THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Roy Ferdinand

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When future historians recollect pre-Katrina New Orleans, they will likely turn to self-taught artist Roy Ferdinand. For fifteen years, Ferdinand chronicled the street life and characters from some of New Orleans' toughest neighborhoods, creating an epic body of work—some two thousand drawings scattered among private collections, galleries, and museums across the country—documenting the most tragic and colorful of U.S. cities.

"Ghetto Liberation," 1999. Color pencil, marker, watercolor on board; 30 x 40 inches. Collection Martina Batan, New York.

A collection of Ferdinand's drawings is part of *Prospect.1*, a new international art biennial being held in New Orleans from November 1 to January 18. Organized by New Yorker Dan Cameron, who is chief curator for the event and also serves as director of the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center, the biennial will feature eighty international artists. With venues in museums, gallery spaces, and outdoor installations across the city, *Prospect.1* is billed as the "largest art event ever staged in the U.S."

Organizers hope the New Orleans-based biennial will make the city a destination for visual arts and help with its continuing recovery.

Ferdinand, who died of cancer at age 45 in 2004, is the only artist to be posthumously honored at *Prospect.1*. Although he didn't live to see Katrina, his work can be viewed as prophetic of the chaos and violence that came with the flood in chronicling the longstanding yet often hidden poverty that shocked the nation in TV images following the disaster.

Although Ferdinand drew inspiration from events he witnessed, took part in, or saw in the pages of the local newspaper, his best work transcends time and place. Dark, sometimes bizarre subject matter can bring to mind Goya or Bosch: thugs prey on the weak and kill each other; a homeless woman wrapped in an American flag wears cardboard for shoes; prostitutes display guns; a ragged man sitting on a back stoop skins a cat for dinner; an imp in a crack house grins at an act of bestiality. Parallels to his work among modern artists include the art of New York painter Leon Golub, who held that an artist must work from directly observable life to have political or social relevance and delved into such subjects as violence, power, sex, and politics.

Ferdinand's limited palette and minimalist style is far from painterly, however. His near-journalistic presentations could be compared to the New Realist photographers of mid-century New York. The disturbing mix of pathos, anger, and whimsy in some of his portraits of New Orleans street kids is reminiscent of Diane Arbus's "Child with toy hand grenade in Central Park." His gunned down drug dealers juxtaposed with street signs reading "stop" and "one way" recall a photo by Weegee of a corpse under a movie marquee reading "Joy for the Living." Like the neo-realists, he approaches his subjects head-on, with flat compositions that often lack depth of field. But Ferdinand worked with his memory and imagination instead of a camera, using pens, pencils, markers, and small sets of watercolors on poster boards that he bought at local drug stores.

The *Prospect.1* exhibit was selected from several private collections by Martina Batan, director of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Dating from 1990 to 2003, the exhibit nearly covers the span of Ferdinand's career. Avoiding the most explicit images found in his work, the selection balances his exploration of the city's violent subculture of

gangs, guns, drugs, and crime—what he called “the black urban warrior myth”—with neighborhood portraits, some of which clearly seem to have worked as emotional outlets for the artist. In “Police Line,” a young girl standing behind crime scene tape looks past the legs of adults into the eyes of the viewer, her expression showing a hurt and weariness beyond her years. With a touch of irony, Ferdinand adds a teddy bear in gangster sunglasses as a design on her t-shirt. “Mother with Infant” is one of a number of Ferdinand’s black Madonnas, a theme to which he returned throughout his life as an artist and, along with “Baptism,” shows the spirituality that contends with the darkness in his work.

These pieces and others in the *Prospect.1* selection display Ferdinand’s natural gift for revealing emotion and character with a few pencil strokes. Elsewhere, his draftsman-like skills and native intimacy with the hidden backyards and empty streets of New Orleans create a charged atmosphere, danger and beauty both at hand in his blue skies, boarded up houses, and white cemetery crypts.

Yet Ferdinand’s formal skills are nearly always imperfect—misrepresentations add power and depth to his art. Bodies slightly out of proportion, multiple vanishing points, and tilted buildings become evocative characterizations of a subject—New Orleans—that is innately skewed and often morally off center. In “Mr. Foster,” an elderly man walks down a deserted street of abandoned buildings and makeshift fencing that, in its cubist patterning, has an almost syncopated rhythm. The naked eye of the subject—peering directly at the viewer through a missing lens in his eyeglasses—seems alert to what may lie hidden beyond those many off-kilter corners. “Big Man,” a tableau of “drug thug” accoutrements set in front of a wall covered with gang graffiti, mixes social criticism with the self-aggrandizing style of rap. Graffiti is a recurrent motif, which Ferdinand often personalized by using the names of people he knew who had been killed on the street.

Ferdinand’s social commentary, such as “Louisiana Office of Welfare,” and portraiture (“Folk Artist”), offer counterpoints to menacing gang members and other darker images in the *Prospect.1* show. Much of Ferdinand’s work, however, has a noir-ish or even Gothic sensibility, often seeming to involve his own search for monsters, both within and without. An obsessive fan of science fiction and horror films, he uses horror as a

metaphor in some imaginative pieces, such as “Cemetery.” Executed in the same style as his documentary subject matter, its black zombie rising from the dead shocks while also seeming to mock stereotypes of the inner-city life Ferdinand depicts elsewhere.

Had Ferdinand lived to see Katrina, he would have undoubtedly become one of the tragedy’s most perceptive chroniclers. The drawings he left behind stand as a singular vision, a body of work that turns the mean streets of New Orleans into art, by turns sweet, sardonic, tragic, bizarre and horrific.