
INTERLOCUTOR

LISBETH FIRMIN

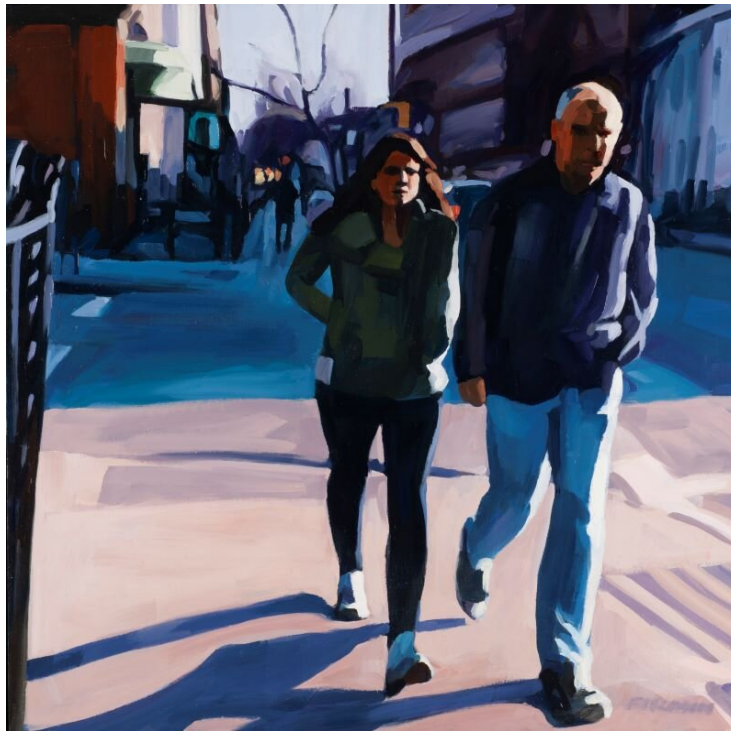
Tyler Nesler
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Photo by Daniel Krieger

Lisbeth Firmin works in a subdued palette, using blocks of color to recreate moments of lone figures and couples lost in thought, walking through shadows or lit by the unearthly glow of a city sunset. Her figurative paintings allude to portraiture, though she avoids the direct gaze of her subjects, focusing instead on their backs, their distraction, their movements through scaffolded sidewalks and neighborhood side streets.

Building the shapes of her figures with thick brushes in gradual layers, sometimes as many as twenty, her paintings come into being slowly, much like the slow development of a photograph. Her process embodies the quiet, introspective energy of her look back at the city she made her home for over thirty years. As a counterpoint to her richly colorful oil paintings, her black and white monoprints are stripped down versions of these urban scenarios, their negative space etched out from the black ink-covered plates she uses to press them into being. In both her paintings as well as her lithographs, Firmin delivers an outside insider's view of some of the most intimate moments happening every day on the streets of New York City.



"Couple, Brooklyn", 2017 - Oil on wood panel, Framed Dimensions: 25.39 x 25.39 in. (64.5 x 64.5 cm)

You've been painting since childhood, and you chose to bypass academic training to study with printmaker Seong Moy, and painters Philip Malicoat, Victor Candell, and Leo Manso. What were your reasons for not pursuing a formal education in art, and in what ways do you think that may have been advantageous to you?

I was very young, it was 1970 and I was twenty-one. I was also married and pregnant, so art school was out of the question. I took workshops with these artists off and on in the 1970s. In retrospect, not going to art school did enable me to develop my style all on my own. One of the downsides of not going has been that I didn't get to meet other artists and make connections with galleries, mentors, etc.

How did you discover the works of Moy, Malicoat, Candell, and Manso, and what was the process of meeting them and training with them? How was each individual particularly influential on the ways you came to eventually develop your own thematic and creative approaches?

I spent the summers and fall in Provincetown, Massachusetts from 1970 to 1979. Candell and Manso taught at the Provincetown Workshop, and I took a workshop with them in 1970. Most of the students were from Cooper Union; I was a little nobody who was definitely very pregnant so they didn't take me seriously. Seong Moy was a master printmaker, and I took several classes with him over the summers — he taught me etching. Phil Malicoat was really my first mentor. I studied painting with him for two summers in the late 70s. I had never done oils before — he taught me a lot. And we would play chess after class. After this, I just developed on my own. I have always been very driven.



"Chinatown Windows I," 2013 - Oil on wood panel, Framed Dimensions: 17.32 x 17.32in. (44 x 44cm)

Your urban landscapes follow up on the tradition of such painters as George Bellows and Edward Hopper. What do you think initially attracted you to their style and to their expressive explorations of human solitude?

It was in the mid-1990s, my daughter was off to college, and I was at a bit of a crossroads in my life. Do I stay in NYC (I moved there in 1979) or move away? I had a great apartment on Sullivan Street, and one day as I walked out my door, it came to me, PAINT WHAT YOU SEE ALL AROUND YOU! So I did, and that was really the start of my career. So it was after I did some of these urban landscapes that I realized that I was following in the steps of the Ashcan School, eight painters who painted what they saw when they left their abodes, in the early 1900s.

There is a quality of classic street photography to your oil paintings, with an added expressiveness through your use of as much as twenty layers of paint built up slowly using big brushes. How did you come to develop this technique, and do you think it's a conscious or subconscious mirroring of the traditional process of developing celluloid photographs?

I could always draw, so for most of my early life I did drawings. Then I started using gouache and working in color. Gouache is an opaque watercolor that lets you apply paint on top of another layer. So when I turned to working in oils, I applied that method to the oil paint, applying layer after layer. I never liked the fussy look of drawing in the paintings, too tight. So, working from my own photography, I use big brushes and the painting is very loose for a long time, gradually becoming easier to read as I progress. It's tricky to know when to stop sometimes!



"Barbershop, Chinatown", 2014 - Lithograph printed by Corridor Press, Otego, NY, Framed Dimensions: 27 x 27 in. (68.6 x 68.6 cm)

Your work that is currently being shown as a part of C24 Gallery's group show *Street Life* includes not only your colorful oil paintings but also black and white lithographs. What appeals to you about contrasting the oil paintings with your monochrome lithographs? In what ways do the two approaches complement and also contrast each other in terms of your thematic approach to depicting urban life?

I did my first monoprint at Parson's at a workshop in 1992. My first print, a landscape of Long Island, was very good, so I fell in love with this! And over the years I found that often I will do a monoprint of my subject matter before I do the oil. It helps me with the composition, and I love the black and white quality of the prints. Sometimes I like the prints more than the oils. A monoprint is one of a kind, the plate is wiped clean after one print. I wanted to do a limited edition, so I worked with Corridor Press in upstate New York and did these three plates which master lithographer Tim Sheesley printed for me.

You lived in New York City for thirty years, but since 2000 you have resided in upstate New York. While you still create a lot of work that comments on urban life, how do you think your life in a more rural setting may have changed your approach to depicting urban scenes, and vice versa? For example, your twelve paintings of vintage tractors from upstate are done in a style that resembles your urban images, and to my eye these tractors are nearly as lonesome as some of the figures you depict in your urban scenes...



“Man in a Hoodie”, 2017 - Oil on wood panel, Framed Dimensions: 21.26 x 21.26 in. (54 x 54 cm)

I moved upstate in 2000, and painted my urban landscapes for several years, while living up here and going back to the city to get material. My career was in full throttle at this point; I had two galleries, one in Provincetown (which I still have) and one in Santa Fe. I was producing around twenty-five paintings a year, not including the monoprints, and selling almost everything I painted. Gradually though, since I wasn't painting what I was seeing, the work got a little stale. So in 2007 I started going to figure drawing classes and painting nudes. My galleries didn't want this new work, so I sort of melded those two things together and started painting the figure in the urban landscape, so the figure could take up the whole painting! I love painting the light on the figure. I love painting light — period.

I did take some side trips in my journey, one was delighting in painting these old tractors that were all over the farms and fields up here. And now, in part due to the pandemic and all the driving around I did, I have done a series of abandoned places, all on paper done in gouache. I've done the paintings first this time, and will do the monoprints next. An exhibition of these new works, titled “Alone,” is opening at 1053 Main Street Gallery, Fleischmanns, NY on November 6, 2021.

A selection of Firmin's work is currently on display as part of the Street Life group exhibition now up through September 25, 2021 at C24 Gallery in Chelsea, NYC, and in the Gallery's lower level showroom from October 7th through December 24th.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/9/21/lisbeth-firmin-interview-street-life-exhibition-c24-gallery>

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