household, the generations played a single refrain akin to the composer Vinteuil’s “little phrase” in Proust’s novel.

Is *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* a mix of eras and ages? On June 6, 1968, around the time he painted the picture, Porter recollected his life for the art historian Paul Cummings, who came to Southampton to interview him for The Archives of American Art.¹⁵ The house mostly hidden in the background in *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* suggests a home many times over: not only the artist’s house at 49 South Main Street in Southampton but the family home his father, an architect, built in Winnetka, Illinois, where the artist grew up, not to mention the other house, also built by James Foster Porter, on Great Spruce Head Island where the architect’s son read *Remembrance of Things Past*. Maybe the very brushes he used to paint the picture could not but relate—genealogically, in Proustian lost time—to the crooked brush—“it was bent”—with which Porter painted, in effect, his first picture—a painting of a blade of timothy grass that his grammar-school teacher praised.¹⁶ The flow of an artist’s experience—from here to there, then to now, normalized in art history as “development”—appears both murkier and brighter: present and everlasting.

But something else must enter the mix—an errant energy, a disruptive and killing element, if all is to be finally at peace.

In spring 1968, Porter was jogging with the family’s young golden retriever Bruno when he tripped over the leash—the dog had “suddenly swerved”—and broke his left elbow.¹⁷ He was out of a cast by May 8 and perhaps made *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* later that month. Although he was a right-handed painter and the injury did not directly affect his art, the painting seems to acknowledge the broken elbow in the left branch or “arm” of the oak tree on the painting’s right side that torques into the picture, with Porter’s signature on the branch’s bend or elbow.

Painters and writers often suffer under the feeling of an “obscure hurt,”¹⁸ to use Henry James’s phrase for the undisclosed injury that shaped his life. In Porter’s case, the injuries were numerous: his cold and demanding father; the confounding remoteness of his eldest child Johnny (whose autism the uncomprehending physicians blamed on Porter for being a distant father); the increasingly unnerving behavior of the bipolar poet Schuyler, living in the family home, with whom the bisexual Porter was close; and much else. But in *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom* the broken elbow does not seem to refer to injuries other than itself. Entering from above, it is an outlandish energy, a crack in the scheme of things that enters the unity to screw the design, give it a test, a fastening. What is it?

The true serpent in any garden is death. A part of the fall, the entry into knowledge, death enters even earlier—with God’s finger touching the clay of Adam to life (for so the fall feels foretold). On June 8, 1965, three years before painting

Forsythia and Pear in Bloom, Porter tried to beat a train across the tracks (as was his habit). This time the Long Island Railroad train sheared off the back of his yellow Chevrolet. The car flipped upside down and Porter, bleeding, opened the door, rolled out, and began walking around in circles, repeating, “My wife told me not to do this.” He should have been dead—but he wasn’t. In fact, he was basically unharmed. In 1975, when his son Laurence drove his father’s coffin to the graveyard in the new car Porter had purchased with the money he received from the railroad, he reflected that the new car symbolized “a gift of an extra decade of life” for his dad.¹⁹ *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, of 1968, was painted in borrowed time.

Porter died, as perhaps few artists have done, while jogging with his dog. On September 18, 1975, again with the golden retriever Bruno, Porter had a massive heart attack and dropped dead at the age of sixty-eight. A motorist saw his body and the dog and hailed the police.²⁰ In retrospect, the injury of seven years earlier was a grazing, a tickling, a painful funny bone, foretelling the force that, sweeping in from nowhere, resided always within. Left-handed, that force did not affect the right-hand work of the business at hand, but still it always extended its long arm, sweeping like a scythe, painting with a bent brush.

The break is the spark, so says *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, the truth without which there is no renewal. To be caught short in the brevity of spring, to have one’s breath taken away, is to make the moment a sum of life both retrospective and new, of all that was and is, in gladness and fullness to the last, a harmonious whole. ■

1. Fairfield Porter, *Forsythia and Pear in Bloom*, curatorial file, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
2. James Schuyler, “Freely Espousing,” in *freely espousing* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 14.
3. Fairfield Porter, letter to Ted Leigh, September 12, 1973, in Ted Leigh, ed., *Material Witness: The Selected Letters of Fairfield Porter* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 317.
4. *Ibid.*, 317.
5. Porter, letter to William Arrowsmith, July 23, 1956, in *Material Witness*, 153.
6. Porter, letter to Arthur Giardelli, August 3, 1968, in *Material Witness*, 255. Porter called this simultaneous distinction and unification of things “pluralism” or “concrete variety.” See “The Immediacy of Experience,” *The Nation*, January 9, 1960, reprinted in *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism, 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 81.
7. Schuyler, “May 24th or So,” in *freely espousing*, 56.
8. Justin Spring, *Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3-8.
9. John Szarkowski, “Eugène Atget,” in *Looking at Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 64; quoted by Porter in letter to Ted Leigh, October 26, 1973, in *Material Witness*, 320.
10. Porter, letter to Edward Henning, April 17, 1971, in *Material Witness*, 276.
11. Porter, letter to Henning, May 8, 1968, in *Material Witness*, 249-250.
12. Porter, letter to Henning, April 17, 1971, in *Material Witness*, 276.
13. Spring, *Fairfield Porter*, 226.
14. Porter, letter to Schuyler, September 14, 1956, in *Material Witness*, 160.
15. Paul Cummings, “Oral History Interview with Fairfield Porter,” June 6, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
16. Cummings, “Interview with Fairfield Porter.”
17. Spring, *Fairfield Porter*, 293.
18. Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 57-61; 720-721.
19. Spring, *Fairfield Porter*, 275. The railroad initially sent Porter a bill for damages to the locomotive, but Porter “had a lawyer send them a threatening letter, and the railroad eventually sent him two hundred dollars in compensation” for the destroyed car and hospital bills.
20. Spring, 344.



Fairfield Porter, *Self-Portrait in the Studio*, c. 1950, oil on canvas, 45 x 30 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Untitled (View Outside Southampton Studio)*, 1968, oil on Masonite, 18 x 20 1/2 in.
Collection of Ron and Patricia Padgett



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



Fairfield Porter, *Farmscape*, 1966, oil on board, 5 x 7 in.
Courtesy of Roland and Lori Pease



Fairfield Porter, *Farmhouse, Great Spruce Head Island*, 1954, oil on canvas, 25 3/8 x 36 3/4 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Oak Tree*, 1969, oil on canvas, 22 x 20 in.
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA



Fairfield Porter, *View of Studio with Elm Tree*, 1962, oil on canvas, 24 x 22 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Trees in Bloom*, 1968, oil on Masonite, 20 x 18 in.
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Landscape*, 1956, oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 38 1/2 in.
Private Collection, New York, NY



Fairfield Porter, *On the Porch*, 1961, oil on canvas, 45 x 40 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Lunch Under the Elm Tree*, 1954, oil on canvas, 78 x 59 7/8 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



Fairfield Porter, *The Garden Road*, 1962, oil on canvas, 62 1/8 x 48 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Armchair on Porch*, 1955, oil on canvas, 37 1/2 x 45 in.
Private Collection, New York, NY



Fairfield Porter, *Jimmy and John*, 1957–58, oil on canvas, 36 x 45 in.
Collection of Barbara Kratchman



Fairfield Porter, *The Screen Porch*, 1964, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY



Fairfield Porter, *A Day Indoors*, 1962, Liquitex on canvas, 71 3/4 x 54 7/8 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



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



Fairfield Porter, *Katie*, 1969, oil on Masonite, 32 x 26 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



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



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, *Looking Through the House*, 1961, oil on canvas, 20 x 18 in.
Private Collection, Chicago, IL



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



Fairfield Porter, *Table*, 1970, watercolor on paper, 30 x 25 in.
Collection of Elizabeth Feld Herzberg



Fairfield Porter, *The Orchard*, 1964, oil on linen, 22 x 24 in.
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA



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, *Morning Sky*, 1972, oil on board, 14 x 16 in.
Private Collection, Chicago, courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY



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



Fairfield Porter, *Penobscot Bay with Yellow Field*, 1968, oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 55 1/4 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



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



The most prominent things
in the painter's experience
are right in front of him,
like the paint on the canvas.

Fairfield Porter, 1974

Fairfield Porter, *Self Portrait*, 1968, oil on canvas, 59 x 45 3/8 in.
Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH



Thomas Hart Benton, *Sunday Morning*, 1934, oil on hardboard, 18 x 24 in.
The Art Students League of New York, New York, NY



Jackson Pollock, *Deposition*, c. 1930-33, oil on canvas, 7 1/2 x 16 in.
The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, courtesy of Olney Gleason



Jane Freilicher, *Still Life*, c. 1965, oil on canvas, 14 x 16 in.
Collection of Loring and Diana Knoblauch

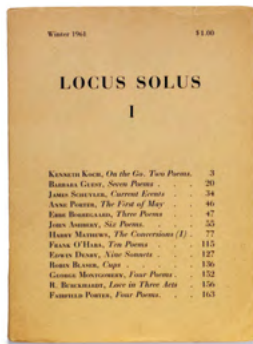


Joe Brainard, *Untitled (Still Life)*, 1968, watercolor on paper, 14 x 11 in.
Collection of Avo Samuelian and Hector Manuel Gonzalez

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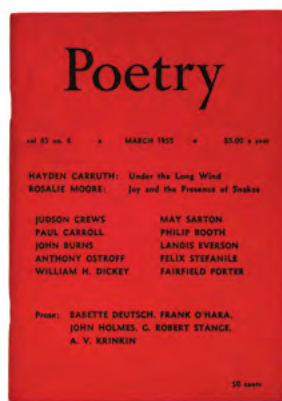
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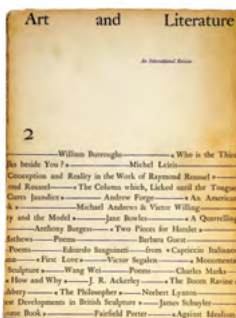
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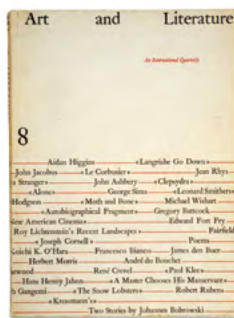
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17.



1.

The Kenyon Review

Vol. 3, No. 4

Autumn 1941

This issue of *The Kenyon Review* includes a letter to the editor by Porter in which he criticizes the painter and writer Wyndham Lewis for a dismissive article about Pablo Picasso that Lewis had contributed to a previous issue. Porter accuses Lewis of looking at art through “spectacles of words.”

2.

Locus Solus

No. 1

Winter 1961

The literary magazine *Locus Solus* was conceived by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Harry Mathews and James Schuyler. In addition to four poems by Porter, “The Mountain,” “To Laurence,” “At the End of Summer,” and “When the Morning Train,” this issue includes writing by John Ashbery, Rudy Burckhardt, Edwin Denby, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, as well as the poem “The First of May” by Anne Porter.

3.

The Poets of the New York School

Selected and edited by

John Bernard Myers, 1969

The poems in this anthology were collected by John Bernard Myers, co-founder of the influential Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where Porter had his first solo exhibition in 1952. In his introduction, Myers notes the “thoroughly symbiotic” relationship between painters and poets, and works by painters and poets appear side-by-side. 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.

4.

Poetry: A Magazine of Verse

Vol. 85, No. 6

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.

5.

Art and Literature

No. 2

Summer 1964

The literary magazine *Art and Literature* was published by the painters Anne Dunn and Rodrigo Moynihan and edited by John Ashbery. This issue includes one of Porter’s most ambitious essays, “Against Idealism.” In it, Porter contrasts the kind of knowledge pursued by art, which associates “reality” with “appearances,” and the kind of knowledge pursued by science, which associates “reality” with “ideas.” “Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy,” Porter explains in the essay’s final lines, “and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and the ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting.”

6.

Art and Literature

No. 8

Spring 1966

This issue of *Art and Literature* includes an essay on Joseph Cornell, one of his most insightful accounts of a contemporary artist that Porter produced. In the essay, Porter argues that Cornell’s enigmatic boxes “escape the classification of criticism.” Each work resembles “a room, 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.”

7.

ARTnews

Vol. 51, No. 3

May 1952

Porter began writing for *ARTnews* in 1951, having been recommended to the magazine’s editor Thomas Hess by the painter Elaine de Kooning. This issue includes reviews of exhibitions by a dozen artists including Jane Freilicher, who had just had her first one-person show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. Porter’s review was the first that Freilicher ever received. In it, Porter praises her paintings, noting that their ambiguous passages “add to one’s enjoyment, as the underlying depths in a friend’s character makes the relationship richer.” Porter and Freilicher would become close friends, and Porter would publish another, longer article, “Freilicher Paints a Picture,” in 1955.

8.

ARTnews

Vol. 52, No. 3

May 1953

This issue of *ARTnews* includes Porter’s article, “Tworlov Paints a Picture,” as well as reviews of recent exhibitions by Raphael Soyer; Magritte; and André Masson.

9.

ARTnews

Vol. 52, No. 7

November 1953

This issue of *ARTnews* includes reviews of more than a dozen artists, among them William F. Draper; Jack Levine; Barbara Forst; George Inness; and Yasuo Kuniyoshi.

10.

James Schuyler
freely espousing
1969

This is the first collection of poems published by James Schuyler, and features several poems that Schuyler wrote while he was living with Porter in his homes at 49 South Main Street in Southampton and on Great Spruce Head Island in Maine. The cover of the collection was designed by the painter Alex Katz, who was also a friend of Porter's and a frequent guest.

11.

James Schuyler
Hymn to Life
1974

Like *freely espousing*, this collection of poems by James Schuyler includes several pieces that Schuyler wrote while he was living with Porter and his family. The cover of the collection was designed by Porter and shows the pear tree that stood in the backyard of the Porters' home in Southampton, which could be seen from the window of Schuyler's room.

12.

Parenthèse
No. 4
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 elaborates, "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."

13.

Partisan Review
Vol. 22, No. 4
Fall 1955

This issue of the influential literary magazine *Partisan Review* includes a letter to the editor in which Porter criticizes Clement Greenberg's essay "American-Type Painting," which had appeared in a previous issue. Writing as a painter-critic, Porter suggests that Greenberg has little knowledge of the basic elements of painting including color, value, and the play of light and dark, noting, "He is very willing to tell painters what they may or may not do, without enough understanding of what they have done or are doing." Porter would publish another indictment of Greenberg's art criticism seven years later in *Art in America*.

14.

Evergreen Review
Vol. 5, No. 20
September-October 1961

This issue of *Evergreen Review* includes "Painters and Poets in Collaboration," Porter's review of a series of volumes published by Tiber Press pairing work by poets and painters. Porter takes the opportunity to reflect on the work of some of the period's most influential writers, many of whom were his friends. Frank O'Hara's poems present "a disheveled wealth of realistic details all somewhat altered by the stamp of the author's personality." Kenneth Koch's irony "washes away conventional sentimentality, until you are left with the emotions of childhood again, seen now with an innocence of maturity." John Ashbery's language is "opaque," his words having "more objective reality than reality of meaning," whereas James Schuyler's poems are "transparent windows on a complex view."

15.

Art in America
Vol. 50
1962

This issue of *Art in America* features the essay "Recent Painting USA." In it, Porter gives his fullest account of his opposition to Clement Greenberg, the most influential art critic of the period. Taking issue with Greenberg's claim that abstraction had become not only the dominant but the necessary form of painting, Porter counters: "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."

16.

The Nation

May 28, 1960

This issue of *The Nation* includes a review of a recent survey of Constructivism. Having described works by Malevich, Kandinsky, and Lissitzky, Porter turns to what he sees as the contradictions of the movement more broadly. "It is the pretension of the Constructivist that he sees more profoundly than any other artist: he sees below appearance. He believes he is closer to reality," Porter explains. And yet, insofar as the Constructivists claimed to "see the reality below the surface in a Platonic way" they adhered to what Porter argued was the "traditional view that spirit and intellect are higher than materiality." What is worse, their work embodied elements of Communism that Porter insisted were repressive, including "the combination of radicalism with a disciplining of the individual," "the desire for absolute order," and "the simplification of all problems to black and white."

17.

It is.

No. 2, Autumn 1958

This issue of *It is.* includes "The Short Review," an essay in which Porter describes his approach to art criticism. He 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 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 attempt to assess the importance of a work but would instead give a sense of its "character." Rather than stating a work's meaning explicitly, they would work by implication, aware that when the evaluation of the critic is "explicit" something is "almost unavoidably left out." Most importantly, reviews grounded in the critic's impression of a painting or sculpture would not attempt to give a comprehensive account of that work. Instead, they 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."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fairfield Porter: What Everyone Knows would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of the talented and dedicated team at the Art Students League of New York, in particular Michael Hall, Artistic and Executive Director, under whose leadership the League has entered a new and exciting chapter in its history.

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The exhibition benefited from the advice and expertise of a key group of early collaborators, many of whom have lasting connections to Fairfield Porter and his circle. Andrew Arnot and Elisabeth Ivers at Tibor de Nagy Gallery provided the initial enthusiasm and endorsement that allowed the exhibition to evolve from an idea into a project. Corinne Erni, Michele Heinrici, and Kaitlin Halloran at the Parrish Art Museum confirmed the first and largest group of loans that allowed that project to move forward; and Shelley Farmer at Hirschl & Adler Modern helped secure several additional loans that ensured that project's success. Pivotal assistance was also provided by James Barron and Dylan Everett at James Barron Art; Caroline Black at The Pollock-Krasner Foundation; Scott Rothkopf and Kim Conaty at the Whitney Museum of American Art; Frank Del Deo at Del Deo & Barzune; Eric Gleason at Olney Gleason; and halley k harrisberg at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

The exhibition's catalogue was designed by Lucy Han, who brought to it a degree of nuance and sophistication equal to its subject, and was enriched by Alex Nemerov, who contributed a characteristically profound and perceptive text. Flora Birnbaum improved both the exhibition and catalogue by adding her intelligence, wisdom, energy, and taste.

Any account of Fairfield Porter is indebted to the work of the scholars, critics, and curators who have become the stewards of his career, in particular, Rackstraw Downes, editor of *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism, 1935-1975*; Ted Leigh, editor of *Material Witness: The Selected Letters of Fairfield Porter*; Joan Ludman, author of *Fairfield Porter: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings, Watercolors, and Pastels*; Justin Spring, author of *Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art*; and Karen Wilkin and John Wilmerding, authors of *Fairfield Porter*.

Finally, and most importantly, deepest thanks are reserved for the exhibition's generous lenders.

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Elizabeth Feld Herzberg

Loring and Diana Knoblauch

Barbara Kratchman

James Barron Art

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC

Ron and Patricia Padgett

Parrish Art Museum

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Smith College Museum of Art

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