

Gina Freschet

Gina Freschet is an artist who likes to write in pictures. Her unique illustrative style depicts sociopolitical themes through cartoon figures and elementary sketches. Seemingly simple caricatures represent a complex thought process laced with satiric humor. Stylistically, Freschet's compositions are a pastiche of pictorial and script based signs, graffiti gesticulations and children's drawings. A self-proclaimed sign painter, Freschet considers her work unmoored from any specific artistic movement in the canon of art history.

Born and raised in San Francisco, the artist recounts her childhood as "fractious and chaotic." Being one of five siblings—who were each, a year and a half apart in age, and mostly girls—a lot of yammering, temper flares and dramatics transpired under one roof. Freschet describes her father as a "big, Italian rage-aholic" which further fueled the Freschet family frenetic. As an escape from the dynamics of her home life, Freschet would often retreat into what she calls "one of her repressive states," in order to find solace through art. During these repressive states, she'd summon her imagination to craft short stories and render rudimentary illustrations. The creative results of these mood swings quickly singled her out both at home and in the classroom as someone with extraordinary artistic talent. Subsequently, Freschet enrolled in accelerated classes in high school, and graduated early at age sixteen.

Upon completion of her high school studies, Freschet's father moved the whole family out to the East Coast for a new career opportunity in Lexington, Massachusetts. Highly sensitized to the claustrophobic effects of suburbia, Freschet did not adapt well to her new surroundings and reentered into another repressive state. She sought sanctuary by attending printmaking classes at the Museum School at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but ultimately she remained saturnine. Within a year, Freschet returned back home to the Bay Area to live with a friend's family and quickly enrolled in a community college to pursue studies in English and Drama. Upon completing her second year of college, Freschet's parents generously offered to send her to art school in New York City. Having only dreamed of such an opportunity, Freschet was once again back on the East Coast, but this time on her terms.

As a School of Visual Arts (SVA) undergraduate, Freschet studied illustration. What made the two-year program particularly alluring was the myriad of successful New York City illustrators that peppered the SVA professorial collective. This detail was particularly important to Freschet because as an aspiring illustrator, the field was in great need of validation due to its distinct separation from the fine arts. Freschet explains, "In the 1980s, there was a large divide between illustration and Fine Arts. It was all about Minimalism—there was no painting going on, not even in the galleries—so all the drawing and painting got relegated to illustration."

Upon her matriculation to SVA, Freschet was eager to learn new ways of "expressing objects rather than rendering objects." Meaning that as an artist, she aspired to add new dimensions to ordinary objects onto paper, rather than just successfully copying their likeness. The artist considers herself lucky to have been taught by two very popular New York illustrators at the time—Sue Coe and Brad Hollins—who also became her mentors. During her first year, Hollins was assigned as Freschet's professor. Although it was his first year teaching and her first year learning, she benefited profoundly from his methods. Hollins played a pivotal role in Freschet's life because he provided her with the tools to meet her goals of expressing objects (as opposed to rendering objects). Specifically, he taught her how to "talk pictorially,"

meaning that he united her ability to draw and her ability to talk together in order to deliver a message. This methodology significantly shaped Freschet's technique, and as a result allowed her to deliver powerful iconography in her compositions.

Freschet befriended Sue Coe her second year of school. As a British political cartoon artist, Coe offered a very different perspective on America:

She was a communist, and we were all capitalists...there was a big disconnect there. She educated me about America's role on the globe and it was [from a perspective] that you don't really learn when you are kid in America. I remember this one time while working for The New York Times Sue illustrated a little piece in the food section about Peking duck. She drew a whole flock of ducks lined up on their little feet in line to go to the guillotine, waiting to become Peking duck. That was Sue's idea of making a political statement out of a recipe. To her, her job was to come here and 'socialize' as many people as possible toward the socialist point of view. And all her work was geared toward that kind of message.

Coe's viewpoints ultimately presented limitations on their friendship later on, but while under her tutelage at SVA, Freschet was incredibly inspired. Having just learned how to speak in a brand new language of signs from Hollins, Coe added another layer to Freschet's technique by supplying her with a dialect. After graduating SVA with honors, Freschet proceeded to teach a class with Coe at SVA for an academic year. Around the same time, Hollins had introduced Freschet to a contact at The New York Times, and she began working as a freelance illustrator for the publication. She would illustrate editorial pages and recipes. For a short while, Hollins, Coe and Freschet were all employed at The Times working under the same art director. Freschet fondly recalls that time period at the newspaper because she was working alongside her mentors who not only were her colleagues but were also her friends. Stylistically speaking, they were a diverse trio; Hollins was a classicist, Coe was a militant communist, and Freschet was an amalgam of the two. Inevitably, this cross-section of illustrators made for an interesting creative team at The Times. Eventually, Freschet moved away from the illustration scene. As an illustrator, all art was channeled through a series of art directors and editors. Only a year out of school, she felt that she did not know her own artistic voice well enough to take direction from others. Wary that too many factors would influence her fledgling style, Freschet quit her job at The Times and absconded illustration altogether.

Still eager to express her creative forces, Freschet took it upon herself to learn how to paint. The artist took a liking to oils due to their forgiving properties—oils could be easily manipulated wet or dry—unlike other mediums such as watercolors. That Freschet is self-taught in painting, her initial foray into the medium was awkward. Due to the fact that she did not have an early art history appreciation; Freschet did not understand contemporary art until college. Freschet explains that quite simply, she did not know how to look at art: "For example, I didn't know how to look at Cy Twombly's work. When I was twenty-two I called him 'the scribbler'...and now he is one of biggest influences in my craft." In many ways Freschet had to start over by unlearning much of her traditional art doctrine. The artist likens the experience to a maturation process. During this elementary stage, she became frustrated by the fact that the ability to paint had not been bestowed upon her naturally. Perhaps the most challenging was Freschet's mastery of the paintbrush; she was perturbed that she could

not paint the way she could draw. It took her a full year to learn not only about the mechanics of painting—such as changing her tool from pencil to brush—but also about liquid color and its properties.

Up until the 1980's, Freschet was working strictly in black in white. Consequently Freschet had to readjust her mode of thinking; instead of working from a mental palette of grisailles, she was suddenly executing her ideas in Technicolor. Part of this process required a formal study of color theory and the color wheel, which included a humbling introduction of how to mix colors. During this nascent stage, Freschet came to fully embrace color, and has since securely fastened it to her technique. Freschet reflects upon the impact of color in painting during that era:

In New York in the 80s, the City exploded with figurative work, which was really exciting to us (artists) because we hadn't seen anyone doing figurative work in the galleries for about a decade...I saw the Neo-Expressionists come out and they were just using wonderful huge spots of color. And then a lot of times, using their hands, just digging into it, and that really turned me on...There was something really messy about it (Neo-Expressionism) and very emotional about it...I really liked Francesco Clemente and Julian Schnabel...and of course Jean-Michel Basquiat was just coming into that scene. He saw a lot of raw emotion that hadn't been seen before.

Moving to Manhattan and attending art school proved to be the ultimate antidote to Freschet's repeated repressive states. She confesses that there was a time when she was hooked on the idea of being the tormented artist, but then after some deeper self-exploration, she realized the notion could easily be deconstructed. Auspiciously, Freschet discovered that she was able to produce meaningful work and be happy at the same time. Living in New York became central to this emotional equation during the 1980s:

I didn't know what I was getting into being in New York, being really young, the way New York was in those days. But it was kind of like a drug, and you just got hooked pretty much, and the energy was extraordinary, of course the anxiety, too. Lots of new things were happening all the time. I had a studio in Chinatown, and I had my apartment in the East Village and I had my little part-time job—whatever it was, there were many of them—and whatever money I made on my jobs, I would go down to my studio and spend it on art supplies and then work.

Living in downtown Manhattan as an artist in the 1980s was pivotal. The East Village art scene was an enclave transformed by the evolving needs of successive waves of immigrants and drifters such as Eastern Europeans, Hispanics, Blacks and Hippies. The neighborhood had secured its place as a cultural hotbed due to the establishment of various countercultural institutions. Not surprisingly, corporate culture was at odds with the East Village hipster's liberal democratic policies and practices such as punk rock, graffiti art, hip-hop and alternative entertainment. The East Village bore two social paradigms in the 80s: The Mudd Club- which was frequented by Diego Cortez, the curator who installed New York/New Wave at PS1 in order to establish a curatorial dialogue between graffiti art and a punk sensibility; and Beyond Five Words (organized by rapper Fab 5 Freddie, Keith Haring and the personality Futura)- which introduced the public to a new generation of artists that created a fusion of

graffiti and hip hop. A critical factor that made the East Village an ultimate spot for new galleries was the prior existence of locally supported artist driven initiatives such as La MaMa, Danspace, Poetry Project and 3rd Street Music Settlement. They produced an atmosphere of increased cultural contact among groups that may have otherwise been separated by class, race and ethnicity. The downside of the East Village scene was that many underlying principles that were to lead to culture wars in 80s were being laid by the community's distinctive view of American society.

It was just a matter of time before collectors and dealers were cherry picking graffiti art and repackaging it as high art, and with this sea change it ultimately lead to a big cultural shift in the New York art world. Art students of the late 70s and early 80s such as Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring engaged in cultural infrastructure by championing hip-hop, dance and art, but drawbacks came from the academic world not taking graffiti art seriously, and the artists were criticized for not having a formal education. Despite these artists having solo shows at blue chip galleries (i.e. Basquiat at Mary Boone), by 1985 graffiti art had dwindled from the mainstream and civilian warfare had come to personify the East Village aesthetics & movement.

As a bit of a social outcast herself, Freschet felt quite at home in the East Village. However, her reclusive nature did not seem to deter the process of befriending mentors, or other notable figures like Jean-Michel Basquiat. As an East Villager, Freschet frequently crossed paths with Basquiat and eventually maintained a brief friendship with him. The epitome of the itinerant artist who had nowhere to go, Basquiat was constantly sleeping at people's apartments. At one point, he was sleeping on Freschet's floor. She describes him as a warm-hearted free spirit:

It wasn't a long relationship but he was just great. He didn't start painting until after I knew him. He was just drawing when I knew him. I even took him up to Sue's (Coe) class once just to hang out and see what was going on...he got so turned off because she was going up and down saying what was bad about America and what was great about Stalin...Basquiat was brilliant...Even his little graffiti things were brilliant. And funny...Every time I've seen him portrayed he's presented as this moody, resentful, angst-ridden guy but he wasn't like that at all. He was just like a child. He was like one of the Lost Boys—just a street kid who was happy, who was funny, and was full of life and full of joy.

Stylistically, some of Freschet's work can be likened to Basquiat's given their mutual penchant for bright colors, rudimentary sketches, and ideogrammatic compositions. Works like *Ka Pow*, 2008 and *The Vacuum*, 2008 particularly exemplify this. Upon further exploration of Freschet's oeuvre, one can begin to identify other artistic influences as well. Freschet expresses a great interest particularly in Outsider Art:

I love the way people who don't know how to paint represent things. It's like a beautiful language barrier—someone comes to your country and they start speaking English and they don't know it that well—but they invent the most wonderful phrases that are wholly unique and so original. It's like having access only to a thesaurus instead of a dictionary.

Simplified animal forms and rustic environments depicted in *Horse*, 2008 and *Wyoming*, 2008 suggest compositional similarities to Outsider Artist Bill Traylor. *Untitled (Kewpie Doll)*, 2007 and *Garden of Allah*, 2007 each illustrate an attraction/repulsion element featured heavily in Outsider Artist Henry Darger's work. The artist also pulls elements from Dada, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism, Oceanic Art, celebrated musicians like Bob Dylan and avant-garde filmmakers like Roman Polanski and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Freschet plucks strands of unconventional pictorial language and East Asian spiritualism in *Untitled (Elephant and Buddha)*, 2007 and *The Little Dog Laughed*, 2008 reminiscent of Francesco Clemente. *Catacombs*, 2008 reflects a personalized version of Cy Twombly's "blackboard" picture style. Curly script, yellow color planes and non-delineated space in *Untitled*, 2007 and *History and Memory*, 2007 quote from the trademark style of Saul Steinberg. What is notable about Freschet's artistic and musical heroes is the absence of any female figures. When asked if this was a conscious decision, Freschet replies:

I don't really think of myself as a female artist, just as an artist. With some female artists, their femaleness is very much a part of their art. For me, I deal with humanity and sameness. I suppose my artistic role models stem from the fact that illustration was a male-dominated field and I didn't really know of any female illustrators besides Sue (Coe) and myself at the time. Also, filmmakers were predominantly male back then as well, so it (my influences) was coming from many directions. I like lots of art made by women; some female artists whose work I admire are Jennifer Bartlett, Susan Rothenberg, and Louise Bourgeois. They've produced some really powerful stuff in the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Throughout the years Freschet has continued to expand her artistic repertoire by creating works on paper, watercolors and collages. Freschet's process is not tethered to the restriction of time; sometimes a work can be birthed easily, whereas in other instances it can take up to a year to complete. The one element that does matter is scale. Freschet confesses to there being a certain amount of intimacy between her and her work, which in her mind, would not successfully translate in a large composition. Her largest work measures approximately 3' x 4'. Perhaps this can be attributed to her background in illustration that required a certain amount of detail within a restricted space. When asked about certain themes in her work, Freschet prefers to call them 'attitudes':

I'm interested in communicating, but not interested in preaching...It's kind of like introducing you to something you've always known and upon viewing a work, you instantly recognize it...I want my art to make people think, make people laugh...My hope is that it will make people step a little outside of themselves. If it puts you off, that's good!

Freschet believes that the purpose of art is to encourage people to believe in the possibility of transcendence, and that its reason is to remind people that there is an elevation that belongs to them. Therefore, when it comes time to depict her 'attitudes', Freschet prefers to present something in a light-handed way, rather than heavy-handed posturing as her friend and mentor Sue Coe did.

Having been exposed to social discourse at an impressionable stage in life, Freschet's opinion on America is complex and conflicting. By the late 1990s she found that an onslaught of

capitalism had left the country culturally bereft. In particular, Manhattan was becoming increasingly polarized between what she calls a “carnival society”—a shallow stomping ground comprised of fashion models, pop icons and political figures—and those who chose to distance themselves from this distorted social reality. Her first defense was to become invisible by blending into the city’s surroundings, but all that did was exacerbate her feelings of alienation. Disheartened by a homeland wreathed in a miasma of political turmoil and vanity, Freschet relocated to Mexico. She sought spiritual refuge in Mexican culture, folk art tradition, vibrant hues, and extraordinary topographical elements. Freschet discovered Mexican artists to be great sign painters, which allowed for a significant grooming of her own pictorial lexicon. Distanced from her native soil, Freschet began to slake her soul with a form of expressionist painting. Images, icons and impressions were slathered onto canvas like acts of contrition.

While adjusting to her southern migration, two unexpected events occurred. The first being that Freschet developed an allergic reaction to the poor grade of turpentine and was forced to explore other media. Flummoxed by the prospect of having to teach herself how to use more mediums, it took some thought as to which ones she would attempt to master. Freschet chose to experiment with watercolors, gouaches, and collages. Faced with this predicament for over a year, Freschet produced a significant amount of new works. Without realizing it at the time, the situation became a happy accident because it ultimately pushed her technique into a more independent style. Although Freschet did not continue interdisciplinary work upon her return back to the U.S., she still keeps an assembly of said works as a memory.

The other chance development that transpired for Freschet was the unexpected reunion with her first love: illustration. She was constantly inspired by the quotidian of Mexican life—from casual conversations with people on the street to cultural customs—and soon these impressions began to reconfigure in her head in the form of a narrative. As a result, the artist began writing and illustrating several children’s books. Saturated with dreamlike, folk-art-inspired imagery, Freschet’s books were a reflection of the new life impressed upon her: *Beto and The Bone Dance* recounts highlights of the popular Mexican holiday Day of the Dead; *Naty’s Parade* describes Oaxaca’s Guelagueta festival, a midsummer carnival of musicians, food vendors and dancers in elaborate disguises; *Winnie & Ernst* delivers a gleeful tale of eccentric woodland characters that is reminiscent of a modern-day Beatrix Potter. When it was time for Freschet to return back home to America (due to familial obligations), she had significantly changed her art process, her way of life and her approach to the world. As a result, the expression “you can’t go home again,” really rang true.

Trying to come up with a genre of where art is today is not an easy task. Some schools of thought have stated that art is undergoing a deconstructive process in the sense that artists are shedding themselves and their mediums of excess. The need to use found materials neatly exists in opposition to the sheer abundance of ‘stuff’ accumulated from an oversaturated consumer culture. As hybrids of Arte Povera and Minimalism crop up, some artists go as far as considering their work to be “post-medium.” Other scholars have opined that art is in the breathless process of trying to keep up with the digital age and that artists works today are a reflection of seriality that are systems-based as opposed to medium-specific. In this instance, art takes the tack of Minimalism with its endlessness and repetition, and as a result, artists are fabricating works whose form and content mimic today’s latest communication technologies. Lastly, a discourse is being generated—mainly by

artists—about the unsettling feeling of not having a concrete location in the world, or what Whitney curator Shamim M. Momim calls a feeling of “placelessness.” The idea of being in a perpetual state of transition—overwhelming international events, conflicting opinions on globalization, war, and ecological damage to our planet—collectively haunts artists’ psyches. As a result, works are created with the intention to decelerate time and accentuate the present. As for the future of art and its trajectory, Freschet offers her opinion:

I remember reading about a meeting of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline and they were trying to come up with a name for themselves, and I think it was Rothko who said, ‘We have to find a name for ourselves,’ and de Kooning strongly objected saying that, ‘It would be a disaster to name ourselves!’ And I know exactly what he meant, because as soon as we label ourselves, it over! As for the future of art movements, maybe we are going to be unlabeled, or maybe we can’t keep up with labels. Or maybe things are so mercurial these days that we are kind of fading in and out.

Whichever direction art does go, the one thing Freschet is certain of is that it will never disappear, and it will never become extinct. “There’s a famous anthropologist who had a theory on social structure that states: ‘after the instinct for survival is the instinct to create.’ ” In this regard, the future appears bright, no matter what the form.