

“Toxic Beauty: The Art of Frank Moore”

*Delivered by David Leiber as the Rose Goldsen Lecture at Cornell University in 2013*

Frank Moore was a downtown artist—filmmaker, activist, polymath—prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. He died of AIDS in 2002 at the age of forty-eight, fighting the disease since 1987. He was many things to many people and moved between artistic communities freely. Between 1985 and 1987, for instance, he worked on a dance-based experimental film called *Beehive* with the Cornell choreographer Jim Self. For this film, his studio loft was converted into a giant painted cardboard honeycomb set. *Beehive* won a “Bessie,” which is a New York dance and performance award for outstanding creative achievement.

I knew him best as a totally innovative representational painter of exquisite, refined cautionary fables that invited the viewer into a wondrous visual realm. His paintings looked like nothing else in the art world and his intentions as an artist to educate and seduce through his beautiful objects of contemplation stood him far apart from his peers.

We met around 1991 on a studio visit to his loft on Crosby Street on the edge of SoHo. I was with the dealer and collector Gian Enzo Sperone who, like myself, had been curious to see more of his work in person and to meet this fascinating character. At that moment, Frank was in between galleries, having shown three times in consecutive years with some success at a gallery which had then just folded. On this memorable encounter, there were about a dozen pictures (dated 1987–1991) littered about the studio, of varying sizes, subjects, each in its own unusual artist’s designed frame. We enthusiastically offered him a show on the spot, with Gian Enzo buying nearly everything he saw. The studio visit ended with Frank pulling three homemade lobster potpies out of the oven, which he had understood was an expected component of the visit. I cannot recall visiting him in the years of studio visits which followed whereby a meal was not part of the equation.

The next year we hosted our first exhibition of his work. There were about fifteen paintings included—all, as I mentioned, very different in format and subject. We struggled to find a logic to the hanging, shifting pictures here and there without any real resolution. Finally, Gian Enzo suggested that we hang them in a clothesline chockablock, from biggest to smallest, from left to right. Like a cascade of falling pictures, the installation was sublime, and Frank immediately dug it.

What followed were more exhibitions in New York and in Europe, especially Italy, more publications, more invitations to be part of group exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial in 1995, commissions and the most delightful artist-dealer relationship/friendship I think I have had with any artist in my nearly thirty years as a dealer.

The first substantial monograph on Frank's work, entitled *Between Life and Death*, appeared, sadly, posthumously. It arrived from the printer after many delays on the eve of his memorial service at his loft then on West 14th Street. That evening we heard from many of his friends, so many people for whom Frank was their most entrusted friend, confidant. Several weeks later, in June 2002, there was a survey show of the artist's work organized by the Orlando Museum of Art and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. Frank worked on the checklist for this show but was denied the extraordinary moment for any artist when he or she is able to see all their work together for the first time.

In 2012, on the tenth anniversary of the artist's death, there was an even more memorable survey exhibition organized by the Grey Art Gallery at NYU, entitled *Toxic Beauty: The Art of Frank Moore*. There was a second, smaller component of the show at Fales Library, also at NYU, where the artist's papers are held. The venue was perfect, despite the limitations of the Grey Art Gallery's exhibition spaces, as it was a university gallery known for its commitment to underappreciated but historically important artists, which is located in the heart of Greenwich Village on Washington Square Park. Reviews of the exhibition were uniformly glowing, with significant coverage in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other art magazines in print and online.

Who was Frank Moore? To some he was a prominent member of Visual AIDS, a group which invented the red ribbon, a universally known symbol of AIDS awareness. In Frank's case, it is difficult to separate the man from his art—both were so compelling and charismatic ... and quotable. This did not mean that one had to know the artist to understand his work, although most did take advantage of basking in his winning personality if one had the opportunity. Now some ten to twenty years later the paintings speak loudly on their own and invite all newcomers. They dealt with some of the powerful subjects of their time, which in the 1980s and through the 1990s meant the raging AIDS pandemic and a myriad of social injustices, which also included a landscape or environment under threat.

For Frank, the body and our environment shared the same space and were inseparable. His paintings were "political" personal (often autobiographical), never preachy, always generous to the viewer. They were breathtakingly beautiful, luminous, and seductive, intentionally so, which was rare in an art world that may have valued political content but was not accustomed to Frank's uniquely high-style realism. Each painting was like an extensively researched historical novel with its own special binding or frame. He really believed that his art could seduce the viewer. To quote Frank (and it's easy to do this as he wrote prolifically and profoundly): "I do think that art can effect change in the society, though it takes a long time to operate—almost to the point that the better the painting the longer it takes to achieve its full impact. That's what painting does over time. It gets louder and louder as the vibrations travel."

Roberta Smith in her *New York Times* review of the *Toxic Beauty* exhibition asked: “Will art history be kind to Moore’s best works? Probably. They are too ardent, argumentative and finely wrought—and also beautifully lighted—not to hold our attention. Their concerns are enduring and their imagery can be amazingly versatile, gaining new pertinence as time goes by.”

Everything that Frank thought about and experienced made its way somehow into his painting. When I say polymath, I mean this in the fullest, almost Renaissance sense. He was a Naturalist and an Urbanist, an organic gardener, a mycologist, a forager (not just mushrooms, but Frank was the first person I know to eat pea shoots and cultivate them along with watercress in his pond). He loved performers of all persuasions, poets, philosophers, the human genome, farm stands and pancake breakfasts on airstrips, offbeat theater, foreign languages (French, Russian, Italian), snorkeling, dancing, baking, fashion, the stock market, medical journals, almanacs, Douglas Sirk films, seed catalogues, *I Love Lucy* reruns, the Adirondacks, the desert, beachcombing, minimalism, especially Ellsworth Kelly, the Latin names of every plant on his property, Chinese food, *National Geographic*, electrical lighting, camping, gossip, the telephone. He was alive every single minute of his forty-eight years, always open to new pleasures and experiences.

In February 2013, the New Museum in New York opened a show called *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*. The exhibition brought together a wide range of work in different media, much of it political, all produced in 1993. Frank was represented in the show with a picture entitled *Birth of Venus*. In 1993, the Nobel Peace Prize was shared by both Mandela and De Klerk, the World Wide Web was in its infancy, and nobody knew yet what was a blog. Within the art world, some artists embraced representation—mostly through photography and through other conceptual strategies—and others considered thorny political topics. Frank did both with tremendous flair and new ideas about high style, embracing an eccentric form of realism and decorative framing devices. He painted *Birth of Venus* in 1993 at a time when the AIDS crisis was raging and was by then called a pandemic. Inspired by Italian masters such as Botticelli and Titian (and the lesser-known modernist fabulist Alberto Savinio), the picture depicts a half-animal, half-human Transvestite still known today as Lady Bunny. She erupts from a polluted contaminated sea—a “toxic beauty”—as she lies amidst syringes, unused condoms, and pills.

About *Birth of Venus* the artist wrote: “In the spring of 1993, I went to Paris to see *The Century of Titian* exhibition at the Grand Palais. I thought the show was divinely beautiful—except that all the paintings of Venus looked like someone had stuck Norma Shearer’s head onto Roseanne Barr’s body. I couldn’t help thinking about female beauty, particularly its seductive aspect (all the Venus pictures were styled as seductions), and drag—the arena in which our cultural norms of beauty and femininity are maximized, hyper-styled, freed from sex and gender, satirized and

worshipped. I thought of The Lady Bunny, an increasingly renowned drag diva and gender illusionist whom I had long admired for her beauty, generosity, wit, and general tackiness. Instantly it clicked, and I could see the whole composition as a big X. I noticed as she was posing for me that she was doing weird but beautiful things with her hands ... ‘ballet-hand’ gestures that drag queens use to make their hands appear more petite and feminine. I painted her nude with the body she had chosen rather than the one he was born with, and I gave her my dick. I pulled down my pants and painted it from life.”

What is distinctive about this *Birth of Venus* is not only its provocative subject, which remains radical and arresting today, but also the lavish beauty of the work’s surface. The painting flows with light—itself inherently affirmative, life-giving, the result of layer upon layer of oil painting, pictorial skills which Frank honed as an artist since he began in the early 1970s, studying at Yale. The work never feels illustrational or a one-liner, despite the graphic nature of the image. Frank was both a consummate craftsman as well as a fastidious researcher. Before he picked up his wide arsenal of brushes and other tools, he would delve into all aspects of his subject, consulting the literature, scientific and medical journals, and other historical sources until he felt that he understood his content thoroughly. At the same time, he would consider the work’s final presentation or appearance, which ultimately meant he would conceptualize and construct the work’s frame—which were sometimes found period frames or more often elaborately constructed or carved wood frames, inspired by earlier storytelling pictorial traditions or the content of that particular picture. He loved to quote Norman Rockwell on the subject of frames, something like: “I would no sooner let a painting leave the studio unframed than I would let my children go to school unclothed.” For Frank, the right frame could add humor, irony, elegance, and tension to the picture. For *Birth of Venus*, he reused a nineteenth-century period frame from a collection of frames which he inherited from the Pierre Matisse Gallery—I think he was amused that this particular frame once surrounded a Degas landscape.

Throughout the 1990s, Frank’s health vacillated wildly as HIV brought forth many maladies and complications. In between fairly regular hospital visits and treatments (many quite experimental at the time) and several major surgeries, he continued to paint and committed all his energies into his apparent solitary studio practice. He worked mainly on his own, with occasional studio assistance from a sculptor friend who specialized in the elaborate carpentry that his frames required. On another level though, Frank was almost never alone. He was a great connector of people—bringing together fellow artists, filmmakers, dancers, choreographers, scientists, doctors, naturalists, lovers of great food and gardens. Often, he painted wearing a headset, talking on the phone while he worked, catching up on gossip. He compartmentalized many of these relationships so that his network may have been somewhat disguised until the very end. Tellingly at his memorial service, so many friends came forth all of whom considered Frank their best friend.

Art and life were inseparable for the artist and as the nineties advanced, so did his illnesses. At that point his work became more overtly autobiographical. By the mid-1990s nearly every work became a type of self-portrait. The first key work in this regard is his *Arena* from 1992. Here he “deliberately set out to construct an image in which every detail corresponded directly to something that was happening in his life at the time.” He continues: “The gamble was that the central event of that painting, the loss of my partner of eight years to AIDS, could ultimately be seen as emblematic of so many similar losses that were occurring all around me, attaining a level of universality. Otherwise, I continue to mine autobiography as a source of material, but I try not to use stuff that has to be explained or footnoted. Autobiography should lend a sense of authenticity or groundedness, not narcissism.” In *Arena*, we see a labyrinthine medical arena filled with the spectacle of death and dying. The artist’s lover lies dying in the center, surrounded by human skeletons carrying banners with Latin sayings—such as “Birth is the beginning of Dying,” “We are merely shadows and dusts”—while a Buddha-like figure (in this case the poet John Giorno) and the artist’s friends meditate in a corner amidst a clash of body and culture. As Klaus Kertess writes: “*Arena* teems with a voyeur’s view of the media circus and medical nightmare the AIDS pandemic has become since it was first diagnosed in the United States in 1981.”

On a larger scale, with even more complexity and a truly extraordinary frame, is his painting *Wizard* from 1994. This picture can be read like a Boschian treatise of the AIDS crisis at that moment in time. It depicts a de-natured landscape devoid of plant life, replaced by crowded images of pills, syringes, sickness, and other grotesqueries. The Plague is presented like a fable, almost a Wizard of Oz landscape littered with the accoutrements of the health-care industry, including rainbows of gold coins and other currencies which glow through these atrocities. The “Wizard” is the figure at the lower left, who was Frank’s doctor at the time, in a white smock who confidently strides forward, his briefcase in hand. Is the cure within his reach? The frame is composed of literally all the medicines Frank had taken up until that moment, all cast in Lucite resin (after the French nouveau réaliste Arman but well before Damien Hirst’s experiments with pharmaceuticals). This picture, one of the artist’s finest, became a cult picture of the 1990s, used for the cover of *Art in America* the same year it was painted in an article about art and the AIDS crisis.

This notion of landscape (or different landscapes) under attack continued through the artist’s series of three paintings about Niagara Falls, each with its own distinct copper frame. These copper frames made of plumbing piping remind one that Niagara, despite its awesome beauty, is also a reservoir that can be turned on and off like a faucet. Dipping into the backyard of the nineteenth-century American Visionary painters Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Church, here Frank paints Niagara, the largest reservoir in New York, in all its awesome toxic beauty. After years of research in consultation with the EPA and some uncomfortable encounters with representatives of the polluting industries which operated on the edge of the falls, Frank

discovered over 350 different chemicals in the waters of Niagara. If you look closely at these paintings, you will see that the artist silkscreened chemical representations of these pollutants into the water passages of the picture. Typically, the artist employed the silkscreen to deploy factual information into the painting. The sublime has been compromised, although it is still beautiful and compelling. The goal is vision: to see or represent things that may not be apparent to the naked eye, in this case what lies beneath the surface of things.

What is remarkable about Frank's work today is that the images and subject matter do not seem dated. This I think is partly due to the work's nondidactic qualities. He was also careful to present two sides to every issue, to show the complexity of the world and the elasticity of meaning itself. Rooted in his childhood memories of the falls, Frank returns to Niagara as an adult with eyes sharpened by his years of environmental activism but still with a sense of awe for nature.

Another major project from that period was his painting *Yosemite* from 1993—his largest picture, measuring nine by twelve feet. This painting made its public debut two years later in the 1995 Whitney Biennial curated by Klaus Kertess. Here we see that national park presented as amusement park. The work was painted after a camping trip to Half Dome, where the artist also gathered (illegally) the pine cones which make up the extraordinary Adirondack-style frame (East Coast tradition meets the Western frontier). Disney characters share the road and congested campsite with eco tourists and swooning animated redwoods (themselves alive like storybook characters after Charles Burchfield). Warning smoke signals coalesce into peace and dollar signs, infinity signals and Mickey Mouse in the center of the picture.

Other pictures addressed issues of material culture and the complexity of belief systems. One of these, entitled *Everything I Own*, from a recurring series of works which depict the artist's hands, shows a Buddhist mudra position of two conjoined hands, fingers interlocking. Expressive of an action of the Hindu deity, this mudra holds, instead of grains of rice, the artist's timeworn possessions. Everything and not everything that the artist considers of importance. These favorite objects—his furniture, carpets, paintings (his own), pets, and plants—cannot be so easily given up in a moment of cathartic release. Once again, not only does the abundance of detail hold our attention here but so does the abstract structure of the two-colored background, itself suggestive of a monochrome painting by the minimalist Brice Marden who was an early influence in the 1970s. This structure gives the work its tension, its source of light, and another suggestion of the sublime.

The mentioned 1995 Whitney Biennial was a turning point for the artist in terms of a broader reception and audience for his work worldwide. The biennial included two works: *Yosemite* and his send-up of Norman Rockwell's iconic image *Freedom from Want*, now titled by Frank Moore as *Freedom to Share*. Here, Thanksgiving as it was depicted by Rockwell for *The Saturday*

*Evening Post* has morphed into something more sinister, into a ghastly though somewhat comic scene of racial inclusiveness and biological horror. Turkey has been taken off the menu, replaced by a main course of pharmaceuticals; water glasses replaced by the laboratory beakers. Puddles of small glass beads form on the work's surface like festering bacterial cocci.

In 1995, Frank was introduced to the fashion designer and collector Gianni Versace, who had seen the biennial and singled out Frank's work. The two became fast friends, almost like muses to each other, and the relationship led to nearly ten commissioned works for the designer's homes in New York and Miami Beach. These commissions were flattering for the artist and provided him with financial security. The downside, seen in retrospect, was that these commissions took him out of the public's eye for a period, as he exhibited rarely in those years, consumed as he was by these various commitments. Commissioned pictures included the following: *Stretch*, *Cow*, *The Client*, *Black Narcissus*, *A Midsummer's Night*, *B.J.*, *Survival of the Fattest*, and *Free for All*.

The last picture, painted for Versace although never delivered, was *To Die For*. Asked to explore the Versace Medusa logo, Frank offered his own interpretation of the beauty myth, depicting a decapitated Kate Moss seen in an elegant marble bathroom with a nest of snakes sprouting from her hair. The artist had just added an image of a fax recently received from Versace eager for a progress report on the painting and was applying the work's final touches—mostly rivulets of dripping blood seen on the marble steps—when he heard about the designer's brutal murder on the steps of his palazzo in Miami Beach. The painting, unintentionally and portentously, became an eerie portrait of both the life and death of Versace.

Around the same time, Frank himself endured endless health challenges, including multiple cases of lymphoma and several near-death moments. Three significant pictures, part of a series of so-called *Bed* paintings, were completed in 1997–1998. The best known perhaps is *Lullaby*, an image of bison—no longer but once nearly extinct—now miniaturized as they roam and gaze on a hospital bed amidst falling crystal-like snowflakes. Where these haunting memento-mori-like images come from remains a mystery ... perhaps from daydreams while lying hospitalized, immobilized, or maybe from memories of his childhood lullabies like “Where the buffalo roam ... / Where seldom is heard a discouraging word.”

Some of Frank's last works address the changing roles of genetics, particularly as it impacted both the health-care landscape and the environment. His *Oz* is the culmination of his research. On the one hand, genetics led to the development of drugs in the biotech arena which prolonged his life; on the other hand, he was repulsed by the abuses of companies like Monsanto (producer of Agent Orange) and GMOs in general, most notably engineered corn. For Frank, the genetic revolution was not simply a revolution in genetic science but a larger, more complex transformation underway in religion, architecture, art, education, criminal justice, history,

anthropology, animal husbandry, politics, medicine, even in the ways we define ourselves as human. Frank maintained an encyclopedic interest in all these subjects and more—painting was just one outlet, although an important one, for these concerns. He had a large view of humanity and saw the interconnectedness of things. He was so competent on many levels and modest about this knowledge, or I should say wisdom. I remember not being particularly surprised to learn that he was also a brilliant investor in the stock market. He seemed to know as much as his doctors about his condition and what the available options were for him under the circumstances. Similarly, he seemed to know which were the good and the bad for companies both from an ethical and investment point of view.

Finally, let's look at two works: his *Weed* from 1989 with its stupendous frame made of Madagascar mica and panoply of glass eyeballs embedded in the surface of the painting, and his color woodcut *Primer* made shortly before his death. Who defines or dictates what is a weed and what one decides to cultivate? The dandelion, once despised in the 1950s as the bane of the everyday Long Island lawn keeper, is now sold at the farmer's market and called puntarelle.

In *Primer*, we see images of the inchworm as it measures itself against the ruler, the wood-drawn ruler with its drawn wood grain done in the wood engraving. Running like a film strip or picket fence in horizontal bands across the surface are the words "KILL IT / DON'T KILL IT / KILL IT / DON'T KILL IT." Why do we kill the ants inside the house, but we let them live out on the porch? With humor and wit, extraordinary technical skills, imagination and generosity, Frank Moore's real subject has always been the vision itself, imploring us to open our eyes and ears—our consciousness to the world around us.