



Frank Galuszka
in his studio

PHOTO BY CHRISTINA WATERS

CATHERINE SEGURSON

Interview with artist Frank Galuszka

We've featured Frank Galuszka's art twice now in Catamaran. In response to my invitation to contribute this fall, Frank invited me to visit his studio to have a firsthand look at what he was working on and to make some selections to feature in the magazine. His enormous art studio on the hill at UC Santa Cruz reminded me of Monet's studio in Giverny, only Frank's space was alive with all sizes of canvases and drawings in progress along with a feast of paints and brushes and mediums. We started talking about his process and the stories behind his paintings and I couldn't help but think how our readers might like to listen to him talk so passionately about the creative process. He agreed and here is a small sample of our conversation about his art.

—Catherine Segurson

Catherine: How did you know you wanted to become an artist?

Frank: My first awareness of art was an awareness of something I didn't like. I was a child and had a box of crayons. I was coloring pictures in a coloring book. It was a coloring book of aircrafts and I came to an airplane I didn't like because I'd colored all the others. I was also left with the colors from the crayon box I didn't like. One was a pastel green and the other was a pastel orange. I started coloring in these dirigibles with those colors and I thought of how much I hated those colors. That was my first aesthetic experience, one of realizing how much I disliked those two colors together.

Catherine: How old were you then?

Frank: Four.

Catherine: Your family, did they support you in pursuing art when you were young?

Frank: Yes. My family was very supportive. They didn't know about art, but my father was curious about everything. He was adventurous and inquisitive. He still is. He took me to see some paintings and I had the good fortune, without realizing it, of seeing original work. I remember going, when I was maybe nine, to see Dali's *Last Supper* in Washington. I felt like I was standing inside the painting among the figures, then walking around outdoors on the beach that was painted inside the painting. It was incredible. I didn't understand how my experience of being inside the painting was created by the painting.

Later, with him, I saw my first abstract paintings—and these were original paintings. I hadn't seen any abstract paintings before seeing a show of Kandinskys. What a shock. It was the opening show of the Guggenheim Museum. These paintings made me angry. I had an emotional response. I thought they were completely chaotic and irresponsible and pieces of junk. On the same day I saw impressionist paintings for the first time. At the Guggenheim there was also a show of Monets, including one of the poplar paintings. I couldn't understand why the tree trunks were pink. The paintings were like nature and

unlike nature at the same time. They were about another world that I believed existed when I saw the paintings. I had never imagined it existed before.

Catherine: Did you grow up in New York or Washington, DC?

Frank: New Jersey. Pretty close to New York.

Catherine: You had a lot of opportunities growing up to see art in New York City.

Frank: Right. I went with my Dad to see the *Mona Lisa* when it came to New York. The line went out into the street from the Metropolitan. It was a grey rainy day. I remember how green the painting was. The painting had an occult presence. Its supposed value was an occult property. I wondered why it was green. I had a high school friend who was an artist. His name was Joe Spohr. He was a completely different artist than me. He was a teenage abstract expressionist. I painted like Dali. We would go to museums and to the galleries on 57th Street.

Catherine: What were the art galleries like back then in New York?

Frank: Well the thing that was so much fun was that we would also go to the auction houses. We were in high school, sophomores, freshmen. We came in off the street to see all the work of Morris Louis. What a revelation! His life's work was about to be auctioned off at the Park Bernet. Louis had just died. It's amazing to see all of that and then to go to Dali exhibitions at the Knoedler Gallery and to meet Dali. Knoedler was on 57th Street and they had brown velvet walls. Then there were all the galleries around 57th Street and on Madison Avenue to explore. Leo Castelli's gallery was a great place to go. It was in a town house in the Seventies I think. They threw out the crates that the paintings came in out front on the street. We carried off the lid of a junked crate that had been addressed to the gallery by Jasper Johns. It was addressed in black paint by Jasper Johns' hand. A sacred relic. We carried it back on the train. My friend used it for a wall in his studio.

Catherine: When did you decide to become an artist as a vocation?

Frank: It was a rainy day and I was in high school and I had an art teacher who had been a real mentor to me, Ed Havas. I had decided I wanted to pursue a career as an engineer. I was interested in aircraft, rockets. It was the time of the space race, and that was very exciting, and I was also launching rockets with my rocket-launching friends. I was funding the rockets by selling paintings of crucifixions and jazz musicians.

We were driving. Ed said, you know, if you really wanted to be an artist you could be an artist, you could do that. Oh, I thought, and I decided to do it right on the spot, just like that. Just because he said so, I figured, okay. It was an exciting time for art too. Pop Art and Op Art were just beginning. It was in that edge just before the Beatles and the British invasion.

Ed did moody watercolors of the Great Swamp, which was a vast wetland, a melancholy wilderness in New Jersey. Ed's brother Paul was also an artist whose work I liked a lot. He did abstract paintings, they were like Hans Hofmann paintings. He was going to Syracuse University. Ed put together the application and we sent some paintings. They gave me a scholarship, and I went. I was painting really original work at that time.

Catherine: You were still in high school?

Frank: Yes. Ed introduced me to an art critic who published a very well-known book at the time called *Conversations with Artists*, Selden Rodman. A fantastic conversation with Jackson Pollock is in that book. Selden Rodman curated my work into a museum show. It was great. At the opening I met Ben Shahn. I think it is important for young artists to meet older artists who they admire.

Catherine: Besides Syracuse you also studied art at the Tyler School of Art. How did this happen?

Frank: When I was a freshman at Syracuse I met Peter Rudolph, who was also studying art there. We became friends. We both realized that if we stayed to become sophomores we would be only two male sophomore

painting majors in the art department. I think we felt it wasn't going to be competitive enough, something like that. We transferred together to Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. It was a great time.

Catherine: Did you have any mentors there or any professors that influenced you?

Frank: Roger Anliker, who recently died. He inspired me quite a bit. He believed in individuality and originality. Also he did paintings that were representational and others that were abstract. He could do things in those different domains and dissolve the conflict between them. Anliker's idea about art was that painting should create visual things, not exactly like, or not duplicating, anything in nature or in art. Like, creating original visual things.

Catherine: What kind of school of art is that?

Frank: He was connected to the American magic realist school.

Catherine: Would you say that your work now is a bit like American magic realism?

Frank: Magical realism is one of the things that influenced my work when I was young. It was in the air. A melding of American realism and European surrealism.

Catherine: Visual prompts in the paintings engage our curiosity in a possible narrative. They seemed to want to tell a story, but it's not really spelled out, is it?

Frank: Yes, a possible narrative. It's intentional. I like film and I like stills from films. I like genre paintings, like ones by Vermeer. In the past, artists were extracting things from day-to-day life so I thought about the extraction from narrative in a still and the sense that each still is something within a story. I was very influenced by Dali's idea in his manifesto, *Conquest of the Irrational*. I decided then that I wanted to create work that pursued the structure of thought, but without an explicit showy surrealistic weirdness to it. It was more like an impression

of experience. Another teacher, Richard Caller, who was also at Tyler and who had been a member of the Surrealist Group in Paris, told me he thought that what I was trying to do with my work was to paint personal or intimate subjects on a public scale. I thought yes, this is what I want to do. I thought his insight was right on the point of what I wanted to do.

Catherine: Your work offers the viewer a chance to enter.

Frank: Yes, I hope so.

Once, at a show of my work, a woman came to me and she said: "That's the saddest painting I've ever seen." I said, "Well, why?" She said, "This woman has a map out on the bed. That means she's leaving, she's opening up the drawer. She's taking something out, she's leaving her relationship. There's a ring on top of the dresser, she's giving up her marriage." Nothing of that interpretation was in my intention. But it put an iconography together into a coherent reading, which was a good and accurate reading of the painting that I hadn't foreseen. My interpretation of the painting had been altogether different, but mine, like hers, was only an interpretation.

Catherine: For you, then, there's a crossover between different genres. You like to read and you can take something you enjoy in a literary work and bring that into your visual art.

Frank: I like a narrative without much of a story and I like long boring movies. I watch movies in slow motion. It gives them another dimension. They are more like paintings, but they're moving.

Catherine: You have the privilege of having been able to work in a spacious studio at the UC campus, so you're able to work on large-scale paintings. What is your process like with those big paintings? I just remember we hung one of your large-scale paintings in the show next to the 109-inch-wide painting *Homo Sap* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, your painting titled *Inga*, and it reminded me a little of Gustav Klimt.

Frank: That painting combined a figure together with

the coastal landscape. I used as studies several paintings I painted outdoors. I was studying a group of my landscape paintings together and I thought I wanted to do a big painting that had all those things in it with the freshness of a painting that was done outdoors. The ghostlike figure is a combination of the consciousness of the plants, the cliffs, the sea, and of the people who used to be there. She's like a ghost but the format of the figure is taken from an Edvard Munch painting of his sister Inga.

In the Edvard Munch painting the figure is wearing black and has big blotches on her dress. I had done some paintings with a figure in that pose for other paintings of a woman on the cliffs, which was like a Madonna of stress. In my *Madonna of Stress* she is wearing dark blue and she is on the cliffs and her baby is crawling off into the weeds and is probably going to crawl right over the cliff because she's so self-absorbed because she's so filled with stress.

Catherine: It's interesting that you bring up your landscape paintings and how multiple landscape paintings went into the foundation of your large-scale painting. I was surprised to find out how often you go out and do plein air paintings. I don't think I've ever heard of anybody as prolific as you are. You had said you did something like three thousand paintings in about five years' time?

Frank: Probably that many; it's at least two thousand. I look around every day and sometimes ... well, for a while I would go every single day.

Catherine: I read once that Santa Cruz has the fifth highest number of artists per capita. Do you go out every day and paint every day because it's visually beautiful, or are there some other reasons?

Frank: When I first came here I thought, I've got to paint this place, this is great, the way that the plant life is and how the trees are sculpted by the wind, the way things resonate throughout the landscape, you can see the whole thing and the mystery of it.

Catherine: Do you ever feel an urgency to paint the coastal landscape because of the way nature is changing

and possibly disappearing? Is there any sense of trying to capture it?

Frank: I don't know. There is an identity to each day. There are no two days that have the same identity; they're as different as people. You could say the seasons or such, they come around again and all that, but each day has an identity and the experience of painting in the day, more even than painting the landscape, they're paintings of the day, I think.

Catherine: I'd like to talk a bit about your career as an art professor. You seem to have really strong connections with some of your students. Some of them have gone on to have pretty great careers in art. Can you talk about your influence on certain students and how they've become really great artists in their own right? How do you do it? How do you help your students become artists?

Frank: I tell them what I see. I tell them what I think they're doing. Then we talk about what the implications of that might be, but it has nothing to do with me influencing them directly to do anything.

Catherine: It sounds similar to what happened to you when you were younger when somebody you know, an adult, simply said to you, you can do this.

Frank: Yes. These people who were my mentors, who I appreciate tremendously, are not people that I blindly followed. I was sort of against what they were doing. I'm very happy in that I feel in a way what my former students Noah Buchanan or Ian Pines are doing now is against what I'm doing now. I think that's good.

Catherine: Well, how does the Rebellion work then when you're teaching your students?

Frank: Students often think that they have to have an idea before they make a painting. I try to tell them that Ideas often get in the way. They can slow you down too much and the painting doesn't come to life. Ideas can separate you from the painting, can leave you standing outside of it.

I encourage them to aim at the demystification while also holding on to the mystery to capture an interesting thing in their art. Which is one of the things that James Elkins writes about in his book *What Painting Is* when he associates painting with alchemy. The idea of painting is something where you start with a gross material, paint, and then you turn it into something which reveals something other than that. This leaves it open to new interpretations.

Catherine: You just encourage your students to engage in the alchemy?

Frank: Yes, I think so. To just both do it and to be mystified by it, but to not be stopped by anything. Maybe that's it.

Catherine: How do you come into the alchemy around the subjects of your own paintings and what amount of personal experience goes into some of your paintings? In your studio you showed that painting that you made after a tree fell on your car. You were driving in a storm during El Niño on Highway 1 and this tree falls on your car and you almost die. Was making the painting sort of a cathartic process for healing or was it just something about that experience that inspired the art? How does that work?

Frank: I think it's mysterious and any of these things could become long conversations in themselves. Christina was in the car too; she was really hurt when the tree fell and came through the car. We both went to the hospital and were waiting for her surgery and I was already drawing the accident.

Catherine: What inspired you to draw the accident right there in the hospital?

Frank: I was already drawing the accident for two reasons. One, of course, you're kind of freaked out by the whole accident and the storm and the rain. But I thought of what to do. You know, you're in the hospital, I was not badly injured, she was pretty badly injured. I thought I should do something. Monet drew his dying wife Camille; he does this painting and he becomes fascinated with the colors changing on her face, or at least that's what he says.

Catherine: There's a belief in painting from life, all aspects and emotions, even the tragic.

Frank: There's that, and then there's the intuition that if you begin to process something, especially in a nonverbal way like that, it seems to have some therapeutic value. Right? I'm drawing this and I also did a portrait of her before her surgery, a plastic surgeon was coming. It actually helped to normalize how she felt as well as how I felt. Then as she was recovering she did paintings of the whole thing and I worked on the painting we are talking about. That particular painting that you looked at was a painting that had begun as another kind of painting altogether. It was unfinished at the time of the crash. In the weeks after the crash it transformed itself into the painting that it became.

Catherine: Life events, drawings, even other paintings become foundations, layers, for your artwork. Is it important for you to do preliminary drawings or paintings? What are your favorite materials?

Frank: I believe that painting is a three-dimensional medium, that the thickness and substance of the paint is essential to the painting. I like all of it. My abstract paintings have mostly been done in acrylic. Some with mica as well. My representational paintings for the most part are oil paintings, although there's some crossover and now I'm doing some abstract paintings that are oil paintings. I like doing watercolors, I like making etchings. I like the materiality of the paint, the idea that the paint is material. Then there's this intersection between the conceptual and the materials.

Catherine: The intellectual interpretation, the narrative, and then the physical.

Frank: Yes. Even the representation of space, of distance, done with a lot of materiality in the paint, that kind of intersection of two, maybe even three, conflicting things.

Catherine: Do you feel materiality is really important? I mean, especially in this day and age when we're moving away from physical objects with advances in technology.

Frank: I think it's important to make handmade things. I've always been interested in realism, but in anti-photographic realism. I'm not against photography but I'm working in a way which is intentionally indifferent to photography. I am against the cultural domination of photography as the standard for what reality is. Or what it looks like. I think that we're all living in a period where our visual cultural construct is photographic. I'm doing anti-photographic paintings. Rebellion against the hegemony of photography.

Catherine: Because the reality is more than just the capture, the photographic capture.

Frank: The photographic capture may be an absolutely minor factor.

Catherine: It seems that making the material object is creating something more enduring.

Frank: Yes, the act of making it. I think today's students want to make material objects. They have very little real awe or even respect for the digital these days. It's mostly older people who still have some feeling of the mystery of the digital. But the students have no respect for it. They bring laptops to class. The laptops are covered with stickers, the glass is shattered, there's paint dripped all over it, they eat their lunch on top of it. It's not like some sort of pristine marvelous thing, whereas the handmade painting is highly regarded. I think people want to make things with their hands, don't you think?

Frank Galuszka began his studies at Syracuse University and transferred to Temple University, where he received his MFA from the Tyler School of Art in 1972. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Romania from 1969 to 1970. He has had thirty solo exhibitions since 1970, including ten solo shows at the More Gallery in Philadelphia between 1982 and 2002. He also showed at the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York City, and at the Pennsylvania Academy. He has shown in over eighty group shows and is a professor of art at University of California, Santa Cruz, where he teaches painting. He has taught at six other art schools and universities, from the Aegean School of Fine Arts in Greece to the Studio School of Painting and Sculpture in New York.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA WATERS

Work in progress in
Frank Galuszka's studio