



Lisbeth Firmin

I Just Wanted to Paint

Lisbeth Firmin decided to move to New York City after a chance encounter on Bond Street in 1978. "We parked across the street across from this gallery called Marie Pellicone. We were unloading our car to go up and stay with our friends in this loft. I had made these collages of kitschy items with all kinds of sequins and just crazy stuff, and I was giving them away to my friends. There was a whole trunk full of them.

"This woman looked at them. She just happened to be standing in front of her gallery. She goes, 'Wow, these are really cool!' And I said, 'Oh, thanks!' She goes, 'Do you want a show?' I went, 'Sure!' So that's how I got my first show."

"I thought, if it's that easy to get a show in New York City I'm moving there."

Like most artists who move to New York, she realized it really wasn't that easy. "The only job I could get was waitressing. I had never waitressed in my life, so I really couldn't even get a job doing that. I had no experience. Finally, some restaurant hired me for brunch and so I was making a little bit of money every day."

She had found a way to make a living, but she hadn't moved to the city to be a waitress. Firmin used her connections to find a more suitable job. "I had met this woman out in Seattle who was a cartoonist, and she had been hired by the *National Lampoon* in the city. The woman was Shary Flenniken who created *Trots and Bonnie*, a reoccurring *National Lampoon* comic strip. Firmin's friends urged her to call Flenniken, so she did and was hired as Flenniken's assistant. "I put down the eggs benedict and I went over there. There was no money, but it was steady income."

That job turned into a career in publishing. "I met all these fabulous people," who helped her advance her career. "I got connected to King Features which is where I moved over to be the design director because I was in that cartoon world, in that *New Yorker* cartoon world, and the *Lampoon* cartoon world." While she was working in publishing, she



LEFT: *Woman on a Subway*, 2018, oil on wood panel, 20" x 30"

TOP: *Rain-Slicked Street, Broadway*, 2001, oil on wood panel, 16" x 16"

BOTTOM: *Franklin Alley*, oil on wood panel, 2000, 36" x 42"



ABOVE: *Coming From the Pool II*, 2014, monotype, 24" x 30"



RIGHT: *Deirdre on the Couch*, 2007, monotype, 31" x 24"

recalls, "I took a class in graphic design because I didn't know how to do that either. I learned pretty fast. Cut and paste. Before the computer."

Firmin liked the job well enough, but the pull to be an artist still tugged at her. "I kept the job. Towards the end of it, my boss would say I just wanted to paint so bad, but I was afraid to quit. He did the best thing for me. He severed me. . . . It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I took the money and I had two residencies. I went to MacDowell and I went to Vermont Studio School, so I was just painting like crazy."

She used New York as an inspiration for her artwork. "I decided to paint the city in the nineties, and that's really when my career took off. I just said, I'm going to paint what I see when I leave my apartment, which was on Sullivan Street, so it was all downtown." She says, "Corporate dealers were selling my work now to boardrooms and stuff because it was that urban stuff."

Even though it is somewhat taboo in the Art World for an artist to think about their art as a source of income, Firmin has good business sense when it comes to selling

her work. She explains, "My early work was in gouache because that was easy for me to handle. But then I realized ... if I did paintings in oil painting I could get a lot more money."

She had never studied oil painting, so she read a book on the subject. "I taught myself how to do oil painting just by reading. There's just stuff you can do and stuff you can't do." Changing from gouache to oils really made a difference. "I started making more money, and I got a couple of really good galleries. . . . Oil paintings are just worth more than works on paper. It's just a fact."

She notes that because of her success she "needed a bigger studio, so I was looking upstate." She found a beautiful space in Franklin. "Artists lived there before, so it was all just one open space in the top, which was so cool. Like a loft. And then, the bottom was an old storefront that was just a studio. ... I worked downstairs and I lived upstairs."

"It was really funny because I was working in my little tiny two-bedroom apartment on Sullivan Street for all those years getting my career going, and [then] I had this huge



TOP: *Sheds*, 2021, gouache, 19" x 26"

BOTTOM: *Old Barn, Platner Brook*, 2021, gouache, 19" x 26"

space ... and I just put myself in the corner because I couldn't deal with it. I found a corner that I could just work in. I eventually filled up the space, but to start it was overwhelming."

While living in the country, she continued to paint urban landscapes. "I would go down to get material from the city." But then, the focus changed. She started making the paintings about the people in those cityscapes. "The figures started out really small in my paintings. Now, that's all there is. It's about the figure. So that's how it evolved for me from doing the urban landscapes since I don't live there anymore."

She says, "I guess I have to paint what I see. I'm painting all these urban landscapes, but I don't live there anymore, so I tried to paint Oneonta, I tried to paint Windham, but it just wasn't the same." Firmin realized she needed to change direction. "I took a figure drawing [class]. I worked with a bunch of artists in Oneonta, and I just took a break from the urban stuff. I just started painting the figure again, but that wasn't enough. Then, I went back and I put the figure in the urban landscape, and that made me happy."

Then came the pandemic. "During COVID I didn't know what to do. Everything got canceled. ... I went out to Birch Creek, it's out by Fleischmanns. It's a beautiful place. I go there sometimes just to walk around. It's an old, abandoned farm house ... and I thought, I can paint that."

"On the way home from here, I found two other beautiful, abandoned places that I wanted to paint, so I did a whole series. I had a show a couple years ago and we did really well. I've sold half of them, and they were very well received, so that was nice to know that I could change courses like that."

"But now I'm back to doing the figurative work."

The anonymous figures in her work have a certain emotional quality that she can't quite explain. "It's not coming from a conscience level that I'm making it try to be emotional. In fact, I'm pretty repressed [laughs]. I'm pretty in control most of the time." She says, "People have compared my work to [Edward] Hopper. Especially when I was doing the building things ... but I think that Hopper nailed loneliness, and my people are alone. They're not particularly unhappy, but they're definitely alone."

In the past, Firmin would only paint strangers, but, once again, she's trying something new. "I started painting people I know." She admits, "I don't know if that's going to work out or not."

After more than twenty years of painting with oils, her work has come full circle. "What happened was, my oil paintings, I wasn't happy with them." She says, "I went out and bought a bunch of gouache, and I'm having a pretty good time. ... I did all those beautiful, abandoned houses in gouache. That was a big hit, so I thought, ok, I can do that."

She's also experimenting with another medium. "I started working in acrylic, and I'm really liking it. It's much more lively than my oil painting, so I'm back to painting, but it's not in oil."

In addition to being a painter, Firmin is also an experienced printmaker. "I love my prints. I don't have a press, but I have a friend who has a press in Roxbury, so I book it." The prints are often studies for her paintings. "I would do the monoprint first, so I would get it laid out first." She has future plans of trying out the large press at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in Connecticut.



Under Scaffolding, 2016, oil on wood panel, 20" x 16"

"I'm talking to them now because I found out they have a beautiful press room and big press."

Since she no longer owns most of her early work, she's decided to publish a book. "I did some amazing paintings in the city in the early days and they just flew because they were cheap, and I don't have anything. I just have slides, so I had all the slides digitized by this great guy up in Maine. He did a really good job. Now, I just have to put together the book. And it's going to go from like '95 to now so people can see the evolution. But the early work is what I really want people to see because I think it's really good. I had no idea when I was doing it."

Firmin left Franklin about ten years ago and works out of a studio in Margaretville. Her studio is an ideal space for her. "They're carrying me out of here on a stretcher [laughs]. It's suitable for me. I don't need a bigger space."

She has paintings taped to the walls and propped up on tables. One of the unfinished works is an example from the classes she teaches. "I teach plein air, and I teach still lifes, and I teach all kinds of stuff. I demonstrate

so people can get an idea how to do it." She explains, "There's no drawing. ... You have to do it with a big brush. It shakes people up." She points to the study on the wall. "Try this at home. Mix up some of the colors from whatever you're working from. ... Then, I tell my students, you just take a big brush, work with a negative shape ... and I want the whole thing covered in like twenty minutes. And it's amazing."

She says of her life in the Catskills, "I fell in love with this place when I first came. When I was driving up just to see the house, I had never even heard of Delaware County in my life. So I'm coming from the city to find this house in Franklin to take a look at it, and I'm looking around, coming up through Walton, and I'm like, oh my God, it's so beautiful up here. Right after I bought the house and moved up here, I spent so much time just looking out the window. It was so beautiful, and it still is."

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FIND LISBETH FIRMIN'S WORK AT: LISBETHFIRMIN.COM