I found Paris inside me – Frederic Tuten creates a new art form
Interview with Frederic Tuten
« J’ai trouvé Paris en moi » – Frederic Tuten crée une nouvelle forme d’art

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/interfaces/9017
DOI: 10.4000/122du
ISSN: 2647-6754

Publisher:
Université Paris Cité, Université de Bourgogne, College of the Holy Cross

Electronic reference
Donald Friedman, ‘I found Paris inside me – Frederic Tuten creates a new art form’, Interfaces [Online], 51 | 2024, Online since 30 June 2024, connection on 22 July 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/interfaces/9017 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/122du

This text was automatically generated on July 22, 2024.

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1 On a Terrace in Tangier, is a 2022 collection of Frederic Tuten’s works on cardboard accompanied by stories inspired by the pictures. The images, Tuten says, do not illustrate his stories nor do his stories explain the images, but rather they “speak to each other, creating a new conversation... another kind of art with a unique emotional reality. The story makes you feel the emotion of the drawing. The drawing makes you feel the emotion of the story.”

2 Consider, for example, the image/story pair entitled “At a Market in Tangier.” First, the art:
Figure 1. “At a Market in Tangier,” 2020 (Pastel, pencil, ink on cardboard)

I suspect a random viewer would be immediately taken by the bright, happy, stratified layers of childishly playful colors and shapes—some, like the sky and mountains, the trees and little houses, the bottles and cups, immediately recognizable, others, such as the forms hanging like bells or lamps or Christmas tree ornaments (or perhaps pointing heavenward like minarets), less so. As children name objects in a picture puzzle, we are pleased to identify the paintbrushes in the can, the plants growing out of vases, the red road, the primitively rendered truck, and, of course, the foregrounded cup on the frame, which is probably the window through which we are taking it all in.

We turn to the accompanying text:

We bought flat bread and olives from the souk and returned to our hotel room and made our bed a table, with a towel for a tablecloth. Red wine from Algeria, tart, tannic, and competent.

The window opened to a lone palm tree and a tight blue sky that no cloud dared to smudge.

Her smile occupied the world.

Our experience of the picture is enlarged: we have been looking out a window, and it is the window of a hotel room in Morocco. The artist/narrator and his lover have furnished a meal out of a few items from the Arab market—the bread, olives, and wine that provide complete sustenance for lovers, dining on the bed which we can infer will shortly return to its intended use. Rather than the open view with the “lone palm tree,” Tuten the writer tells us was there, Tuten the artist filled the frame—of the painting, of the window—with the sights (suggesting as well the smells and sounds) of that exotic land. It is only the writer who supplies the romantic context in which these things were encountered. (Paradoxically, it is the painting that narrates encounters that must have
taken place at multiple points in time). Text and image are complementary, additive: only together do they enable us to share something like Tuten’s full experience.

6 Since he tells us that it was the drawing that inspired the story, were not both created by Tuten himself it would be a straightforward ekphrastic exercise – a work in one discipline that describes or is evoked by, a previous creation by someone else in a different discipline. But it’s not; it’s the same creator in both instances. Try and imagine Pieter Bruegel turning his “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” into a poem as W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams each did centuries later.

7 What Tuten is doing with these visual and written exchanges sent me back to The Writer’s Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers, to see if any of my more than two hundred subjects had attempted anything like it.

8 Although their views on the relationship between text and image, the written and the visual, and their motivations for expressing themselves in a different discipline, are as disparate as the writers themselves, as artists, they fall into some broad categories: those, like Kipling, Thackeray, and Evelyn Waugh, who illustrated their stories and poems; those, like Sylvia Plath and Susan Minot, who sketch people and scenes as aides memoire, or otherwise use images to summon words, as Maxine Hong Kingston begins books by first drawing and connecting blobs on a piece of paper, or as Dario Fo would draw his plays before writing them.

9 There are the writers who combine word and image in cartoons – from the satiric spots of an S.J. Perelman, Ralph Steadman, or Charles Johnson, to the graphic novels of Will Eisner, Jules Feiffer, and Art Spiegelman, to mention just a few of the many working in this genre.

10 A clear majority—August Strindberg, Edward Lear, and Henry Miller are representative examples– have no agenda beyond bringing a painting, print, or sculpture into autonomous being. This is so even if, like Colette and Jean Cocteau, they saw the visual as just a different form of the written: “For half a century, I wrote in black on white,” said Colette, “and now for nearly ten years, I have been writing in colour on canvas.” Drawing, Cocteau said, was just a “different way of typing up the lines.” The idea that language is essential to art has been with us since words supplanted images as the primary means of unspoken communication. We see this, wrote William Carlos Williams, in the “long line of poet-painters,” who were “all of them artists for whom the text portrays, the picture speaks.”

11 Other writer-artists, however, insist on maintaining the distinctiveness of the separate forms. For Eugene Ionesco, “Literature and painting have nothing to do with each other even as they express the same anguish, the same games, the same questions. The language of painting should not be confused with the language of words, he said: “The title of a picture should be another picture.”

12 Dante Gabriel Rossetti made poems for pictures and pictures to accompany poems, but insisted that his poems were “in no way the result of a painter’s tendencies—and indeed no poetry could be freer than mine from the trick of what is called ‘word painting.’” The point of meeting between poem and painting was the creative sensibility, what he analogized to the relationship of beauty in man and woman, and referred to “as the supreme perfection.”

13 In this, Tuten shares an affinity with Rossetti. Tuten’s stories in miniature, like Rossetti’s poems, do not seek to describe the artworks with which they are partnered,
but to connect with them. Unlike Rossetti, (and the other writer-artists), however, Tuten finds through his texts the means to explore the creative sensibility that unites word and image.

14 In my August 2023 interview (https://youtu.be/qFXVQEkUA) with him, Tuten says that he finds a fundamental sameness between his painting process and the way he constructs a story: “If I’m writing a novel [or a] short story and I have a sentence – ‘He walked up the hill.’ And you think – well, what happened after the hill? What’s next? Well, ‘He picked up a gun and shot a bird.’ Okay. In some sense the need of the ‘and then’ continuity in writing, you have to follow it sentence by sentence with some meaningful, important conception, or description. And I thought, ‘that’s what happens now with my painting.’ But I don’t see it in terms of language. I see it in terms of form and color.”

15 Tuten contrasts his approach with the way his friend Roy Lichtenstein developed a painting: “Roy’s was a methodical process. Everything was thought out. The whole painting was thought out. I don’t feel that way.”

16 Tuten’s late-in-life self-realization as a painter was rooted in childhood ambition. “I was about fourteen and a half—fifteen – going on fifteen. I read Lust for Life, the novel about Van Gogh. And I read again Moon and Sixpence, the novel about Gauguin that Somerset Maugham wrote, and the novels fascinated me. What fascinated me was how artists lived, and what they lived for. That there was a way of thinking about being a person that had to do with making art, that it left you in a different realm – that you were somehow not like everyone else, but committed to everyone else. But there was something beautiful about the style of it, the devotion of it... And I started thinking about my own self as a painter.”

17 Tuten’s teenage fantasies placed him in a Parisian garret with a model who would serve as muse and lover. “Somewhere along the line, I thought you know, I want to go where the painters go, I want to be where painters are, where painters live, and live a painter’s life. So, I thought I was going to go to Paris and do that.... I had no idea about French.”

18 “I just thought that... somehow I’d meet some artists, and they would all sort of, like, take me in as a fellow artist and I would get a little place maybe like in the film “American in Paris”... up above a cafe, and I’ll meet a beautiful woman like Leslie Caron in the film, and then she’ll become my girlfriend and model.... I think all of it was a way of getting out of the Bronx. It was a way of imagining a world glamorous and beautiful and noble, because I thought all artists were noble, like Van Gogh. I’d read the letters.”

19 After a failed effort to learn figure drawing at New York’s Art Students League—there was no instruction, just a blush-inducing nude model he ineptly tried to render on his pad and was humiliated for—a neighbor introduced him to his first art teacher, John Resko. Tuten had dropped out of high school in preparation for the transition to artist in Paris and the concerned adults in his life feared he’d turn into a delinquent if he didn’t get some art education. Resko was an ex-con who had received a life sentence for murder, but, said Tuten, after being “in Dannemora prison for twenty years, where he began to draw and paint... he literally painted his way out of prison.”

20 This was the 1950s and Tuten was living a meager life with his struggling single mother in the Bronx – his father having walked out on them when he was ten, compelling him to earn what he could as a delivery boy for the local butcher. As a teenager he found his
way to a better paying job and eventually saved for his passage to Paris. He was close to departure when he learned that his mother had lost her job months earlier, that the rent was in arrears and they were about to be evicted. “So, I withdrew my savings, and I paid the rent... And that was the end of it. That was the end of the whole dream. Although I began to do other things, I began to write poetry and I began thinking more of myself as a writer.”

21 Nonetheless, Tuten’s interest in art and artists stayed with him. At nineteen he went to the University of Mexico to study pre-Columbian art and Mexican mural painting: “I don’t know what it was, but I was madly in love with what I could see – from books only, of course – the Mexican mural painters... Rivera, Siqueiros. Orozco.” It was not just the beauty of the painting but the intention behind it: “I was really interested in the idea of art that would serve people’s interests. In the case of Mexico, painting that would tell the Mexican people their history. Of course, I just love the colors.” The colors of Mexico haunt him still and find their way into the paintings he does today. “I remember once traveling to Mexico and looking at the side of the roads and seeing this beautiful reddish earth, the marvelous color of the earth. And somewhere I... think now with these new paintings of mine, especially, I’m trying to find that color again. I’m trying to find it, find it and put it on the canvas.”

22 Working on his PhD in nineteenth-century American literature at New York University and hating it, Tuten found relief in reviewing art shows, which led to his meeting the artists. “At that time, if you wanted a piece to appear at the time of the opening, it was like a four-to-six-week lead. So I go to the studios and I met Rauschenberg, I met – I went to do a piece on George Segal, [the] sculptor. I went around, and then I got involved in the art world, so to speak, which was basically fun. Basically openings, parties, dancing like crazy.”

23 Over the years Tuten reviewed the Venice Biennale and the San Paolo Biennale for the New York Times, as well as other shows for the Times and for such publications as Arts and Artforum, and wrote about and became personally acquainted with many of America’s best-known artists—Robert Rauschenberg, George Segal, David Salle, Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl and especially Roy Lichtenstein, who became a lifelong friend and did original art for two of Tuten’s book covers. Tuten continued to make drawings, and, at some point, decades ago, he shyly showed them to Lichtenstein who gave him a few tips and encouraged him to continue to make art.

24 In the late 1960s Tuten finally got to Paris—the city, not the fantasy—as a tourist and subsequently taught at “Paris Huit... which was the experimental school started after ’68 when the Sorbonne was in crisis.” In the 1980s he became aware of artists who were “bringing back figuration. Robert Longo – people like that. And I was really appalled. I thought, what – we’re going backwards now? We’ve done all that already. What was the point of doing it again? I thought we had all the battles with abstract expressionism... Then we had pop art – everyone derided pop art and made fun of it. It was nothing.... It was commercialism. It was capitalist product, byproduct, all that stuff. But it was new and tried to do something new.”

25 “The work I’m doing now – I look at it – I see what I’m doing, which is very conservative. I thought, you know what, there’s still some things to be learned from earlier periods. And I don’t mean just copies of Cézanne. Certain things that modernism has not fully done, or it could be brought back again, in some way and made interesting again.”

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When Tuten got to meet the artists he’d dismissed as “terrible and awful and reactionary,” he liked them and learned from them. “And what did I learn from them? I don’t paint like David Salle or Ross Bleckner or Eric Fischl... But I did like the idea that they could reformulate what had been already done. That’s, that’s what I was thinking, what I’m trying to say now about the paintings I’m doing. A reformulation. There’s a certain kind of foundation for it.”

So how did they influence him? “I get a note from David saying how much he likes the new paintings, how much he likes me. And he said to me, specifically, ’Yes, Fred, forget about figuration. Don’t you try it. Forget it. Shapes and forms, shapes and colors – that’s what painting is anyway’”

And does Tuten finally think of himself as an artist?

“At this time of my life – someone would say, the winter of my life, although I don’t feel cold – practically no day passes where I’m not either writing and painting or painting and writing, whichever comes first in the morning. I guess what I could say is I found Paris. I found Paris inside me.”


Transcript

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Introduction

Frederic Tuten, novelist, short story writer, memoirist, and art critic fulfilled a childhood dream and became an artist in his own right.

Paris Dreams

I was about fourteen and a half—fifteen—going on 15 and I read Lust for Life, the novel about Van Gogh and I read Moon and Sixpence the novel about Gauguin that Somerset Maugham wrote, and the novels fascinated me. What fascinated me was how artists lived, and what they lived for. That there was a way of thinking about being a person that had to do with making art, that it left you in a different realm – that you were
somehow not like everyone else, but committed to everyone else. And I started thinking about my own self as a painter.

34 And somewhere along the line, I thought you know, I want to go where the painters go, I want to be where painters are, where painters live, and live a painter’s life. So I thought I was gonna go to Paris and do that.

35 So I got a job and when I got the job, I went to Art Students League. I didn’t know the first principle. I thought that’s what I would learn. I would learn how to make the figure. But they just had the model come out and then people would be making sketches and I just didn’t know what to do. I would just start, do something. Of course I was fascinated by the fact that the woman was nude. I don’t think I’d ever seen a nude woman before. But there she was this beautiful woman. And I was, I must’ve turned red, I must’ve lit up the room with the redness in my face. One day, the teacher came around and looked at our pads and I opened up my pad and he said “what is that?” and I said, “that’s her feet.” And he said, “is she wearing galoshes?” And everyone began to laugh and I felt humiliated. And I got very sad and very upset. And then I went home and never came back.

The Dream did not Die

36 I just thought I would go to Paris and somehow I’d meet some artists, and they would all sort of like take me in as a fellow artist and I would get a little place maybe like in the film “American in Paris,” a little atelier up above a cafe, and I’ll meet a great-looking beautiful woman like Leslie Caron in the film, and then she’ll become my girlfriend and she’ll become my model.

37 Of course I had no idea about French. I spoke a little Italian. I was raised in a basically Sicilian household. My father was a southerner from Georgia... um, he just one day left. We never heard from him again. He just disappeared. Like that. My mother had to take care of everything.... And I started working when I was ten. I was the delivery guy for the butcher shop and stuff like that....

38 Anyway, one day, I had saved up some money. And I still thought I’m gonna go to Paris. All of it was a way of getting out of the Bronx. It was a way of imagining a world glamorous and beautiful and noble.

39 And then my mother didn’t tell me that she had lost her job – had been out of work for months and months. And now we were going to be evicted. So I withdrew my savings, and I paid the rent – the arrears of three months, whatever it was. And that was the end of it. That was the end of the whole dream, the end of everything. Although I began to do other things, I began to write poetry and thinking more of myself as a writer.

Mexico

40 When I was an undergrad, undergraduate, I don’t now what it was, but I was madly in love with what I could see – from books only, of course – the Mexican mural painters. Rivera, Siqueiros. Orozco. I went around, I saw the paintings. I was fascinated by it, because at that point I was really interested in the idea of art that would serve people’s interests. In the case of Mexico, painting that would tell the Mexican people their history. Also of course, I just love the colors...
I remember once traveling to Mexico and looking at the side of the roads and seeing this beautiful reddish earth, these marvelous colors of the earth. And somewhere I think now with these new paintings of mine especially I’m trying to find that color again.

Writing about Art and Meeting Artists

I began writing for a magazine called ARTS magazine. I was in graduate school, I hated it so much that I needed to find some way out and someone was an editor of this ARTS magazine, so he said, “why don’t you write some reviews.” At that time, if you wanted a piece to appear at the time of the opening, it was like four-to-six-week lead. So I go to the studios and I met Rauschenberg. I met – I went to do a piece on George Segal the sculptor. I went around, and then I got involved in the art world, so to speak, which was basically fun. Basically, openings, parties. dancing like crazy...

And in 1964, I had seen – '63 or '64 I saw my first Lichtenstein painting in Provincetown, in a bar. And I asked one of my friends who had just become a curator at the Guggenheim, “Did you hear about this?” She said “Yeah, it’s called Pop Art. They make paintings from cartoons.” I couldn’t believe it. I said, “really?” I was so fascinated by it. I said “do you know the artist?” She said, “Yeah, I’ll make dinner for you. We can meet him.” And I met Roy. And that was a very powerful, powerful, powerful change in my life. It was marvelous. And we stayed friends until he died.

Roy Lichtenstein

One day I said to him, “You know what, Roy – I’ve been making these color drawings.” And he said rather graciously, ‘Oh, can I see them?’ And I said “oh, of course” but I felt little nervous about it because he may not like them and it would affect our relationship. I think you really cannot profoundly love a person, unless you love the work. You cannot. There’s something that the painter, and the writer, and poet have in common: When it’s really central to the life and to the mission of living – it’s at the core.

So Roy came to look at my sketchbook. And he turned the pages you know very slowly. He didn’t do what people do – what I probably would have done, which is pass through the book and look it over and say, “Oh, that’s really great, wonderful,” bullshit. And he stopped at each one, looked at each one. And finally when it was all over he said “Please continue doing it. But may I make a suggestion? I see that you’re all-over surface – it’s all the same. All the color variations of have the same power. Try to make, try to take your pencil, your pastel, make an impression stronger in one section than another. Give it variety. Give it variation.”

And that was just – it was – it wasn’t I think that it ever really affected how I think about it – painting or writing. It was just that he was so serious about it. And he was so careful about it. That left a big impression on me.

In Paris—The City, not the Fantasy

In the early days in the ‘60s I was writing about the contemporary shows. I reviewed Malcolm Morley, George R. Segal, Rauschenberg revolvers... Then later on, as I got more
involved after I started writing for the *New York Times*. Hilton Kramer asked me to do some reviews and I went to the Venice Biennale, I went to the San Paolo Biennale. I did all the reviews for those shows, and other artists in America. But it really started when I got when I got back from Paris. I finally got to Paris...

I went there first as a tourist in the 60s. But then later on, I started to teach there at the University of Paris, Paris Huit, Paris eight, which was the experimental school started after ‘68 when the Sorbonne was in crisis, and they made a new school. So I spent a lot of time there. When I was in Paris from ’81 to ’83, I think it was, I heard about these painters, these new painters. They were very, very hot, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Ross Buckner, Robert Longo. Yeah, people like that...

And it basically was they’re bringing back figuration. And I was really appalled. I thought, what – we’re going backwards now? We’ve done all that already. What was the point of doing it again? I thought we had all the battles with abstract expressionism. Then we had pop art – everyone derided pop art and made fun of it. It was nothing. It was zero. It was commercialism. It was capitalist product, byproduct, all that stuff. But it was new. And it tried to do something new.

I came back from Paris. and I was asked to write, to work for then *Art Forum*. And I began to meet all those very artists that I thought it was, like terrible and awful and reactionary, I began to meet them all and I just loved their life and their studios. And their energy. It was fantastic. What did I learn from them? I don’t know, because I don’t paint like David Salle or Ross Buckner or Eric Fischl... But I did like the idea that they could reformulate what had been already done. That’s, that’s what I was thinking, what I’m trying to say now about the paintings I’m doing. A reformulation.

Moving from Figures to Forms

In the pastels and crayon and ink drawings there were figures. And someone said *commedia dell’arte* – you know, people with exaggerated noses and red hats, red heads. There were lots of if not figures, there was lots of – how can I put it – subject. There were sombreros, and there were cups, and saucers and there were little terraces of cafes.

And when I began to make the paintings three years ago. I basically was copying the drawings. It was a way of moving into making paintings. I used some of the same materials. like the cups and the saucers, bottles. And I put them in the paintings as forms, but not necessarily clear as bottles, but they were in the shapes of bottles. And as I’ve been moving along, those shapes become much more abstract, much more synthetic, so that you really can’t recognize them as ‘this is a bottle.’ ‘This is a cup.’ But they’re there in my mind, and I think they are there in some way too. I think.

The work I’m doing now – I look at it – I know what I’m doing, and I see what I’m doing, which is very conservative. But I thought, you know what, there’s still some things to be learned from earlier periods. And I don’t mean just copies of Cézanne. Certain things that modernism has not fully done, or it could be brought back again, in some way and made interesting again.
The Process

If I’m writing a novel, short story and I have a sentence: “He walked up the hill.” And then you’re writing and you think – well, what happened after he walked up the hill? What’s next? Well, “He picked up a gun and shot a bird.” Okay. In some sense the need of the ‘and then’ continuity in writing, you have to follow it sentence by sentence with some meaningful, important conception, or description. And I thought “that’s what happens now with my painting.” But I don’t see it in terms of language. I see it in terms of form and color.

It’s not that I’m doing unconscious, automatic painting, just knocking stuff out. No, no, no, I will make a shape or I make some shapes and I put blue in this shape. Somehow it’s really instinctual. I’m not thinking to myself. I think some people can do that. I think Roy could do that. Roy’s was a methodical process. Everything was thought out. The whole painting was thought out. I don’t feel that way. I just see a color or shape. What shape goes with the shape? What are they? How are they in conjunction? How are they cognate? It’s not conscious thinking but there’s some part of you that’s thinking and some instinct in you that’s thinking and if you’re good at it, the colors work and they work together and they make something new happen. That’s always what I want.

The Goal

I want to make, as I always have stupidly wanted to make beautiful paintings – to make a painting that people look at and get something, some emotional reaction that’s pleasant, or maybe deeper than pleasant. Some echo inside them that I can feel when I see a great painting, when I see wonderful paintings. I can’t explain it to you. I can’t tell you why I love the Cézanne group of apples or why I love this formation of a cloud in Tiepolo. I can’t explain it. But that’s what I want. I want that. I want to make paintings. And I want them to be seen. I want a reception. I’d like people to enjoy them. I want them to enjoy and be enjoyed.

At this time of my life – someone would say, the winter of my life, although I don’t feel cold, and I don’t feel that it is winter. Practically no day passes where I’m not either writing and painting or painting and writing, whichever comes first in the morning. I – I guess what I could say is I found Paris. I found Paris inside me.

AUTHOR

DONALD FRIEDMAN

Donald Friedman, a novelist, essayist, sometime lawyer, but never a scholar, somehow produced the internationally acclaimed The Writer’s Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers. That book brought together the visual art of more than 200 of the world’s great writers. To celebrate its publication, he planned a modest exhibition of writer-art which, with the assistance of John
Wronoski, antiquarian bookseller and art dealer, was enlarged to include dozens of poets and writers somehow omitted from the book, and became a museum-scale show. Along the way to the book and the exhibition, Friedman interviewed a number of writer-artists on camera. Excerpts of those interviews are being posted on Interfaces’ website, accompanied by transcripts and introductions. For Interfaces contributors and friends interested in acquiring copies of *The Writer’s Brush* direct from the author at a deep discount, please contact him through his website,