



ART REVIEW: Unfolding Joy in Bill King Sculptures, Connie Fox Paintings

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by Janet Goleas

On view at [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton, “[Connie Fox](#) and [William King](#), An Artist Couple” offers a joyful exploration of the artistry, civic idealism and joie de vivre of one of the most beloved artist couples ever to live and work on Long Island’s East End.

Sweeping through some 50-odd years of art making, the exhibition examines the couple’s life, love and their shared commitment to awareness. King, who died in 2015, enjoys a robust afterlife through his nimble figurative sculptures, some 28 of which are on view here, while Fox’s paintings hug the gallery circumference as if in an embrace.

Standing side by side in life, the pair’s distinctive asymmetry—Fox is petite, King towered above her—augured the striking contrasts in their art. As such, the show is fueled by diversity, inviting the viewer to observe a conversation in art that stretched over three decades. Fiercely committed to their respective practices, both artists developed expansive oeuvres that were independent of, yet adjacent to, each other.

Fox, now 91, still paints in the house in the woods they shared. In the communal space of that home, paintings and sculptures claim nearly every surface, but their studios are all their own. Curator Gail Levin has deftly re-created this shared aesthetic without sacrificing the separate and distinct nature of the two bodies of work.

The show opens with two iconic works: a life-size vinyl figure by King stands astride Fox’s painting of the same sculpture. Hands in pockets and a tiny, cantilevered head, the red vinyl man, titled *My Pleasure*, appears possessed by both a mid-century arrogance and a slight sting of defeat, like a stowaway from “Death of a Salesman.” Fox moves on this dichotomy directly in the painting *Bill’s Vinyl Man with Stool*, depicting the sculpture as unrealized—deflated, even—as if awaiting the life-breath of its maker.



“My Pleasure” by William King, 2007. Red vinyl, 68 inches.
From the collection of Connie Fox. Courtesy of Guild Hall.

Moving through the exhibition, Levin’s focus shifts between the artists’ interaction and some of

their finest, most pivotal works. King's approach was one of levity and a quick and feisty intellect; Fox is drawn to the experiential, accessing her imagery through a fusion of instinct and illusion. Where King's sculptural cartoons might be analogous to [Daumier](#), Fox's vision was galvanized by the thinky subjectivity of Surrealism. Where King is resolutely American, Fox straddles abstraction, observation and the intuited netherworlds of the European Surrealists [Yves Tanguy](#), [Joan Miro](#) and [Max Ernst](#).

Fox's 1993 painting *Marcel's Star: You don't have to be a star baby to be in my show*, is a sassy homage to [Marcel Duchamp](#), whose star-shaped tonsure was famously photographed by [Man Ray](#) in 1921. The painting is an amalgam of depth and frontality in which the famed five-point star sinks into a deep, historical space, as if isolating a moment in the constellation of Modernism. King was also drawn to history and often referential in his sculpture, and here he depicts a brooding Duchamp in the 1995 wood sculpture of the same name.



"Marcel's Star: You don't have to be a star baby to be in my show"
by Connie Fox, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 65 inches. From the
collection of Connie Fox. Courtesy of Guild Hall.

Both artists embarked on examinations of the "self-as," too, with distinctly different outcomes. Within King's tongue-in-cheek approach was a personal and evolving colloquialism, resulting in works such as *Self as Eulenspiegel*, one of his later sculptures, in which he envisioned himself as the prankster of medieval German folklore. Likewise, Fox reassigned her identity in a series of charcoal drawings in which she conceives of herself as the German artist [Max Beckmann](#), the French novelist Colette and others.

With conviviality, activism, music and folly as the cornerstones of their lives outside the studio, Fox and King were often at the epicenter of political and cultural events on the South Fork. Mugging for the camera, the pair were not above cross-dressing and costumery, as evidenced in a photograph of both in drag.

Clearly smitten, King often sculpted Fox. *Connie*, 1984, was carved the year after they met and later, working from a photograph of the two of them, King's *Jolies Fleurs* captured the duo beachside, swimsuits and all. In the sculpture, both share King's characteristic legs, with torsos that rest upon spindly, skyscraper limbs. The site of the photograph, Sammy's Beach in East Hampton, was a muse for Fox, whose *Sammy's Beach* series is a triumph of memory and mindfulness.



"Jolies Fleurs" by William King, 2007. Balsa, Polychrome, 23

x 7 1/4 x 6 inches. From the collection of Connie Fox.
Courtesy of Guild Hall.



Connie Fox, William King, Sammy's Beach, East Hampton,
NY. Courtesy of Guild Hall.

Levin, an esteemed art historian, author, curator and distinguished professor, ignites the tale of this couple's artistry with the canniness of a storyteller. The installation ricochets from wall to wall, linking idioms and tracing the personal and the critical in a visual circuitry that is effective and illuminating.

In 1989, Ruth Vered asked Fox and King to collaborate for an exhibit called the "Home Show." Though they had never mounted a collaboration before, the two were game, and they embarked on a series of works that spoke to domestic life. Assembled against a freestanding wall, the pieces range from abstract ceramic plates to fanciful wooden chairs to painted carpets and carved hearts. Directly across, a selection of ferocious paintings by Fox stares back at the wall, as if to vanquish the fates of domesticity.



"Fox Home Show, ceramic plates" originally exhibited
at Vered Gallery, 1989. Photo by Janet Goleas.

The painting *Sammy's Beach III* is filled with the sort of roiling energy that conjures dark matter. For Fox, who swam at Sammy's Beach virtually every day for more than 30 years, the site and her experiences there offered a keystone that helped link the visual brain with the phenomenon of action, transforming sensation, memory and awareness into form and color. King's genius found its footing inside the moments, the memorable and the self, too, locating his keen vision within the mind's eye, a deep sense of cunning and an endless sense of invention.



"Sammy's Beach III" by Connie Fox, 2009. Acrylic on linen,
80 x 72 inches. From the collection of Connie Fox. Courtesy
of Guild Hall.

At [Celadon Gallery](#) in Bridgehampton, the celebration of William King continues with a small retrospective of his ceramics, on view through November 13, 2016. The show explores busts, crowns, clowns and placards, with a special focus on standing figurines bedecked in overcoats.

BASIC FACTS: “Connie Fox and William King, An Artist Couple” is on view October 22 through December 31, 2016 at Guild Hall in East Hampton, 158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.guildhall.org

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