What do you get when you cross Jan Vermeer, Edward Hopper and a hyperrealist cultural historian? Max Ferguson!

# all around


# the town

BY BJ FOREMAN

My Father in the Subway III, 1984 (oil on panel) © by Max Ferguson; Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

MAX FERGUSON IS something of a maker of documentaries-in-paint. He peoples his art with family, friends and the elderly and records disappearing ways of life. The other star of his continuing art show is his beloved New York City. He's often out and about location-scouting and making photographic studies for future paintings. "I run when I hear that a building is slated for demolition," he says. The consequence of this is that many of the scenes, as well as the people he's painted over the years, are now gone. This is probably the unspoken, visceral message that resonates with his viewers, and that's how he likes it.

## Quest for Perpetuity

Preservation has been a part of Ferguson's aesthetic since his student days. While at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam during his junior year in college, he began cultivating museum conservators' opinions, hoping to learn how to make his own work archival. Historians estimate that, during the Dutch Golden Age (1600–1700), there were a few million paintings, drawings and prints in Dutch homes. Of those, only one percent remains. Ferguson wants his paintings to last a thousand years.

To this end, he tried painting on all sorts of panels, including fiberglass and hardboard, before settling on a custom-made surface of two all-aluminum panels separated by a honeycomb core. "They're lightweight and, in short, archival," he says. For larger projects, he paints on canvas, but he prefers the aluminum.

The artwork isn't the only thing Ferguson wishes to preserve. He habitually documents his thoughts and practice. In the 1970s he began noting on the backs of his paintings the exact paints and gesso he'd used as well as other useful nuts-and-bolts information, so that if the painting ever became damaged, it could be restored to its original condition.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** "I did a great deal of experimenting with the missing tiles in the background of ***My Father in the Subway III*** (oil, 20x30)," says Ferguson. "I wanted what would work best compositionally and aid in balancing the painting as a whole."

**RIGHT:** "I feel that ***Me and My Father*** (oil, 26x26) is a nice marriage between 17th-century Holland and 20th-century New York," says Ferguson. "This is the only painting I've done that depicts both my father and me."

These notations for future conservators evolved into riotous collages of his life while working on the painting, including things such as photographs of his children, scraps of sheet music, notes to self and quotes in various languages. (See *Katz's, 7 A.M.*, Front and Back; page 57.)

## Vermeer and Hopper Blend

In terms of subject, compositional elements and technique, Ferguson's work owes a debt to the Dutch Golden Age, particularly to Jan Vermeer (1632–1675). For style and attitude, however, Ferguson is purely American in his vision. Like his more recent influence on the American end of the equation, Edward Hopper (1882–1967), Ferguson paints the city as a lonely place. "Many of my paintings," he says, "would make one think that I'm a loner; yes and no. While I've never lacked for family or friends, I've often felt like a bit of a misfit, on the outside looking in. That sense of alienation is certainly reflected in my work."

The typical Ferguson painting features a lone person observed from a certain distance, as if the observer were standing a way off, not at all associated with the subject matter. The artist himself is often the figure in the paintings, as are his wife and family. Rarely do these subjects face us. Instead, we see their backs. "When the model is depicted from the back," says Ferguson, "it helps to bring the viewer into the painting as a co-observer."

He's an avid practitioner of the occupational portrait, a traditon that flourished in the Dutch Golden Age. One of Ferguson's canvases shows us a barber in his shop, giving a customer not a haircut but a shave—something not so common these days. There's his portrait of the owner of a doll hospital at his work. Yet another shows us a storefront, behind which a tailor plies his trade. "I naturally relate to craftsmen who are trying to do the best job they can versus performing the job perfunctorily," he says. "I also believe strongly that

**BELOW:** "While most of my paintings have people in them, I like that ***Thunderbolt*** (Coney Island series; oil, 22x30), hints at the presence of people in the past but also has an abandoned, forlorn atmosphere," says Ferguson. "I was trying to capture the regal, monumentality of this roller coaster fallen on hard times. The steel and wood take on a human quality."

Coney Island Thunderbolt, 1990 (oil on canvas) © by Max Ferguson; Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

everyone has an obligation to make the world a better place. Sometimes those whose jobs seem, on the surface, to be unimportant are in fact the ones serving vital roles in society."

This is the focus in *Katz's, 7 A.M.* (page 57), which shows a man mopping the floor at one of New York City's iconic delis. The upside-down chairs and tables provide rhythmic flow toward the vanishing point behind the man with the mop. "This painting contains three of the most challenging sections I've painted," wrote Ferguson in the catalog of his 2010 show at the Gallery Henoch, "Urban Intimacy." He's referring to the shifting colors of the neon (in the background, behind the hanging salami), the floor and the sweeper's face. But there's no intimacy here. The man mopping the floor is alone, communing only with the mop, and what otherwise would be a bustling place is closed and empty.

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For a step-by-step demonstration of *Woman in Mirror*, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

**BELOW**: "In ***Woman in Mirror*** (oil, 9x8), I dealt with several spatial planes: the woman, the wall and mirror, and the reflection of the room," says Ferguson. "This small painting forced me to work very close, and it forces the viewer to stand close. It seems that the louder and larger the works of my contemporaries grow, the quieter and smaller my paintings become."

One work steeped in Dutch tradition is *Shoe Repair Shop* (page 59). We see the scene from the rear of the shop; both the customer and the shoemaker have their backs to us. It's a hollow moment, with no communication between the two. The shoemaker's face, however, is reflected in a mirror hung on the back wall. A poster looks like a window through which we see the Manhattan Bridge. The same wall sports a framed collage of photographs. Perhaps this is a little joke on photorealist art, but Ferguson doesn't find much humor here. That shop was gone within a year of the painting's completion. The repairman couldn't afford the higher, gentrified rent that followed urban renewal. As in Dutch painting, a mirror here signifies the vanitas motif, reminding us of the fragility of life and the shallowness of vanity.

Another tip of the hat to Dutch painting is the wooden board laid across the shop's counter. A similar element is seen in *The Goldsmith* (www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc) by 15th-century Netherlandish painter Petrus Christus.

An allusion to 17th-century Dutch painting is the depiction of an interior scene viewed through doorways and windows, with a mirror reflecting beyond the picture plane. Framed in this way, Ferguson endows the 21st-century mundane with timelessness.

## New York People and Places

Ferguson has painted "portraits" of Radio City Music Hall but also the neon facades of New York neighborhood dives we've not heard of. Like the French Impressionists, he paints café and restaurant scenes. One of Ferguson's features the great cabaret singer Bobby Short at the piano. Another shows us a woman having a snack at a coffee shop. This last echoes the desolation of Hopper's New York scenes.

When there's much to say, Ferguson paints in series, such as those centering on Coney Island, Katz's Deli and Julian's, the pool hall

### WHAT IS AN OCCUPATIONAL PORTRAIT?

An occupational portrait depicts a person at his or her daily work. This tradition, which flourished in the 15th to 17th centuries, has its roots in the late 14th century, when the prospering urban class began to commission art that wasn't strictly devotional. The occupational portrait is related to genre painting, which depicts ordinary people in everyday life.

# *Katz's, 7 A.M.*, Front and Back

Ferguson painted *Katz's, 7 A.M.* (bottom, at left; oil, 20x20) in 2009, although the iconic scene would have looked much the same 20, 30 or 40 years ago. Realizing, however, that such familiar scenes have a way of disappearing, Ferguson seeks them out and preserves them in his paintings.

But preserving the scene is only half the job. On the back of *Katz's, 7 A.M.* (bottom, at right) is a documentary hodgepodge, recording not only Ferguson's notes about the painting but also chronicling his thoughts and activities during the months when he created the painting. Such collages of clippings, photos and handwritten notes typically grace the back of Ferguson's artworks.

he frequented in his youth. As strong as each piece is in and of itself, his life's work is more than the sum of its parts; it's autobiographical as a whole, for Ferguson himself as well as for his city.

Often the protagonist is his own father. For 23 years, Ferguson junior painted Ferguson senior playing pool, purchasing a New York Times, standing in the subway, visiting a restaurant and passing time in Florida. The father's usual role is the quintessential New Yorker. These paintings didn't stop when Ferguson's father passed away six years ago. At the time of this writing, the artist was beginning a series based on photographic studies he took at the hospital as his father lay dying (See *My Father at Mount Sinai* (page 61). "It's not so much a painting I wanted to do, but one that I felt I *had* to do," he says. In every way, this painting marks a departure for the artist. It's a poignant image, fully frontal, quite candid. Ferguson transforms the drapery divider used for privacy into a Jewish prayer shawl. Although most of his previous paintings manifest a certain distance between the subjects and the picture plane—usually four to 10 feet—this one brings viewers much closer.

### Modus Operandi

But art and personal history aside, on a more technical level, how does Ferguson begin a painting? "While I prefer to work from

**MATERIALS**

**SURFACES:** two all-aluminum panels separated by a honeycomb core from **Museum Services**; canvas for very large paintings

**PAINT: Winsor & Newton** ivory black, Mars black, titanium white, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, permanent madder lake, burnt sienna, cadmium red, cadmium yellow, raw sienna, Naples yellow

**MEDIUM:** turpentine and cold-pressed linseed oil, progressing with each layer from 2 to 10 percent linseed oil to turpentine

**BRUSHES: Winsor & Newton** Series 7 kolinsky sables for watercolors, sizes 000 to 0

## Monochromatic and Color Underpaintings

**BY MAX FERGUSON**



I feel *Shoe Repair Shop* is one of my most successful paintings; I put a great deal of forethought into its composition and color scheme, particularly the blues, yellows and reds. I like that the design keeps the eye moving from one section to another, and I identify strongly with craftsmen who take such pride in their work.

**1.** After transferring the lines of my drawing to a panel, I apply a rough, thin underpainting layer, using burnt umber, black and white.

**2.** Here you see the completed monochromatic underpainting.

**3.** Here I've begun the first color layer, which I still consider an underpainting. To achieve my desired results, I find I must use sable brushes that are intended for watercolors.

**4.** I apply one or two layers of underpainting in color. While I make most of my decisions prior to beginning a piece, I often make changes while I'm in the process of painting (note that the buttons on the woman's pants have been eliminated in this completed color underpainting).

**5.** With each successive layer, the painting becomes more detailed and polished, as you can see by comparing the completed *Shoe Repair Shop* (oil, 16x16) with the previous steps. Oil paintings generally take me between two and four months to complete.

life," says Ferguson, "with most of my subject matter, that's somewhere between impractical and impossible. I generally begin with photographic studies, which are a jumping-off point—the final painting is radically different from these studies." Next comes the drawing stage, which he calls "the dress rehearsal." He shifts elements in and out, moving them around the drawing like chessmen. "I'm impatient," he says. "I'm always so anxious to start painting. If I did sketch more, I'd probably save myself a lot of trouble!"

When he has the drawing right, he gives the back of the paper a light wash in oil paint, half ivory black and half burnt umber. "I let this dry for about a half hour; then I position the drawing on the aluminum," he says. "Next I transfer the lines with a pencil."

After transferring the drawing, he roughs in the piece with a thin underpainting, restricting himself to a palette of burnt umber, black and white. "For the first 25 years of my career," he says, "I used only black and white for the underpainting. Then I began adding umber. It dries faster than just black and white, and the umber adds warmth." Next comes a color underpainting applied in one or two layers. Each layer becomes more and more detailed, and as crystalline as the finished product looks, it's often quite different from the drawing Ferguson started with. (See Monochromatic and Color Underpaintings, at bottom).

Ferguson is clinically obsessive-compulsive. "My personality serves the kind of work I do

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To see more of Ferguson's art, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

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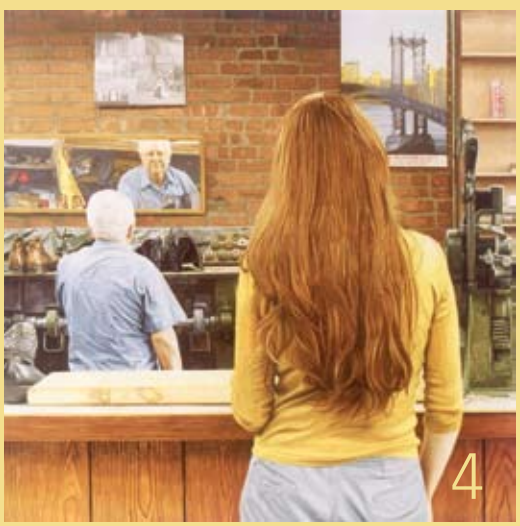

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**RIGHT:** "My work is essentially autobiographical," says Ferguson. "My new role as husband and father inspired ***Interiors*** (oil, 30x42). I consciously made a number of art historical references—to Vermeer, Van Eyck and Hopper."

Subterraneans, 1990 (graphite and chalk on paper)
© by Max Ferguson; Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

**ABOVE:** "For ***Subterraneans*** (graphite and chalk, 20x30), I consciously tried to wed an old master technique—graphite and chalk on colored paper—with a hard-hitting contemporary urban image.

well," he says, "driving me to make everything perfect. I occasionally make hysterical stabs at loosening my technique, but inevitably my obsessive-compulsiveness gets the best of me, and I return to my usual modus operandi."

Over the years, he's gradually changed the way he mixes his paints, and he has added more pigments to his palette. Originally he used about six pigments; now he uses 10 to 12. Originally he would mix a large amount of base tone for a given area and then just add black and white to create tonal variations. "Needless to say," remarks Ferguson, "the results were fairly dull and muted." He then began creating about three variations—from light to dark—of his base mix, still adding white and black for the extremes of range. "Now I generally employ about five to six tonal variations," he says, "and, naturally, this gives me a much richer range."

He goes on to explain that, when painting skin, he'll add to his base mixtures a range of redder tones for areas such as cheeks and fingers, creating from these many in-between variations. He mixes out the paint the night before, putting the various colors in 35-millimeter plastic film containers and labeling the fleshtones one through five.

From underpainting to finished work, Ferguson's paintings usually consist of three to four layers, and each painting takes two to four months to complete.

## Out and About

Given Ferguson's predilection for painting the people and places of New York City, one might assume he seldom leaves that locale. Actually, he splits his time between New York and Jerusalem and manages two studios. "It's a little fractured," he says, "but I've gotten used to it. Because I work from photographs, where I am physically when I'm painting isn't key. In fact, I did most of my Coney Island series in Copenhagen."

Traveling with completed or partially completed paintings can be troublesome,

though. "Crating and packing can be quite the headache," he says. "I'm fortunate that most of my paintings are small, usually under 20x30, so I can often bring them with me as carry-ons."

Ferguson also "gets around" as he maintains relationships with his collectors. He enjoys seeing his work hanging in homes, within the context of other pieces in a collection. He keeps in touch with collectors, letting them know when their paintings have been reproduced, where and when his future exhibitions will take place and whatever else is going on in his career. In this way, he's able to keep tabs on his paintings, and he often borrows back his works for exhibitions. Even so, he offers this strong recommendation for artists: "Always get good transparencies or digital images of your paintings before they leave the studio. Once they leave, they can be very hard to track down." ■

**BJ FOREMAN** is a freelance writer living in Cincinnati, Ohio.

## Meet Max Ferguson

photo by Sharon Weiser

A New Yorker by birth, Max Ferguson comes from a long line of lawyers—and a father whose hobby was painting. Max returned the favor by making his father his principal model. The younger Ferguson studied animation at New York University, changing his major to painting after he spent his junior year abroad at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Upon his return to New York University, he simply showed up at the office of H.W. Janson, the famed author of what was for many years the accepted text for Art History 101, ***History of Art*** (1962), and Janson purchased one of Ferguson's cityscapes. Proving Janson's assessment right, Ferguson today has an appreciative cadre of collectors. His works hang in numerous museums, including the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, which is scheduled to open in November. He's represented by the Gallery Henoch in Manhattan. Visit his website at www.maxferguson.com.

**BELOW:** "***My Father at Mount Sinai*** (oil, 36x52) is huge by my standards," says Ferguson. "Because of this and the subject matter, I took a much broader approach. This was the most emotionally difficult painting I've ever done, and I feel it has the greatest emotional impact."