

Lisbeth Firmin

STREET ARTIST

By Lynne Burns



ROUTE 6, TRURO, 1992, ACRYLIC AND GOUACHE, 12 BY 29 INCHES

LISBETH FIRMIN IS A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALIST known for her urban landscapes. For more than four decades, her work has been featured in hundreds of solo and group shows across the United States and abroad. Born in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1949, she has been drawing compulsively since she was old enough to pick up a crayon. Her family moved around, first to Indianapolis, where she was awarded several summer scholarships to the John Herron Art Institute, and later to Los Angeles, where she received scholarships to study life drawing at the Chouinard Art Institute. “It was like the Art Students League on weekends,” she explains. At sixteen, Lisbeth was by far the youngest student there. “I saw my first naked guy at Chouinard’s. I just sat there and drew what I saw. Every detail,” she laughs as she recounts the story. Voted best artist in her high school, she managed one year at the University of California, Santa Barbara. But after being informed she couldn’t take only art classes the following year, she didn’t go back. She had also fallen in love with “a bohemian artist type,” Tom Moore, and become pregnant, all at age twenty. They married and moved to Provincetown. The year was 1970.

“I went to study at the Provincetown Workshop with Leo Manso and Victor Candell,” she says. “It was where the Long Point Gallery was in the 1970s. Most of the students in these classes were scholarship students from Cooper Union in New York City. I was one of the few paying students, and they didn’t seem to take me seriously at all. I was used to having people tell me how good I was so this was a real shock to my ego. But, being seven months pregnant, I now can understand their skepticism.”

Lisbeth and Tom moved to Puerto Rico in September 1970, and their daughter, Autumn Moore, was born there in November. For the next

few years, the family would split their time between Provincetown and Puerto Rico. “My husband was a portrait artist who worked on the streets and in big hotels in Puerto Rico. During this time, I did little art but kept copious journals, and drew all the time,” Firmin remembers.

In 1975, Firmin started painting portraits on the streets of Provincetown. She worked for Malcolm Paul Newman at the Starving Artist Studio, across from the Mayflower Café. “There were probably fifty artists working on the streets at that time. We were like a band of gypsies. Bohemians,” Firmin remembers. Full-face, four-color pastel portraits

cost thirty-five dollars; fifteen dollars for a profile. “My husband was the best one, he would spend hours on one thirty-five-dollar portrait. I was as quick as I could be—thirty to forty-five minutes. No illusions about fine art for me. The other artists always sent me the dogs and the babies because babies and dogs can’t sit still and I worked fast.”

“After a couple of summers, I finally went off on my own with Simie Maryles, who now runs her own gallery on Commercial Street in Provincetown, and we started making some serious money. We opened a portrait studio on the corner across from Adams Pharmacy. Four things I learned from this adventure:



I-95, HAZY DAY, #1, 1993, ACRYLIC AND GOUACHE, MOUNTED ON CHART, 13 BY 22 INCHES

how to get over being shy; how to hustle; how much I loved sticking twenty-dollar bills in my pocket; and how much I hated doing portraits on the street.”

In 1976, Firmin and her family started living year-round in Provincetown. “The most important thing in my art life happened in Provincetown,” she notes. “I had heard Philip Malicoat was giving classes and would take on students. I loved his paintings. I knew he was a friend of Edwin Dickinson’s and I really loved his work too.” She would later learn of another coincidence: Malicoat had also attended the John Herron Institute of Art in Indianapolis.

“I went to learn how to paint with Philip Malicoat,” Firmin explains, “and I did it for two winters. He and I hit it off. Very much so. He saw something in me and worked really hard to make me see as a painter would. I didn’t get it at first, but Phil opened that door for me. He taught me how to mix colors, what a palette was, and what paints to buy. Some of my fondest memories are painting all day at his studio, and then playing chess into the night. He even said he would get me into the Beachcombers.” She laughs, referring to the private, all-male, somewhat secretive artists’ club in Provincetown.

It was during this time that Firmin met another big influence on her life, Candy Jernigan. In 1975, Firmin was given a beautiful pastel of the Pilgrim Monument in the fog for her birthday. It was drawn by Jernigan. Firmin tracked down this artist and they became good friends. “She was one of the best artists in town and very involved with the Provincetown Art Association and the theater scene. We would work on many art projects together, both in Provincetown and, later, in New York City. Between Philip Malicoat and Candy, I realized this was the kind of life I wanted. This is who I am.”

In 1977, a pivotal event occurred when Firmin and her husband were visiting friends on Bond

Street in New York City. She had done several collages as presents for these friends. “They were over-the-top kitsch with sequins and glitter,” she remembers. The car was parked in front of an art gallery with the trunk open. The gallery owner came over to the car, looked into the trunk, and loved the collages. She offered Firmin a show right on the spot. “So, in 1978, I had my first one-person show at the Marie Pelliconi Gallery in Soho.”

Firmin’s relationship with her husband had been rocky for some time, and in 1979 she left Provincetown and her marriage behind. On the heels of her one-person show, she and her eight-year-old daughter moved to New York City. She laughs as she tells the story now. “If it was that easy to get a show in New York, I thought riches and fame were sure to follow. Of course, that so did NOT happen. If only I had known how hard it was going to be. . . . It was very rough on my daughter. I barely got a waitress job to pay the rent. We were extremely poor.” Thanks to Jernigan, who had followed her to NYC, Firmin found work as a graphic designer. She found a two-bedroom apartment on Sullivan Street in Soho. Autumn had one bedroom and Firmin turned the other into her painting studio and slept in the living room on a futon.

In that Sullivan Street studio, Firmin started doing road paintings mounted on nautical charts. Her idea to start holding studio shows came from another friend, NYC/Provincetown artist Arnie Charnick. Studio parties, she found, were a great way to sell paintings, many of them inspired by her various trips, including those to Scotland, Peru, and Monhegan Island, Maine. “I also started making monotypes,” she remembers, “which I loved from the start. The immediacy of the medium suited my Expressionist style well.”



DELANCEY AND BOWERY, 1996, GOUACHE, 5 BY 5 INCHES

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PINK UMBRELLA, BROADWAY, 2007, OIL ON WOOD PANEL, 20 BY 20 INCHES

By 1992, Firmin had found a couple of dealers interested in her work and was at a crossroads in her career and life. Leave the city or stay? She decided to stay and paint what she saw when she left her Sullivan Street apartment. "I did thirty ten-by-ten-inch gouaches depicting urban life," Firmin says. "I would do two or three a day. I can't believe how hard I was working. I put them up on the wall. I made an

invitation and mailed it out to all my friends. I was painting dump trucks, policemen on horses, cabs, things I didn't even know I could do. I had the open studio party and they were all sold within the first hour! I realized I was on to something. When I occasionally see one today, I can't believe how good they are."

Firmin had her first show of this new work at the Michael Ingbar Gallery on Prince Street



BIKER, RITTENHOUSE SQUARE, 2012, MONOTYPE, 17.5 BY 25 INCHES

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in Soho in 1994. She started working in oils again, doing street scenes with people. "Always people. People presented a small presence in my early work. Now, the figure plays a big part in my paintings. I don't know exactly what that means." She smiles, recalling how she sold out that show and the next couple of shows that she had there. "The city was very, very good to me."

Around this time, Firmin won first prize (five thousand dollars) in the LANA International Arts Competition for one of her ten-by-ten-inch urban landscape gouaches. The artist Wayne Thiebaud was the juror, and Firmin flew out to San Francisco for the award ceremony. She met Thiebaud and he became a mentor as well as a friend. When Thiebaud came out to New York City to teach at the National Academy, he arranged for Firmin to attend his classes, gratis.

Over the next few years, Firmin acquired several new dealers and showed in galleries from all over the country. Along with first prize in the LANA Competition, she received other awards, including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, the New York Club Emerging Artist Award, and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for Printmaking (Lily Auchincloss Fellowship), as well as full fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, Vermont Studio Center, and National Seashore Residency Program.

"My goal was always to become a full-time artist," she explains. "And all these things that happened gave me the confidence I needed. In 1998, I was finally able to do it. I left my job and started painting full time."

One of her longest relationships has been with the Rice Polak Gallery in Provincetown, where she is having a show this summer. Around 1996, she contacted gallery owner Marla Rice and they have been together ever since. Says Rice: "What initially captured my attention in Lisbeth Firmin's hauntingly beautiful work was the light and clarity in her paintings. The excitement for me continues every time I see one. . . . They truly stand the test of time."

"I wanted to go back to Provincetown as a success," Firmin says. "I found this great gallery and loyal, supportive dealer, and also started teaching painting and printmaking at Castle Hill every year."

I met Lisbeth in the midnineties at one of the studio shows she held at her Sullivan Street apartment. I bought one of her urban landscape gouaches, and it had an extraordinary effect on me—every time I looked at it, I liked it more. This is a common reaction to her paintings; this is what makes her an exceptional artist. She will create a painting of New York, of a neighborhood you know, and discover an entirely fresh perspective, through her eyes. The light, the color, the vision, all speak to you of the everyday in a remarkable way. When I opened a gallery-store in the East Village, Cameo Appearances, in 1995, I asked her to show with me, and she became one of my best-selling artists. Today, we continue our relationship with a virtual gallery at www.CameoAppearances.com.

Firmin moved out of New York City in 2000 and bought an 1830s Greek revival storefront in Franklin, New York. It had an apartment upstairs, and she used the spacious downstairs as her studio space. She painted full-time—ten hours a day. "I

was just so happy," she remembers. "This is what I always wanted to do my whole life and I finally got to do it!" In addition to showing her work in Provincetown, she was taken on by the Klaudia Marr Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Firmin was now producing more than twenty-five paintings a year. She was curated into several corporate and museum collections. And she was getting noticed: Michael Gitlitz, Director of the Marlborough Gallery in New York City, wrote: "The monoprints that you submitted to the 46th Chautauqua National Exhibition, 2003, were absolutely stunning and well deserved the CCVA Award I selected. I noticed they garnered a huge amount of attention from people at the exhibit." In 2001, the *New York Times* featured Firmin's work in "Playing in the Neighborhood: Soho," praising her images of the city:

In Lisbeth Firmin's paintings of New York, human figures are suspended in time. They are often in motion, crossing intersections, meandering down avenues or cycling down narrow streets. . . . The perspective is never straightforward but always leans toward the unusual. . . . Firmin, whose work is now on display at the Michael Ingbar Gallery of Architectural Art, has been painting images of the city for a decade. This new group of paintings and prints captures light and the lingering stillness of a specific moment.

When the recession hit around 2008, the Klaudia Marr Gallery closed, and Firmin remembered what it was like to be a starving artist again. But other events were evolving as well. She met her future husband, John Exter. Her daughter married. She became a grandmother. All of these developments put her life and work in perspective: "Time becomes precious as we artists get older and you realize there's not an infinite amount of time left to get everything done."

And she keeps painting and doing her monoprints, more driven than ever to explore and produce as the years go by. Today, Firmin says, "I have always been drawn to capturing the light of a specific moment. There was a lot of experimentation and soul-searching about my subject matter after 2008, the result of which is that I have rededicated myself to painting the figure. But instead of painting the streets, cabs, and buildings, what I now love with a passion is painting the light on these figures in their surroundings. I am doing a new series of paintings, bringing the figure inside, painting the light from a window or a passing subway car. So, in a way, I have come full circle, working from the figure again. I think that my work in many ways IS me. I'm that solitary figure walking somewhere, alone but not lonely. Headed somewhere. Perhaps the viewers can put themselves into my paintings. I hope so." ❧

LYNNE BURNS is a photographer who has lived in New York City and on the Outer Cape since the 1970s. Her Virtual Gallery, www.CameoAppearances.com, features the work of Cape Cod and New York artists. She and her husband, Herb Atkins, own Concepts 1 Auction House in Point Pleasant, New Jersey.