



ALAN FELTUS

AN AIR OF STILLNESS



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A captivating air of stillness underlies all of Alan Feltus's figurative tableaux. His self-possessed females and their male counterparts inhabit a private realm suspended in time and space, and nothing out of context interferes to break the spell. With his rich but unobtrusive brushstrokes, precise palette of tempered Mediterranean color and uncannily perceptive eye, Feltus gives expression to rarified and faintly voyeuristic scenarios suffused with longing, expectation, boredom, anticipation, uncertainty, and regret. Both hypnotic and mysterious, his paintings pose many questions but reveal few answers.

Feltus came of age in mid-twentieth century New York City. Raised by a beautiful but troubled bohemian mother, he was often left to his own devices. He attended alternative schools and spent one high school year in Rome with her, but it was his association with her artist friends—some of whom became mentors—that inspired him and helped him to thrive. He spent hours in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, where he developed a keen awareness of the scope of art, and of his own tastes and preferences. Henri Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy* was a favorite, as were the haunting paintings of French-Polish artist Balthus. By the early 1960s, Feltus landed in art school, eventually earning his Master of Fine Arts Degree in painting at Yale University. While teaching at the School of the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio, he was awarded the Rome Prize Fellowship (*Prix de Rome*), which meant a two-year stay at the American Academy in Rome.

Living again in Rome was extremely fruitful for Feltus. He had no constraints or requirements to fulfill, and was free to experiment in a beautiful studio and roam the city's galleries and museums. During this period he discovered a work that would become central to his artistic life—the painting *Susanna*, by Italian artist Felice Casorati, installed at the Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. A casually intimate scene of a nude woman seated next to a fully clothed man in a closely defined interior space, it struck him like a bolt of lightning. The painting seemed to him to have, "everything I could want my own paintings to have." He considered it the perfect composition: two figures, select pieces of furniture, and a few scattered papers. It had the "quiet, contemplative character" that he craved. This work solidified Feltus's commitment to narrative figure painting, and endorsed the kind of work his nature directed him towards.

Returning to the United States, Feltus took up a full-time teaching position at the American University in Washington DC, and began to regularly exhibit his work at the Forum Gallery in New York City. He married artist Lani Irwin, and settled on a farm in Maryland, to teach and paint. But the pull of his Italian experiences and a life dedicated solely to art led him to conclude his teaching career of twelve years, and with his family, relocate to the historic town of Assisi in Italy.

Feltus flourished under the influence of the Italian aesthetic and the peace of his Assisi studio, which he maintained



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by generally acting as his own model (for both male and female figures). His admiration for the stately grace of Roman sculpture, and the compositional skills of Italian fresco masters like Masaccio, Andrea Mantegna, and particularly Piero della Francesca filtered into his work, as the classically-infused figures and experimental style of *Near Distance* (1992), confirms. A painting Feltus made a few years after settling in Assisi, its drama focuses on the interaction of two enigmatic subjects. The languid posture of the female stretching across a table on her elbows and her androgynous companion's upright pose and curious costume impart an eerie theatrical tone. Despite the pair's apparent familiarity and ease, their eyes tell a tale of rejection, disillusionment, and even sorrow. Indecipherable papers and mysterious geometric details—a bright orange rectangle behind them, the double rectangles on the tilting floor, and the oddly skewed perspective of the corner—come together to amplify the scene's fascinating ambivalence and underscore the mystery at its center.

Ten years on, and under the spell of Casorati's *Susanna*, Feltus paints the lovely *Time Together* (2001). In a warm-toned and light-filled interior, a man and woman rest together easily. She sits in her chair attired only in underpants, arms raised to adjust her hair, a faint sunburn visible on her arms and neck. He sits fully clothed, holding an unfolded paper, musing on the bed nearby. The disparity of her casual nudity and his full attire is arresting, yet it evokes an atmosphere of intimacy and trust. In a group of later works, *The Red Chair*, *And Now, What?*, and

The Red Ribbon, all from 2013, Feltus continues the theme, but a more edgy undertone now prevails. He again sets pairs of figures into finely structured interiors, but opposing body language and pairs of eyes that never meet usher in a new tension. In *The Red Chair*, the man's expressive hands compete with his confrontational gaze for our attention. But what do his unusual positions indicate, and why is his companion looking elsewhere? In *And Now, What?*, do the contents of the letter she holds impact only her, or has it also affected her aloof companion? In *The Red Ribbon*, the woman tries on, or does she remove, her slender thread? And why does her companion stand facing away from her? Feltus leaves us much to ponder.

In *Dreaming Gypsy*, painted in 2016, two figures share the same hushed, overheated room, but again dwell in different worlds. An unusually subdued range of muted browns and blues generate a unified but restrained atmosphere. A moonlit painting (or is it a window?) oversees the dreaming woman on the bed, allowing in a rare glimpse of the wider world. Her deeply angular pose contrasts with the easy position of her seated companion, who pauses in her drawing, sunk in a reverie. Compact areas of blue—pillow and skirt, the two chairs, and especially the seated artist's eyes at the very center of the composition—punctuate the scene and lead from the sleeper to her distracted companion, and then back to her again. We might wonder, which of the two women are in the midst of the deeper dream?



Although most of his work centers on multiple figures, Feltus has also made a number of singular portraits. Most are intimate three-quarter views of the head and shoulders of young women, with distinctive backdrops ranging from simple muted colors to descriptive interiors. Two noteworthy exceptions, *Tuscana* (2005), and *Bernadette* (2014), reveal Feltus's lovely facility for landscape. His gracefully depicted, open countryside is a pleasing reversal from the faintly claustrophobic air of some of his enclosed spaces, and also situates his paintings within a long line of historic portrait paintings.

The young subject of *Tuscana* is framed by a fragile blue and golden sky filled with late afternoon light and bracketed by two delicate trees. Her auburn hair and deep sienna-colored garment brings the scene a lively glow, but her determined glance is filled with challenge. She dares us to defy her, and holds her ground with poise. The contrast between the harmonious pastoral setting and the resolute young woman makes this a particularly striking work. In a different mood, Feltus sets the wistful *Bernadette* in a more somber landscape. Her expressive face encompasses longing and loss—a bereft melancholy sunk in memory. Her extraordinarily gaze seems both internal and far away—a demonstration of Feltus's gifted facility with expression. The fading sky, the muted tones of the fields and buildings, and the late season light evoking both the year's ending and the young woman's melancholy, bring everything together in another moving portrait.

Alan Feltus makes narratively compelling and meticulously executed paintings. Every object and figure is consciously selected, fashioned, and arranged to enhance the environment he aims to create. He explains, "I am most interested in paintings that have a balance between abstract composition and readable subject matter." He compares his process to that of a choreographer working out dance movements within a carefully designed plan. He applies this approach, "... not only to figures, but also to every form in a painting. It can be a piece of drapery, a chair, a shadow on the floor. The shape and color and location of every element ... will have a gesture and a weight. They will all have a purpose and they will all carry meanings." Feltus's singular aesthetic and quiet temperament imbues his art with an air of timeless stillness, so rarely found outside of medieval or Asian art, and so precious in today's hectic world. He has chosen a kind of magic formula centered on the arena of private human relationship, finding it full of possibility. As he writes, "My paintings are about many things, and at the same time they are about nothing more than painting itself. What the figures communicate is open to interpretation, and as such, meanings are endless." Like storytellers of old, he leaves us to follow our imagination.

—Helaine Glick, Independent Curator



Cover:

Near Distance, 1992, oil on linen, 39 1/2 x 55 inches

Inside Flap:

Time Together, 2001, oil on canvas, 59 x 39 1/2 inches

Inside Panels:

Bernadette, 2014, oil on linen, 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches

Dreaming Gypsy, 2016, oil on linen, 43 3/8 x 31 3/8 inches

Tuscan, 2005, oil on linen, 12 x 18 inches

Back Cover:

And Now What?, 2013, oil on linen, 47 1/4 x 39 1/4 inches

The Red Ribbon, 2013, oil on linen, 47 1/4 x 39 1/4 inches

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