



# Art Review: Cornelia Foss Starts in the Heart

July 3, 2013

by Mike Solomon

There are some painters who just seem to have a certain grace. I have known Cornelia Foss's work for probably 30 years and I have always been taken with it. Is it purely a matter of subjectivity?

In her current exhibition at the Peter Marcelle Gallery, as before, it's evident that there's nothing particularly radical or groundbreaking about the genre she works in. Landscapes, still lifes, garden scenes, seascapes and sometimes images of people, it's all the stuff of contemporary impressionism, cleaving to the Hamptons vein that started with William Merritt Chase and Thomas Moran then went to Fairfield Porter, and out through Jane Wilson and Jane Freilicher to what must be hundreds of artists who work in this genre now. For me, Cornelia Foss has always been special and, after spending some time at the new show, I think I can say I finally know why.

It starts in the heart. She has some kind of tremendous faith in her work, or about herself, because whatever that spirit is, it travels in her veins out to her hands, hands that apply the brushstrokes to her paintings, and something is translated, something happy and peaceful that conveys understanding. To quote Elvis Costello, "What's so funny about peace, love and understanding?" This is what you get when you view her work: a sense of comprehension, wonderment and contentment that comes from her resolved sense of self. It's there in the paintings.



"Garden Flowers" by Cornelia Foss, 2012. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. Photo courtesy of Christopher Foss.

In her garden paintings, like *Garden Flowers*, 2012, or *Garden Flowers III*, 2010, the intimate and complex combine to give us all the pleasure we need from painting. Riotous color, in the form and shape of densely planted flowers and shrubs, is manifested by the loose rendering and confident brushstrokes.

This isn't representational dentistry either, tight and cruel like a vise. No, this is heart joy, open, energized attraction, affirmation and affinity for the world. Yet there *is* precision in the paintings. The measurement of tones and patterns among the flowers and leaves are not distracted approximations but rather are carefully and attentively observed.

Once understood, the artist lets the joy of that comprehension flow out in energized brushstrokes mapped from the universe of colors she has deciphered. In a sense, especially in the garden paintings for which she is best known, Foss is the representational twin of Joan Mitchell, as both artists achieve the same result; they get an energy from color and its application and, within their respective formats, give it back to the viewer as pure unconditional pleasure.

Another side to Foss's work shows up in the landscapes and seascapes. I was quite taken by the two small watercolors of waves breaking on the shore in part because they are so simply and elegantly rendered. I mean, how many wave scenes have been depicted by artists here on the East End? It must be in the thousands, yet for me, only few have a validity that equals the actual scene from which they are derived.

Waves *are* beautiful and so it's natural to want to "own" that beauty by painting it, but all too often what is painted falls flat. There are countless paintings done from photographs of waves that are perfectly rendered but lack the kind of energy plein air painting achieves by depicting not only what the artist saw but also what she or he felt when surrounded by the natural world.

This kind of translation of experience is important. It's not that easy to paint a convincing, much less interesting, wave scape. Foss seems not only to have managed the challenge quite easily but also has rendered charming views of waves standing up in the sun and breaking in our faces like some kind of happy greeting ritual.



"Surf" by Cornelia Foss, 2008. Oil on canvas, 47 x 47 inches.  
Photo courtesy of Christopher Foss.

The oil painting *Surf*, 2008 also has an energy that makes it work and there's something about the darker and ominous, slightly surging horizon that gives the scene some gravitas. I think when one is dealing with a beautiful scene, it's good to include the dialectic. In depicting the beauty of the sea, it's right to remember its danger too (think of Sandy). So the hints at darkness lurking in the benign scene Foss give us create a necessary balance and make the painting more interesting.



"February Window VII" by Cornelia Foss, 2013. Oil on canvas, 65 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of Christopher Foss.

Really interesting to me is the large interior, *February Window VII*, 2013, the newest painting in the show. It has a marvelously mysterious setting.

Two black and white cats sit by a window that looks out into the urban twilight. Reflections and shadows play tricks and so the spaces and objects of the foreground seem only to float and reflect in the glass. On the upper left, architectural features protrude from the wall and an elegantly painted oil lamp glows below, reiterating the floating reflections in the rest of the painting.

Out through the window, a bridge is seen in the distance with a strip of light hitting it. All these elements seem to acknowledge Matisse's deconstructive period, particularly paintings like *The Piano Lesson*, and in his various versions of the *Bridge at Notre Dame*. This window painting is a surprise because while it contains Foss's sure hand, elegant color, generous rendering and the exploration of complexity and intimacy, it is with an entirely different set of elements from her garden paintings. I hope we get to see more of these intriguing new works.

Be sure to hurry in to see this wonderful show at Peter Marcelle because it's only up through July 9, 2013.

**BASIC FACTS: "Cornelia Foss: New Paintings"** remains on view through July 9, 2013. Peter Marcelle Gallery is located at 2411 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. [www.petermarcellecontemporary.com](http://www.petermarcellecontemporary.com).

---

Copyright 2013 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.