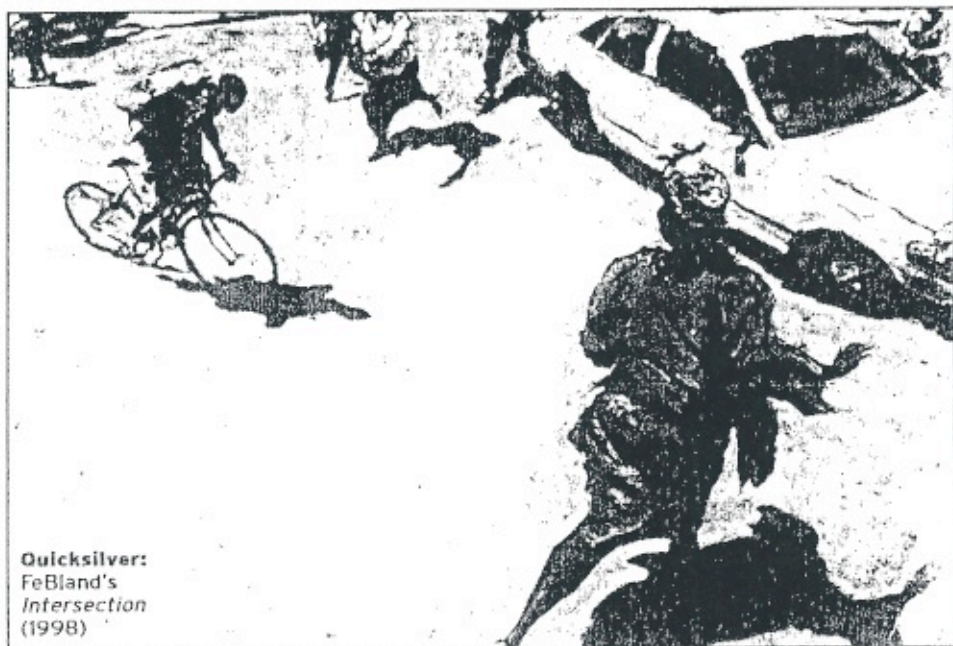


theMet

MAY 24-31



Quicksilver:
FeBland's
Intersection
(1998)

City Lights

David FeBland stands out at Valley House

BY BRET MCCABE

The paintings of David FeBland, who makes his first appearance at Valley House, are robust. FeBland's oil-on-canvas and -linen works are on the small side, but in this tight space he conjures

scenes that mix urban realism with Baroque, expressive brushwork. In *Feast of Lights* (2000), three Hasidic Jews walk down a neighborhood street along which Christmas trees have been left for garbage pick-

up: The street and sidewalk are achieved in a matte, eggshell white and muted gray that accents the season implied. In *Holland Tunnel Vision* (1998), a man briskly walks across a street carrying bags as orange-vested workers attend to the far curb. The blue cab of a truck enters from the left side of the canvas and off in the top left background, the dark recess of the Holland Tunnel peeks out of the composition. It's a dynamic work, with bodies, objects, and

shadows moving your eye around in a bustling motion that heightens its kinetic activity. Color, light, and activity are FeBland's pawns in his provocative evocations of city life. Together they conspire to achieve realistic-seeming portrayals of New York City life with rhythmic ripples that conjure the experience they depict as well. FeBland writes that his paintings aren't transcriptions of observed events. They're compendiums of scenes and ideas witnessed in his roams through NYC — he gave up his car 20 years ago for life as a pedestrian and bicyclist — that he mentally cuts and pastes

together and realizes in the studio. Some of FeBland's visual strengths are indebted to his 18-year career as an illustrator (he turned to painting at 40); his figures reveal

an economical eye that captures the swiftest of movements with the slightest of gestures. But the situations he arranges are informed by his involvement with the living, breathing organism that is modern New York.

FeBland combines all these elements to celebrate the curry of cultures and peoples sharing space in the city. His color choices mix the high and hot for objects that normally would be rendered in duller tones and hues. In the alley scene of *The Fallen* (2000), a dog drags some downed object in the foreground while in the background two African-American streetwalkers pass by in short skirts, high heels, and bikini tops. It's an image that makes you wonder who the fallen are, but there's no moral judgement being passed because his palette and compositions don't conform to traditional readings. FeBland also exploits the dramatic shifts in light a city produces: One building can cast a dark shadow that explodes into scintillating, blood-red orange sunlight of late-afternoon in a city in which light bounces off all the surrounding's shiny surfaces. Here, the dog is clouded by shadow while the women bask in the glory of the sun, confusing any straightforward, singular meaning into whorls of complexity.

These images are disarmingly involving. Though FeBland's work has been compared to the Ashcan School of Robert Henri and John Sloan — with nods at George Bellows and Edward Hopper as well — his ability to instill strongly emotive elements into his work also hints at the more graphic work of Ben Shahn and Diego Rivera. It suggests an evolution of socially conscious realism that both Ashcan artists and Shahn flirted with, a very American response to Soviet socialist realism that embraces its more expressive elements. Realism per se has accrued such a slovenly reputation since then that artists who wish to explore representations of reality fight an uphill battle. Surprisingly, the late-'70s and '80s spawned a generation of artists — visual, cinematic, and literary — who recognized that realism's vocabulary had grown tired and ineffective. In an effort to get closer to how things really are, they turned to all the unrealistic tools at their disposal to produce a kind of social surrealism. It's a quality that gives the movies of Spike Lee their poignancy, and it's a spirit that FeBland's works achieve better than his contemporaries. ■

ARTS

**Gail Norfleet,
Garrett
Speirs, David
FeBland**

Valley House Gallery,
Through June 17,
972-239-2441

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