

Tom Wolfe Speech – Frank Mason Memorial 10/18/2009

I'm not sure how many people here have seen Tom Stoppard's wonderful play, "Artist Descending the Staircase". Well, in that play one of the characters turns to the audience and he says, "Imagination plus lack of skill, gives us no hands art." Andy Warhol showing photographs of commercial products to his elves and ping-pong shots from amusement arcades of famous people. Or, Jeff Koons who sends photographs of himself slogging at it with an Italian prostitute of some fame and sends these photographs off to elves in Switzerland who then convert the photographs into three-dimensional ceramic objects. Or, Richard Serra, who orders ten-foot high raw core tin steel walls from the foundry and has unionized elves to transport them to open spaces and prop them up. Or, Richard Prince, a self-elf who takes photographs of photographs and sells them for stunning sums to culturally anxious hedge fund managers.

Now I have to confess that those examples were supplied by me. But, what Tom Stoppard has his character actually say is, "Imagination plus lack of skill, gives us modern art." So there has to be a corollary to that, and I think the corollary would be, imagination plus real skill gives us Michelangelo, Bernini, Tissot and Titian. And, Frank was known in his youth as the rebirth of Titian, the comparison was made consummate of Frank Mason and Titian.

And both Titian and Tissot loved the deepest perspective a painting could possibly effect and one of my favorite Frank Mason paintings is of the - I think it might be the Italian restaurant below his apartment on Broome Street – and it is of a group of people, many, many people, and no person in the background is neglected at all. Every head that appears in a Frank Mason painting is developed and is an individual who is distinct from every other. But, what particularly surprised me was that in the vast, vast deep Titianesque, Tissot-like perspective of that painting is the carving on wood work at the very back of the room. These are details that the naked eye can probably not see beyond six feet. In this painting they are about sixty feet away. What he did with them was absolutely marvelous, I can't think of another painter who could do it better, perhaps not even Tissot or Titian.

There's also . . . his skill went across every possible category - still life, which, in a way, is the opposite of Titianesque painting of deep perspective. Early, before the program started on the screen here was Frank's *Silver Pitcher*. A still life with the silver pitcher in the middle of it, and

that silver pitcher is so much more real than an actual silver pitcher you just want to grab it and drink some of that New York tap water.

You know, New York tap water is some of the best water in the country. It's better than anything that comes in a bottle, I assure you. Now it's (particularly John Varriano brought it out) Frank was much more than a great artist. And to say that some body is much more than a great artist is saying a great deal. Frank is what I think of as a life force.

You know, Darwin once appeared before a class of students at a university in England, and you know the young will ask questions that the old do not dare ask. And he would explain how life had begun out of a cell and all that is before us came from that tiny origin. So one of the students says, "Well, where was it?"

And Darwin says, "Where was what?"

"The cell? Where was it?"

And he said, well I don't know. It was probably in a warm pool of water somewhere. And then another student said, "Yes, so then how did it get there?"

And he said, "Well, I don't know where, and I don't know if it's terribly important."

And then another student said, "Why does it want to divide? Why does it want to reproduce? Why?"

At this point Darwin reflected and said, "To tell the truth, no one knows where the life force comes from and perhaps no one will ever know. If they do it will be hundreds of years from now before we learn where the life force comes from. Isn't it enough that I brought you all these plants and all these animals? How much do you want from me?"

But, this life force – it is not a metaphor, it's a concept. I always thought when I first came to New York my ambition as a youngster was to work in a newspaper in New York. It took me many years to get here but I finally did it. Unfortunately, my image of New York City had gone from books written in the 1920's and 1930's about people like Ben Hecht. So I was waiting to

see Mark Twain walking up Broadway in a white linen suit. I was waiting to see Walter Winchell who at that time was on the radio saying, “Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea. Let’s go to press.” To me that voice of Walter Winchill, that was that excitement, that earnestness – that was New York. Or, Henry Luce the great creator of Time magazine threatening to throw Harold Ross out the window of his apartment because Ross had run a profile of Luce in the form of a parody of the famous Time magazine style, particularly it’s inverted rhetoric. And the piece ended, “where it will all end knows not.”

All of this to me was, this excitement, this was New York. So, when I arrived all I saw was men in stingy rim hats with the rims about this wide, crowns right down on top of their heads. And they had their chins hooked in their collarbones, scuffling down the street and they were muttering, “Aw Hell”. That’s what was actually here. But then, well incidentally at least they had hats.

125-30 years ago, men – in the English-speaking world anyway – wore tall stiff hats known as toppers. That began to change, by 1900 they began to shrink a bit and get dents down the middle or in the sides. By the time I came to New York it was the stingy brim hats. But, at least they had them. Back in the 19th century women had these little piece of cloth with lace around them called kerchiefs. Today, the men where the kerchiefs – there known as baseball caps. While the women have all the testosterone. Look at the great party hats you see everywhere in fashion today. But I did find a flip side. People here, Clay Felker who was my editor at New York magazine, Roger Straus – an indomitable publisher – and I finally began to realize that every age is the same, every age has had the mass equivalent of the guy shuffling along the sidewalk in the stingy brim hat. What has made New York exciting, what has given it the reputation of excitement, what makes it exciting today is really a relative handful of people who are motors. They’re motors in a ship that goes hurtling at an unbelievable speed, making reckless turns and we’re all invited to jump on board for the ride. And that’s what living in New York means, either they enjoy the ride or they just get out. And Frank Mason was one of those motors, extraordinary.

But, I happened to have the privilege of seeing Frank work – I saw him giving instruction at the Art Students League. I can’t describe it quite as well as John did or as Peace did, but I saw it and I saw this congestion of not only human beings, but easels. When you see easel fights and they go, “There’s room”. Every one trying to get into that room and to get into a position to see the

model, which was in deep perspective way over there. It's an astonishing spectacle. I also had the privilege of participating in some of those Tuesday night sessions on Broome Street. You know Frank and Anne moved to Broome Street I think 20 years before you had all these, "You have to live down there, you have to live below Houston Street or you weren't real." These sessions were held in that great studio and apartment. And Frank was very indulgent with me because the only thing I cared about was getting the hands right. To this day that's the first thing I look at in a painting – the hands, all the rest is not as - is secondary. Frank could do, absolutely, hands that you wanted to shake and you want to look up into those eyes.

This sort of spirit is so rare, so precious, and that everyone has described quite accurately – the booming voice, the laughter. I never saw Frank in anything but a mood of enthusiasm and love of life. So, I made a rather rash prediction in 1976 that by the year 2020 what Frank Mason prophesized would have come true. Frank at one point said that modernism is dying a slow death. Not far away from that we will climb the mountain once again, because you cannot kill genius. And, today it's almost 2010. I don't see the art world, as we call the little village that controls prestige, I don't see it calming down very much. I think it's really more frantic then ever – No Hands Art sweeps the art village.

Tenure art sweeps the art village. Tenure Art is conceptual art that is happening which cannot possibly be bought or collected. But, one thing for the artist is to be hired by the faculty of a university, hang on for ten years and you've got tenure. You've got a salary until the end of your days and then a great pension plan. No Hands Art and Tenure Art. So, we've only got ten years, folks. But, I think now is the time to do it.

Frank Mason was the beginning of a neo-Renaissance. A Renaissance – is a rebirth. A neo-Renaissance is a rebirth of what should not have died the first time. So I leave here with the sense that I - I'm paying homage to Frank Mason. And that I also feel that some how, all of us - me with my hands and you with the rest of the things that you do - can bring Frank's prediction alive. I leave here with tremendous hope.