

# David Finkbeiner, In Another Place

David Finkbeiner's path to *In Altro Luogo*, the exhibition of his work at the Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca in the Piazza San Martino 7 (24 June to 23 July), has not been completely straightforward.

Born in Nampa, Idaho, to a fundamentalist Christian family, Finkbeiner fell in love with the theatre as a teenager and dreamed of becoming a movie actor. In secret and using a friend's address for correspondence, he applied to the University of Denver drama school. Once accepted, he accumulated his tuition by selling pots and pans to his high school class, and happy to be away from the family farm, began studying acting in earnest. His money did not last long, however, and on a teacher's advice he moved to the then-free San Francisco State in his third semester. After graduation he set out to Los Angeles to begin his acting career.

The career was short lived. There were lots of theatrical jobs, but Finkbeiner wanted to work in film and the roles weren't coming. He was supporting himself by working part time in an art supply store on La Cienega Boulevard, where he began to meet artists who frequented the LA art scene. Through the store, he also found work as a model, but this time instead of money, he was offered lessons in etching. He was hooked.

Finkbeiner moved to New York where he showed his first three successful etchings to the director of the Pratt Graphic Center – the Manhattan outpost of the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn – who liked them enough to give him work around the school in exchange for free lessons in intaglio. At the Graphic Center Finkbeiner met and became friends with another teacher, Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer, who invited the younger printmaker to take over one of his classes. Teaching Camnitzer's class and then another for a colleague who was on sabbatical marked the beginning of Finkbeiner's 30-year career as a Pratt art professor.

Camnitzer had bought a house in Valdottavo in the early 70s. When he began a summer printmaking studio there, it seemed natural to invite Finkbeiner to help him teach. Beginning in 1982, Finkbeiner left New York for the Garfagnana each summer, entering into the enchanting world of the ancient Tuscan landscape. These were magical summers passed in the camaraderie of work and of a growing circle of local friends. Among the many outings with students was a picnic in a wood near an old church. Attracted by the sound of the organ and the pealing bells, Finkbeiner began to explore the building. He found a trap door leading to two abandoned rooms. Inhabited only by mice and birds, the rooms were bathed in the late summer light, which picked out the faded blues and yellows of the crumbling walls. Finkbeiner was smitten with the beauty of the empty rooms. He set out to translate with pastels the emotions that the sight aroused in him. This subject, the beauty of a once-inhabited space, and his attempt to articulate it in painting, has been at the centre of his work since that afternoon.

By 1983, Finkbeiner had bought his own property in Tempagnano, a village that overlooks Valdottavo. Over each summer for the next ten years, he slowly reconstructed the ancient stone buildings with his friend Ron Scott, making a main house, a free-standing apartment for guests and a studio where he made



prints and paintings. Back in America, he continued to teach and to exhibit in New York galleries. In 1986 he travelled to Montevideo on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1994 he participated in *La grande mela in Toscana*, a group show in Cortona, presenting prints of closely-observed domestic and farm animals in the Tuscan landscape. He moved permanently to Tempagnano in 2000 and began to exhibit more frequently in Italy: Lucca's Galleria Baci di Capaci in 2000, Orbicciano in 2006, Gallery 800 900 Studio Art (Lucca) 2015, and Bagni di Lucca in 2013 and 2015. In December 2005, Finkbeiner bought an abandoned ruin down the road from his house. With the help of local masons, he put on a roof, rebuilt the walls, uncovered the fireplace, fitted new windows and doors and gradually made the house habitable again. He called it la Fenice, (the Phoenix) and gave the name to a series of pastels and gouaches he made tracing its desolation and rebirth.

Finkbeiner had been working in both gouache and pastel since coming to Italy. With gouache – opaque water colour – he can work quickly, building up layers of colour for density on the transparent and slippery mylar, or just touching the sheet with the wet brush to make a translucent streak of pigment. *Mattina d'Estate* (this month's *Grapevine* cover) confounds our senses with these different textures. The pale shimmering walls surround what seems to be a window frame, a distant intense green pierced by a pergola's sharp white awning. The outside beckons; inside seems abandoned. But the space dividing the two is not demarcated. It is an imaginative threshold of colour that holds us both in and out at the same time.

The gouaches are one of five series that Finkbeiner is showing at the Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca. The other four are made up of large pastels done since 2014. In different ways, each describes the power of time to modify and obliterate spaces that human occupants have created for themselves. Crumbling walls, flaking paint and rusting wire are the protagonists of these pictures, revived and enlivened by the painter's hand.

As if using a camera, Finkbeiner focuses on a pertinent detail, chooses and frames discarded or ruined objects and then re-situates them in a space transformed by luminous colour. This subtle play of recession and projection and the invisible work of knitting together reality and abstraction is Finkbeiner's great accomplishment. It brings us as close as we ever can be to the act of painting itself.

– by Marta Braun

Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca  
Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Piazza San Martino 7  
24 June to 23 July 2017  
Hours: 3.30pm to 7.30pm Tuesdays thru Sundays  
catalog by Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore

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