

To See a World in a Grain of Sand

On David Finkbeiner's double exhibition

David Finkbeiner's work will be on exhibit this month in Lucca at *Ottocento/Novecento Art Studio* in via del Battistero 22/24, with the opening on 11 July at 6.30 pm; and in Bagni di Lucca on 25 July at 6 pm as part of the Bagni di Lucca Art Festival. An artist of enormous talent, Finkbeiner was born in Oregon and completed his studies in theatre arts at the University of San Francisco. In 1965, he moved to New York where, in the halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a first encounter with frescoes from Pompeii left him deeply moved. For Finkbeiner, it was the erosion produced by time and by vicissitude that gave them their charm and beauty. That sighting marked the beginning of his great interest in ruins; more recently, details of Pompeian frescoes caught by his attentive eye during a visit to the National Museum of Naples reappear in his 2014 series, *Bugnano*, partly exhibited at *Ottocento/Novecento Art Studio*.

Finkbeiner taught for thirty years at the prestigious Pratt Institute in New York. With his colleague Linda Shrank, he initiated the summer program of Photography, Drawing and Painting for Pratt in Cortona, transferred it to Lucca and coordinated it until he retired in 1999. Finkbeiner had landed in Lucca in 1981 to join the Camnitzer Studio in Valdottavo. It was there, in 1983, in a place called Ronchi, that he purchased a ruin, restored it and moved there permanently in 1999. Later, he bought another ruin in the same area, called it "La Fenice" (the Phoenix) and made it the subject of a 2007 series that pictured it before and during its restoration. It is here that Finkbeiner lives, works and gives English lessons to anyone in the town who wants to take advantage of his instinctive generosity.

Since 1970, Finkbeiner has been active in the Two Mauds, a Foundation in New York City dedicated to supporting causes for animal welfare. He proudly recounts how in 1994, the Foundation rebuilt many animal shelters destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. For years he has worked as a volunteer at the Diecimo shelter and unwillingly misses his biweekly appointment there. Between 1989 and 1994, animals were the main subject of his images, while in the recent work they are only occasionally present. In one of the paintings exhibited at *Ottocento/Novecento Art Studio* (*Elena*, 2012) we find a detail that at first glance surprises then moves us: the shadow of his cat Elena, in that corner of the garden where she liked to sit and which seems to still register her presence.

The works that emerge from Finkbeiner's studio are the result of his careful study of the geometry of lines and forms, full and empty spaces, light and shadow. That is one of the reasons that ruins are a preferred subject; but they also inspire many emotional responses in him. For example, the sense of emptiness and longing that he felt when he saw Guzzanello for the first time, a village in the Serchio Valley destroyed by an earthquake, which was the source of a series of paintings called *The Upper Room*. At other times, the artist fixes a moment of great potential, as in the series *La Fenice*, where the ruins are charged with the energies of the past and future. Sometimes he introduces fantastic elements as in *Fantasia*, where the ruins of "La Fenice" rise in sharp outlines against an imaginary sky that merges day and night in that moment without contradictions. It anticipates the latest series of his paintings, exhibited in Bagni di Lucca, that are illuminated by the light of dawn and dusk.

The colours of Finkbeiner are earth, stone, brick, leaf, stem, sky, air, light, shadow; the technique he uses is mainly pastel on paper or wood, or gouache on mylar. In his hands, the colours acquire

such a corporosity that one gets the impression of being in front of an oil painting, especially when he works with pastel on wood, a technique with which he has recently inaugurated a new phase of colour experimentation.

Finkbeiner often combines disparate architectural elements and places, as in the series *Bugnano* where the received history of Pompeii in ruins is evoked in citations reworked by the artist to become a private history of crumbling structures in a neglected village. Fragments of murals that once decorated these rooms seem to converse with those from far-off and long-ago Pompeii in a reassuring dialogue about their common destiny. Perhaps the artist is telling us that large and small histories have the same importance. The graffiti scrawled on the walls rudely return us to the present, cutting short our imaginings. In the graffiti of his name, curiously discovered on one of the walls, the artist becomes both author and actor. In its conjunction of distant elements, the site Finkbeiner presents becomes something utterly personal, the outcome of the association of ideas produced by a mind in constant turmoil. The result synthesizes the expressive interiority of the artist and the rigour of his hand.

Gazing with the eye of the foreigner, fresh and self-effacing, seeing everything, accepting all and with strength in his innocence, Finkbeiner has that uncanny ability to "see a world in a grain of sand." His wide-angle vision takes in 360° and then slowly closes in on fragments of the world. Often, in fact, we find him peering through windows or fissures in walls. In his latest series, on exhibit in Bagni di Lucca, the wide angle widens again, this time on sunrises and sunsets, in search of the liminal moment between the light of day and the dark of night. In 1970, Finkbeiner bought his first ruin in New York near the Manhattan Bridge. It would become his first studio in New York where, in the hours of maximum concentration between five and nine in the morning, he would work intensely to produce *In the Morning*, a portfolio of eight prints that did not represent, but were born into, the dawn. Now the circle closes: around the reborn "La Fenice" Finkbeiner has rediscovered the early morning hours and their *alter ego*, those of the evening. This time, however, light is the protagonist as the artist tries to capture the intensity of that special moment of suspension created by the fusion of day and night.

– by Chiara Calabrese

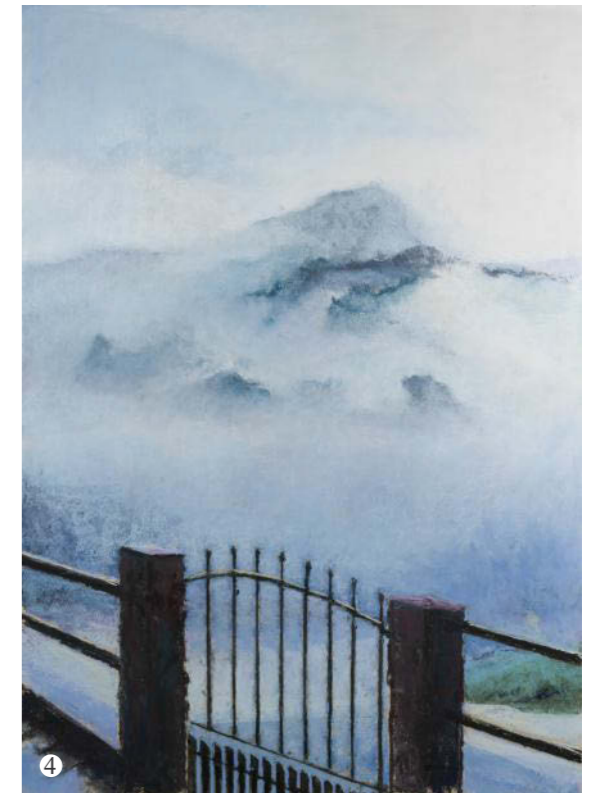
Opening in Lucca: 11 July 6.30 pm

800/900 Art studio
www.800artstudio.com
Via del Battistero 22/24

Opening in Bagni di Lucca: 25 July at 6 pm

Associazione "Il ponte in Arte"
Via Vittorio Emanuele 40
Ponte a Serraglio 55022, Bagni di Lucca

All the galleries are situated on one block near the Serraglio bridge.



IMAGES:

1. from the *Stalla* series, pastel, 2013.
2. *Graffiti*, from the *Bugnano* series, pastel, 2014.
3. *Elena*, pastel, 2012.
4. from the *Alba and Tramonto* series, pastel, 2015.
5. from the *Alba and Tramonto* series, pastel, 2015.

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