THE BEAUTY IN PAINTING
A TIME AFTER TIME

By Courtney Lauck

“I don’t know if you know the mythology behind St. George and the dragon?” Lawrence Fodor asks me. Even though the connection is a little bit sketchy over our Skype call, he can see me shaking my head in response and continues with the story. “Basically, he was a crusader,” he tells me, “at the time when Muslim lands were being terrorized by a dragon. The dragon had eaten all the sheep in the village, the dragon was now eating the young virgins in the village. The last remaining daughter was the daughter of the caliphate of the village. Then, St. George comes along. They beg him to kill the dragon. St. George captures the dragon and brings it to the village and says, all right, if you convert to Christianity I will kill the dragon.” There is a long pause and I can’t tell if I’m losing my connection or if he’s contemplating. Finally, the artist looks at me and says, “For me, I thought, why can’t this guy just kill the dragon?”

You might wonder if this conversation is with a philosopher, an historian, or someone knowledgeable about religious mythology. All of the above are in many parts true, however, you may not have thought it was a dialogue with a painter. Lawrence Fodor is all these things, though the latter designation is how he presents himself to the world. This story he tells me is significant to both his art and what he is trying to achieve with it.

Lawrence Fodor is a man who knows no boundaries in the field of art. His bio says he began painting at 10 years old. He has a BFA from the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles and though a good deal of his life has been spent making abstract paintings, his degree is in both painting and printmaking. His talent stems from a deep and very broad arts education not so common for an abstract painter, and his career is both celebrated and extensive. In early 2014, he called Andria Friesen and asked very specifically if he could have an exhibit in the show-slot for August 2017. When she asked why, he replied that the northwestern
part of the United States, specifically our part of Idaho, would experience a solar eclipse the likes of which hadn’t been seen in decades. Frieseing agreed, having little grasp, as many of us didn’t until recently, of the gravity of the event that would take shape on August 21.

Fodor’s series, Eclipse: Obscured Memories, evolved three years ago in relation to two things: his intuitive inclination toward a new philosophical theme in painting, and his return to Los Angeles when he purchased a loft, circa 1900, perfect for producing these very pieces. It was during this time that he discovered the kernel of an idea that evolved into something beautiful and prophetic, visibly entralling, and philosophically captivating. Inspired by artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, Jean Etienne Ramey, Michelangelo Buonarotti, and Théodore Géricault, Fodor began sketching and then painting reproductions of their pieces. Fodor chose the pieces not only because they are magnificent to behold, but because they also played an unparalleled role in the history and transformation of art through the centuries. Once reproduced in his own hand, he painted over them to the point of obliteration and abstraction. In essence, Fodor took these meaningful works and eclipsed them, taking centuries-old stories and transforming them into modern visages.

During our Skype interview, which included Friesen intern, Megan Elizabeth, I could see his loft as well as the pieces that will be featured in the gallery throughout the month of August. Elizabeth asked about the instigation of his most recent series, and he detailed the inspiration and deep themes coursing through his work. “I had this postcard of St. George and the dragon and something compelled me,” Fodor explained. “I had this big blank canvas. Once I started it, I found out about the eclipse, and I started painting it with the purpose of obliterating it. The whole premise was that I would do these historic works and then I would eclipse—re-contextualize—them. That’s when I decided to call the series Eclipse. The other part of that was putting away the reproductions—and once I start covering it up, it goes away pretty fast.”

The idea behind this eclipsing came from a distinct focus on art representing outdated mythologies, pieces used in their time as propaganda to promote the agendas of certain religions and beliefs. Fodor says, “Mostly, but not all [of the paintings], are heavy with Christian dogma. The Catholic Church used art as a tool for evange-
lism. They had the greatest artists at the time because they had the money and they supported it. But it was also the same in Greek and Roman times too. All the mythology was a tool of propaganda. The reasons behind these are the reasons for many of the problems in our world. They’re outdated. And so my purpose in them is investigating how and why these paintings came to be and then eclipsing, obliterating them. It is my microcosm in how to shift those paradigms and shift them into something that’s a little more sane, more relevant, more accepting and tolerant."

Fodor is insistent on this in his theme and the purpose of recreating these famous works was always to obliterate them, in order to create themes more modern, and that also reflect his own philosophical renderings. And thank God he does (yes, intentional irony). I say this mainly because so much of the art that has persisted throughout time has been wondrous to behold, while also being representative of the distinct vision held by its creator. And just as Fodor’s work illuminates the theme of art eclipsing art over centuries, a “nothing new under the sun” allusion, the underlying spirit of it relies on much more than generic ideology; it falls into the personal realm of a life shaped, built on the childhood magic of beauty as escape. “I grew up a very strict Catholic. In the fourth grade, I was headed to be a Jesuit priest, and in the sixth grade I felt that for me it was essentially all a bunch of lies. So I refused to go back to school one day and started looking for something else, something that would make sense of the world to me.”

Of course, viewing Fodor’s exhibit as solely focused on the coming eclipse would be to discount his most recent work as representative of only a current and relevant obsession. There are layers upon layers beneath using this theme as inspiration. It is a tale that began in the past: “There were things that thrilled my imagination as a kid,” he explains. “I had a particularly rough childhood. I had a tree house that was my great safe space. And I would sit on the roof of my house and just dream of being swept
away by an alien or being thrilled at a lunar eclipse. Or when I knew there was going to be a meteor shower, I'd climb up to the roof.”

It often seems that when you speak to an artist about their current work, in the throes of fervent explanation, that it's the culmination of years of scrupulous vision. But hearing Fodor describe his passion for this exhibit, I can’t help but truly believe that this is the epitome of a career spent searching and finally achieving a purpose. “Even when my daughter was young, we'd go out in New Mexico, you know they have such clear skies there, and we'd put sleeping bags out and we'd watch the meteor shower. It's something that's always, always, always, thrilled my imagination. It was a great escape and alternative that continued on the older I got.”

Fodor's exhibit will be featured in the Friesen Gallery the entire month of August and will occupy the entire gallery, which Andria Friesen says is an exceptionally rare occurrence. The exhibition itself represents a coming together of so many aspects, not all of them celestial in nature. Lawrence Fodor was the very first artist whom Friesen Gallery featured 31 years ago when it opened, and Fodor hasn't had a showing at the gallery in about 10 years. Fodor's exhibit will feature his abstract works along with four large diptychs, his representations of age-old famous pieces sitting directly alongside his eclipsed versions—an avenue to show the process of the labor and talent behind each rendering without having to leave it purely to the audience's imagination. His exhibit will also feature his “Koan Boxes,” cigar boxes filled with unknowable objects, sealed in gold and then covered in years of paint, dripped directly from his paintings—a physically eloquent representation of the Buddhist concept of an unanswerable question. You see, this is the thing about Fodor's work: there are simply so many interesting themes and influences that one can hardly cover it in a single article.

In the end, thinking back upon my conversation with this artist—so brilliant, so captivating, and so approachable all at once—I can't help but think that, in some way, the drive behind sharing his new work with the world resembles much the same reasons he took his daughter out to view meteor showers so many years ago. The ideas, paintings, and parts of the past that have captivated him throughout his life, he can deliver with new life to an audience that, for a long time now, has been awaiting something wondrous.

Eclipse: Obscured Memories
Lawrence Fodor
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Friesen Gallery
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