

Fasanella, Marc (2017) *Images of Optimism*, (with essay by Leslie Umberger and chronology by Paul S. D'Ambrosio), Pomegranate, Portland, Or.

Review by Janet Zandy

A reproduction in a book is no substitute for actually standing before a great painting, taking in its size, color, brush strokes, and the power of its intellect and emotion. This new book on Ralph Fasanella (1914-1997), the great narrative painter of the working classes, comes close to that visual, physical experience. So much more than a museum catalog or coffee table art book, *Images of Optimism* is charged with a palpable fusion of artistic expression and political consciousness. Designed with insight about the grand scale of Fasanella's epical paintings and the telling details of his visual narratives, tuned to the challenge of reproducing his vibrant colors and dark hues, this book opens working-class history and worker art to a new generation. If you detect a whiff of Gramsci's 'pessimism of intellect, optimism of will' in the title, you won't be disappointed.

Such curatorial labels as outsider, folk, primitive, regional, even self-taught, ill fit Ralph Fasanella's scope and political vision. In her Introduction, 'Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget,' Leslie Umberger, curator of folk art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., eschews such categories, choosing 'art of conviction' (p. 9) as a better descriptor. She begins by tracing Ralph Fasanella's roots in working-class immigrant culture. The son of Italian immigrants Giuseppe (Joe) and Ginevra Fasanella, Ralph grew up in working-class neighborhoods in lower Manhattan and the Bronx. A tough, mouthy, baseball-loving street kid, sent to reform school for minor juvenile delinquency, the young Fasanella observed and lived the economic schism between American promise and its peopled, lived realities. Umberger lists some of Ralph's jobs—'garment worker, truck driver, ice deliveryman, union organizer, gas station owner' (p. 7)—important details because Fasanella's art making and his consciousness of labor—its burdens and fruits—are inseparable. As an eight-year-old, Ralph helped his father haul ice blocks up narrow stairs to tenement apartments. Although Joe Fasanella left the family and returned to Italy when Ralph was 15, he remained in the imagination of his adult son, who painted Joe as crucified everyman nailed to an icebox with his own tongs. *Iceman Crucified #4* (1958) is not surrealistic horror, though. Like Fasanella's other great paintings, it is dialogic in its implicit understanding of the possibility of optimism—the brighter background colors of orderly neighborhoods in relation to Joe's foregrounded workingman's browns.

It was Ralph's mother, Ginevra, a talented garment worker and economic support for her family of six children, who exposed Ralph to political radicalism and labor struggle. His tribute painting, *Family Supper* (1972), centers her in her tidy kitchen, surrounded by her children, with coffee, pastries, fruit, and within its frame, the material emblems of their immigrant and personal lives—the ice tongs, sewing machine, clothes line, photographs, record player, stove with sauce simmering, and outside the frame, the neighborhood, the glimpse into the interiors of similar apartments, and above a narrow blue sky, tiny released pigeons and the ubiquitous water towers of New York.

Umberger's introduction provides a sturdy biographical and art historical context for the inseparability of Fasanella's life, politics and artistry. Rather than relying on words like 'crusade' (p. 9) and 'weapon' (p. 7), I wish she had paused over Ralph's intellectual formation and his reading, since books, newspapers, and words are assertive revelatory details in his paintings. Fasanella was an intellectual from the working class as well as a great artist.

Imagine walking through a gallery to see an artist's exhibit in the company of someone deeply knowledgeable about the paintings and the painter. That opportunity and experience is what makes *Images of Optimism* so distinctive. Marc Fasanella, son of Eva and Ralph Fasanella, and named for Vito Marcantonio, progressive congressman representing East Harlem (1934-1950), is our narrator and guide. In writing 'Observations from the Artist's Son' and 'Afterword: Being Ralph's Son,' Marc Fasanella faced the challenge of orchestrating biography, art interpretation, labor history, political ideology, communal ethos, and historical events, as well as his own memories, to present his father's process and vision to an audience who may or may not have seen a Ralph Fasanella painting. This is an important, intergenerational book, especially for those willing to step away from the gatekeeping boundaries of museums and art history, and see, really look at, profound artistic expression infused with working-class historical consciousness.

Ralph Fasanella's formal schooling ended in the eighth grade. He never attended art school. He never aligned himself with New York art world currents and styles. He never separated manual labor from intellectuality. And he chafed against assumptions that working class people are stupid. Marc Fasanella recognizes his father's combination of 'outwardly working-class, straightforward simplicity and inwardly deep intellect' (p. 31). Ralph learned by participating in struggle—as a union organizer and as a volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in 1937 Spain. He learned by reading political theory *and* listening and respecting the workers he encountered in diners, factories, street corners, and shops. He learned by immersing himself in libraries and research, *and* living in the communities that were the subjects of his great history paintings, *Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike* (1977), *The Great Strike (IWW Textile Strike)* (1978), and *Meeting at the Commons—Lawrence, 1912* (1977). Fasanella learned by looking at art, especially absorbing the techniques of the French Impressionists, the empathetic genius of Van Gogh, and the draftsmanship of Goya and Diego Rivera.

We have a rare glimpse of artistic process in Marc Fasanella's descriptions of watching his father paint. Marc was born in 1964 when Ralph was 50 years old and finally able to relinquish his service station to paint full time. (See *Happy and Bud's Service Station*, 1968.) Marc describes Ralph's 'articulation' as a self-taught painter: 'Ideological passion drove him to paint—not a passion for the art of painting, but a passion for the lives of the people. He painted energetically into the wee hours of the morning, fueled by cigarettes, coffee, and the power of his ideas' (p. 57). Marc takes us up close to the paintings themselves and his own (never quite finished) dialogue with them. Titles of paintings become subheadings for his reflective essay. I finally caught the pun of *Grand Union* (1955) as depicting not just a supermarket but a yearning for communal solidarity in the context of shifting modernity. Marc Fasanella recalls *Iceman Crucified #4* 'as a powerful presence in my life. I have come to love it as a family member' (p. 52). *Love Goddess* (1964) takes on a fresh resonance as seen through Marc's expanded consciousness: 'a hopeful painting, a utopian notion of human sexuality' (p. 59). Marc rightly draws critical attention to Ralph's conception of time, especially his disruption of linear time and his imaginative simultaneity of past and present, experiential, and historical time. *Images of Optimism* also includes lesser-known Fasanella paintings, the utopian vision

of *Coney Island* (1965) and the later paintings of Maine bucolic vacations and ideal communities such as *Main Street: Dobbs Ferry* (1985).

Ralph Fasanella's art making was a great circuitry of connection. That circuitry was expanded thanks to the insight of union organizer Ron Carver. When the enormous *Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike* was about to be sold to a private collector, Carver organized Public Domain and raised money, with the help and cooperation of the Fasanellas, to purchase that and other paintings so that the public could see them. *Family Supper*, as one example, is now at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

'Catch' and 'grab' are Fasanella words. Marc *catches* that spirit. Ralph Fasanella is the 'guy' (another Fasanella word) you turn to if you want to grab a sense of how working-class lives play out on the street, in the factory, and at home—in extraordinary paintings. His optimistic vision, his long historical sense, and his kinship with those in struggle are crucial to the times we face today.

Author Bio

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