



*Comet*, oil on panel, 16" x 20", 2011

in the rain in *Red Rhythm*, threading her way through traffic that is at once accommodating but also ominous, the headlights of face-like cars ablaze in her wake. In *Little Architects*, children run across an alleyway into a dark archway, the hair of one of the little girls rushing up into the air like a flame.

FeBland is a painter of urban life. Where he lives, New York, and where he travels (frequently to London and Frankfurt where he has gallery representation), are the chief locales he adopts. And while he may depict a subway entering an elevated Brooklyn platform (*Infinite Sight*), a child being pulled on a sled through Columbus Circle (*Turning Six*), or a painter walking her completed canvas through an indifferent Manhattan (*Send in the Clowns*), he admits to often later adding an imagined element to create a heightened drama. He knows how to tell a story and entice a reader to it. FeBland told me, for instance, that when conceiving *Devil May Care*, he took the conceit of a public swimming pool at dusk as the reason for the work. But weeks later, haunted by the sense that something was still missing, he painted in a figure propelled from a diving board, the arms and legs seen flailing at the center of the skyfield. By introducing this figure, we understand his desire to tell us a story—one that is still mid plot, that has not yet reached its end. In that sense, the viewer is never done with looking at one of FeBland's works.

When I first met David FeBland in his SoHo studio, shortly before the opening of his solo show at the George Billis Gallery, he told me about a real-life cosmic experience. "I was splashing paint and a little piece fell onto the surface—it was purely an accident," he explained, pointing to a work on his easel called *Comet*. "A painter never wants to be afraid of accidents. If you're not trying to create masterpieces, then you're not worrying about failing, you're not worrying about mistakes along the way." To look at the scene he referenced is to see two figures negotiating a furious blizzard at nighttime. But there, above the glare of the streetlamps and the ambient light cast by the city is the flash of a comet.

This subtle, yet powerful moment of drama in the painting harkens to FeBland's self-directive that his paintings be propelled by action and narrative. In that sense, every canvas by him contains a metaphorical verb. Virtually every painting is one of movement—both actual and implied. The viewer is told a story, one with multiple plots, each compelling. To see a painting of his is to occupy it.

In every one of his paintings, there is animation. In *Fun-O-Rama*, bumper cars race to make contact, while their drivers simultaneously avoid impact. A young woman casually courses a city street

Although FeBland depicts every kind of figure—little girls (*Whirlagirl*), uniformed African-American car washers (*Antic*), middle-aged Jewish Orthodox men (*Path of Escape*), contestants at a dog show (*Play the Game*)—he has a penchant for beautiful women. Literally front and center at many of his works are young, alluring, fashionable women, clearly the human form to which he most responds and wishes to present to his viewers. Yet, there is nothing lurid or exploitive about his depictions of such beauty. He does so with profound dignity and respect. Indeed, many of these women seem haunted by uglier forces—having to dance with unkempt men, leaving a beach whose horizon is dotted with ships spewing exhaust, carrying surfboards across a mean alleyway. In *City Afire*, for instance, a young woman passes beneath New York’s Highline at that pivotal moment when the setting sun sets the streets ablaze. Here, his central character seems unaware of the dangers and tumult surrounding her—a skateboarder pulled by a bus in the center of the street, background figures that appear to be either jogging or running for their lives. By juxtaposing some of his female figures with otherwise unbeautiful elements of the city, the women emerge as elements even more lovely. That’s one of the stories he seems to want to tell repeatedly.

As a longtime New Yorker (he was born in London, but came to America as a boy), FeBland is a participant in the cityscape he inhabits. His methodology involves observing the actions of people on the street for days at a time before committing those scenes to canvas. He acts like an urban anthropologist. Some might liken his works to latter-day versions of the Ash Can School, particularly Everett Shinn, noted for his ability to tell the truth with paint, to relate stories of urban life that were both beautiful and unseemly.

But FeBland is a man of today, right now, and, so, if we are to think of other artists to whom his canvases are related, we would be more apt to turn to film—perhaps to the real-to-life, character-driven films by the likes of John Sayles or Noah Baumbach (who directed “The Squid and the Whale”). There is an unvarnished veracity to FeBland’s works that imbues them with a profound resonance. As FeBland told me, “So much contemporary representational work today seems to be more of a depiction of a filter of the world than of the world itself. I guess I think that my own work stands in opposition to that—I go back again and again to the same source and the story behind it rather than its distilled version.”

And because FeBland is committed to the telling of a story, viewers always know what is being shown to them. Yes, FeBland is, ultimately, a figurative, realist painter. But there is always a discernible abstraction, too. As he explains, “I’ve always felt that a good representational painting incorporates a good abstraction. It sets a mood without having to tell the entire story.”

Look at a FeBland work and you’ll see his people, you’ll recognize his settings, whether it’s a city street or a desolate seaside boardwalk, but you’ll also see suggestions of other less articulated forms. These abstractions set his figures in relief. It’s not that FeBland seeks to play with or challenge the viewer. Rather, he courts the viewer. As he remarked to me, “If a painting has a seductive element to it, you’re delivering more to the audience.”

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