

# The Fruitmarket Gallery

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“ I think I felt as I would if a doctor had held an X-ray to the light showing a star-shaped hole at the center of one of my vital organs. Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically (...) that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. ”

**Don DeLillo**

*White Noise* (New York, Viking Penguin Inc., 1984)

# Fred Tomaselli

## Monsters of Paradise

**Exhibition**

31 July – 3 October 2004

**Free**

Exhibition Guide

# Fred Tomaselli

## Monsters of Paradise

Fiona Bradley

**Below:**

Fred Tomaselli, studio  
(*Ectoplasmic Event over  
New Jerusalem, 2001*).  
Photos: Fred Tomaselli  
and Casey Loose



**Fred Tomaselli was born in Santa Monica in 1956 and came of age, as he puts it, in the California of the 1970s – ‘basically the 1960s with birth defects – a mutant excess of PCP<sup>1</sup> and arena rock’. Drugs and music have remained important to him throughout his career, as material for collage and fuel for the imagination (respectively), but a move to Brooklyn in 1985 encouraged him to try to make a different kind of sense of the world through making art.**

The art Tomaselli makes is predominantly collage, although he tends to describe the products of his activity as paintings. If he paints, it is with famously unusual materials – pills, flowers, leaves, insects, cut-out magazine photographs of all of the aforementioned things plus an assortment of body parts, epoxy resin and paint. The artist believes that the materials he uses ‘are all interchangeable, all capable of manipulating reality in a perpetual, hazardless potentiality’. In making paintings with them, his stated aim is ‘to seduce and transport the viewer (...) while simultaneously revealing the mechanics of that seduction’.

The exhibition Fred Tomaselli: *Monsters of Paradise* presents five years of the artist’s practice, from 1999 to now. **Screen Saver 2.0** (1999) is the earliest work in the exhibition. The background to the work is pure painting, almost a pastiche of painting in fact, an airbrushed landscape at sunset, trees silhouetted over a sky fading picturesquely from yellow to blue-black. In the foreground, right under the surface of the topmost layer of resin which keeps the picture together, the landscape is invaded by alien forms made from pills and the leaves of psychoactive plants set on shapes of coloured paper. Both foreground and background are resolutely one-dimensional, the only space in the painting being on the one hand the illusory space the eye has been trained to conjecture according to the cues given by the airbrushed ‘super-realism’ of the landscape and, on the other, the actual space between the landscape and the screen of invading collaged forms.

1. Phencyclidine, more commonly known as PCP, is also known as Angel Dust, Supergrass, Killer Weed, Embalming Fluid, and Rocket Fuel. It first came into street usage in the late 1970s.

The other early work in the exhibition, **Endless Sideways** (1999), is all surface, lines of leaves marching across the panel in a relentlessly rhythmic progression. Interested as he is in transportation and the mechanics by which it is made possible, Tomaselli also toys with the long-standing notions of painting either as a window on to another reality or a mirror held up to this one. In the games his pictures play with surface and depth, an intriguing oscillation is set up between the two.

Collage has a long history in the history of art. In the early part of the twentieth century the Cubists brought material from the real world into the space of their paintings, first using elements such as newspapers to represent themselves, then later taking a more ironic, sophisticated approach to reality, and using one set of 'real' signifiers – a piece of wood-grain effect paper, for example, to stand in for another, such as a guitar. Like the Cubists, Tomaselli uses collage to welcome reality into his paintings, but then distances them from it through combination and manipulation: one picture may contain both the real thing and a cut-out, disoriginated representation of it.

Tomaselli's interest in and inclusion of the 'real thing' brings him close to the conventions of natural history. Like a natural historian, he is a classifier, to achieve the riotous tumult of a picture like **Doppler Effect in Blue** (2002) he must first assemble his material in carefully-sorted order. His studio is meticulously organised, with sheets of butterflies, flowers, leaves, hands, ears and noses cut out and stuck ready for use onto sheets of sticky paper according to size and colour. The artist sources the best suppliers of certain plants, grows many of his own, and harvests and presses the leaves as part of his working practice. Almost as much time is spent organising, classifying and preserving his material as making pictures with it.

One of the most significant uses of the vocabulary of natural history in the art of recent times is Max Ernst's *Histoire Naturelle* (1926), a series of drawings made entirely by the process of frottage, or pencil-rubbing. The drawings create, classify and present the natural world, using one element from it to describe and form another, so that the eyelashes framing an open eye, seemingly delicately and painstakingly drawn one by one, are in fact made by rubbing a pencil on a piece of paper laid over the backbone of a fish. Tomaselli similarly uses the natural world both for and almost against itself in his cataloguing of it, though his material, for the most part, and with notable exceptions, seems to stay more or less where we would expect to find it. In **Field Guides**, (2003), for example, the figure is pursued by a cloud of swarming butterflies, the handle of his axe is made from several smaller handles, and, although rogue body parts do stray alarmingly throughout his body, his feet are made from feet, his hands from hand, and even his brain and more intimate organs are all in the proper place.

## Opening Hours

Mon–Sat 10am–6pm

Sun 12–5pm

## Festival Hours

1–31 August,

10am–7pm

## Admission free

## Limited Edition Print

*Greater Pewee,*

*Olive Sided*

*Flycatcher, Eastern*

*Wood Pewee,*

*Western Wood*

*Pewee, 2004*

Signed edition of 100

200 x 120mm

£150 framed

(£100 unframed)

## Catalogue

Fred Tomaselli

*Monsters of Paradise*

Hardback, 96pp

240 x 290mm

£19.95

## Interpretation film

A documentary is filmed during the installation of each exhibition, with the artist or curator discussing the work selected.

This DVD is shown in the reading room and is for sale in the bookshop. £15.00

In his development of the vocabulary of collage and his use of it to describe and manipulate the natural world, Tomaselli takes much from ordinary language. Both metonym – the practice of using a part to describe a whole ('all hands on deck') – and metaphor – whereby one thing is described in terms of another ('my love is like a red red rose') – feature in works such as **Expecting to Fly** (2002), and some of his visual puns owe much to the verbal. A series of works on paper featuring birds is included in the exhibition, and the same birds re-appear in **Greater Pewee, Olive Sided Flycatcher, Eastern Wood Pewee, Western Wood Pewee** (2004) the limited-edition print made by the artist and on sale to visitors (subject to availability). Taken straight from the pages of a field guide, the birds are wearing field clothes, the fleeces and anoraks of the bird watcher transposed onto the birds being watched.

Tomaselli works so directly with his materials that he does seem almost to paint with them, his handling changing subtly from picture to picture. At times, as in **Field Guides** and the bird collages, the collage material is constrained within the severely-delineated outline of the main form. At others, as in **Flying Severed Head** (2002), the form is defined right up to its edges almost entirely by the material, the head threatening to blow apart should the proliferation of unrestrained hands, ears, mouths, noses, eyes, ears, flowers and mushrooms choose no longer to gather together as the artist has instructed them.

These images are all carefully planned, with Tomaselli often making studies for his larger paintings. Sometimes these studies are drawn or painted, as in **Study for Monsters of Paradise Times Two** (2002), in which the principal elements of a huge picture are worked out in gouache before being executed in collage. The artist also makes studies in collage, however, painstakingly mapping out the detail of a composition through his entire range of material before starting again to make the same image with similar, but inevitably slightly different collage elements. **Study for Gravity in Four Directions** (2001) is this kind of study, a smaller, early version of a much larger work, while **Metal Destroyer** (2004) has an earlier incarnation in a study, the artist using the smaller version as a testing ground on which to decide exactly how to compose the figure so that the tiny hands and arms which make up each of the Shiva-like drummer's twelve arms culminate in one, life-size, drumstick-wielding hand.

Using collage as he does, Tomaselli is, for the most part, restricted in his choice of scale. Though the size of his pictures may vary, the bits in them stay the same – he simply uses more of them. Very recently in **Big Bird** (2004), completed just in time for inclusion in this exhibition, Tomaselli has begun to free himself from this restriction, composing the bird from artificially-enlarged

images of flowers and eyes. Within the world of Tomaselli's work the effect is vertiginous and disorientating, we realise that there has been order and constancy throughout the artist's seemingly chaotic vision, and now one of the defining principles of that order is threatened.

*Big Bird* is a mutant, a monster at large in an artificial paradise. The monstrous is a thread that runs throughout Tomaselli's work. This is sometimes latent, as in the benign beings tending the landscapes of ***Us and Them*** (2003) who only reveal themselves to be monsters on close inspection, and sometimes more obvious, as in the rather terrifying child who towers over his toys in ***Toytopia*** (2003), a picture calculated to re-awaken any dormant suspicion of the purity of childhood and the inanimate innocence of children's toys. More overtly monstrous still are the mutating beings – the drummer of *Metal Destroyer* or the levitating, transfiguring female at the mercy of ***Airborne Event*** (2003). Airborne events have an inescapable ring of menace about them. More mushroom cloud than divine intervention, they threaten an ironically-titled *New Jerusalem* (a city made up of images of buildings notorious in the recent history of American violence – Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, the desert hut of Charles Manson, Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski's Montana shack) in ***Ectoplasmic Event over New Jerusalem*** (2001), and spawn the monsters of paradise themselves, the horrifying mutants, part human, part insect, which reign over the natural world which explodes in ***Monsters of Paradise*** ***Times Two***.

Tomaselli has stated that his work always starts with nature, but that 'nature is riven with infection, pathology, pain and pollution'. The landscapes created in his work tend most often to be nightmarish settings for the kind of late twentieth century end games set out in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* or *Mao II* or the hybridising, post-nuclear fantasies of Jonathan Lethem's science fiction. Both authors, Americans and favourites of Tomaselli's, share his abundantly creative, if in no way positive assessment of the modern American condition. The three of them all probe contemporary America to find a truth, however compromised, to which the world can hold. In the words, as well as the art of Fred Tomaselli, 'we see the world through a scrim of ideologies and technologies and the crackling static of chemicals and electronic media. Purity is a myth'.

*All quotations from Fred Tomaselli are taken from the essay 'My Chemical Sublime' written by the artist for the new publication Fred Tomaselli: Monsters of Paradise. Published by The Fruitmarket Gallery in association with James Cohan Gallery, New York, and Jay Jopling / White Cube (London), the book also contains an essay by John Yu and a newly-commissioned short story by Jonathan Lethem.*

“One of the defining aspects of the avant-garde is its struggle to redefine beauty. How does one define beauty, when context and time keeps shifting the definition? What separates beauty from ugliness? One way to think about this is to figure out the difference between the beautiful and the pretty. True beauty is always a little strange and prettiness corresponds to what we already know we like. When someone says, “I may not know a thing about art but I know what I like”, they are asking for pretty things. True beauty isn't easy, you have to work for it. A view from a mountain is always more beautiful when you leave your car behind and hike to it.

I'm not a radical when it comes to beauty. I like to build my work on what we already agree is beautiful. In other words, on what is pretty. I call on the shape of nature and the formal commonalities in world culture to hook and drag the viewer into the world of my pictures. But hidden inside these pretty worlds are complex and contradictory social viruses and pathologies.”

“ I think that my best work is like a song that hooks you with melody, harmony and rhythm. The lyrics or the content of the song reveals itself later. When both parts come together, you have a mind-body experience that’s full and complex.

I’ve been very lucky to have been involved in some projects with bands I really love such as The Magnetic Fields, Melvins and Wilco. They all have recently released great records. I’m also loving the newest record by The Fall. And yes, I still love the punk rock, just not all the time. A typical musical day in the studio jumps between indie, hillbilly, country, dub, folk, soul, mashups, psychedelic, and all the rocks.”

*Fred Tomaselli in conversation with The Big Issue Scotland, 2004*

### **Fred Tomaselli’s reading list:**

Anything and everything by:  
**Johnathan Leithem, John Yau and Ralph Waldo Emerson**

#### **Don DeLillo**

*White Noise, Mao II*

#### **Rick Moody**

*The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven  
Purple America  
The Ice Storm*

#### **Albert Hofmann**

*LSD my Problem Child*

#### **Terence McKenna**

*Food of the Gods*

#### **Legs McNeil & Gillian McCain**

*Please Kill Me*

#### **Mark Spitz & Brendan Mullen**

*We Got the Neutron Bomb*

#### **Charles Nordhoff**

*The Communist Societies of the United States*

#### **Guy Debord**

*Society of the Spectacle*

#### **Russell Banks**

*Continental Drift*

#### **Ken Kesey**

*Sometimes a Great Notion*

#### **Ian Frazier**

*Great Plains*

#### **Aldous Huxley**

*Brave New World*

#### **National Geographic Society**

*A Field Guide to Birds of North America*

#### **Ernst Haeckel**

*Kunstformen der Natur*

#### **Marylin Rhie and Robert Thurman**

*Wisdom and Compassion The Sacred Art of Tibet*

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# Talks and Events

## The Fruitmarket Gallery welcomes group bookings

from all sections of the community. These must be booked two weeks in advance of your visit.

Contact: Tracy Morgan, Education Manager, The Fruitmarket Gallery  
**P** 0131 226 8183  
**E** education@fruitmarket.co.uk

## Access

The Fruitmarket Gallery is an accessible venue. An infra red induction loop is available in the upper gallery.

## Artist's Talk, Fred Tomaselli in conversation with Tim Marlow

*Saturday 31 July, 2pm Free. Booking advised*

Tim Marlow, broadcaster and Director of Exhibitions at White Cube Gallery, London in discussion with the artist.

## Family Workshop

*Saturday 7 August, 2–4pm. Tickets £4. Booking essential*

This workshop enables parents and guardians to work hands-on with their children to create artwork in response to Fred Tomaselli's exhibition. For children aged 3–6 years with one adult. 20 places available.

## Writer's Talk, Louise Welsh

*Wednesday 11 August, 6pm. Tickets £3 (£1.50 conc) Booking advised*

Jamie Byng, Director of Canongate Books in discussion with Louise Welsh, author of *The Cutting Room*, and the recently published *Tamburlaine Must Die*. In association with Canongate Books.

## Director's Talk, Fiona Bradley

*Friday 20 August, 6pm Free. Habitat, 32 Shandwick Pl., Edinburgh*

*Booking essential – tickets limited*

A slide lecture discussing Fred Tomaselli's *Monsters of Paradise*.

## Adults Collage Workshop

*Saturday 21 August, 11am–4pm. Tickets £7 (£5 conc). Booking essential*

An opportunity for adults to explore the visual delights of Fred Tomaselli's work and to experiment using collage. Materials provided.

## Botanist's Talk

*Thursday 26 August, 6pm. Free. Booking advised*

Dr Ian Darwin Edwards, Director of Public Programmes, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh discusses the cultural and physiological effects of psychoactive plants as featured in Fred Tomaselli's work.

## Growing Ideas Interactive Arts Day for Young People

*Saturday 18 September, 11am–3pm Free. Booking essential*

A fun and creative day in the Gallery for young people. Free taster sessions including photography, sculpture and collage workshops. Suitable for 14–21 year olds.

For further information contact: Tracy Morgan, Education Manager

**P** 0131 226 8183 **E** education@fruitmarket.co.uk

## Booking

To book for talks and events contact the bookshop

**P** 0131 225 2383 **E** bookshop@fruitmarket.co.uk

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