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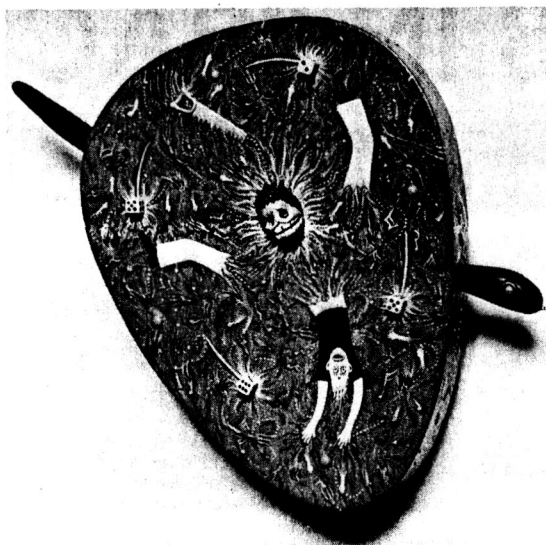
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Victor Faccinto, "Red Raga," 1982, acrylic on wood, 7x7 in., photo by MARTINE SHERRILL

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Front cover: Victor Faccinto, detail from "Red Raga"
(also pictured above in full)

THE CHAOTIC UNIVERSE OF VICTOR FACCINTO

by Chris Redd

"Some people find my work beautiful at a distance, but when they get up close and see what's going on, they're instantly stabbed in the eyes."

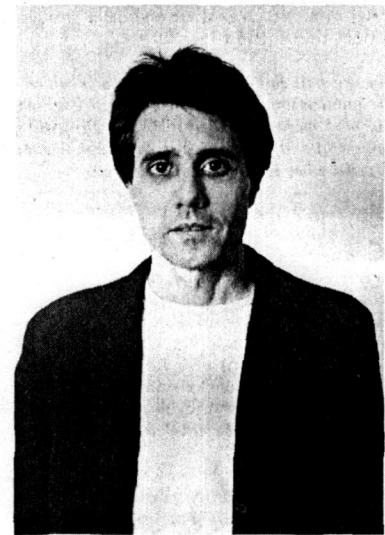


Photo by MARTINE SHERILL

Many artists expend a lot of energy trying to "make it" in New York; they live under the impression that artists must work in the vortex of the art world in order for their careers to thrive and for their art to be relevant. Consequently, that most cosmopolitan of cities attracts artists the way a street light attracts insects in the evening. But not Victor Faccinto. An artist with a solid national reputation and experiences that span the country, he prefers the slower-paced, more relaxed life in the comparatively small town of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Having spent four years living and working in New York during the '70s, Faccinto is in a position to know what he wants. "I like it here," he says of Winston-Salem. "This place suits my mood right now."

Success in the art world underscores the viability of the route Faccinto has chosen. He is currently represented by the Phyllis Kind Gallery (Chicago and New York), which has featured his work in one-person shows in 1980, 1982 and 1987. Other notable institutions that have featured his work in solo exhibitions include the North Carolina Museum of Art and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. The list of institutions that have included his work in group exhibitions runs to five pages. In 1975 his film work was featured in a show at the Museum of Modern Art, an exhibition which gained him considerable notoriety but which he downplays. "In New York, a lot of filmmakers have had shows at MOMA," he explains.

Faccinto's adopted home in North Carolina is a far cry from his original home on the West Coast. Born in Albany, California in 1945, he began to trace out the line that his life would follow in and around San Francisco during the tumultuous '60s. He spent a year at San Francisco State College but then transferred to California State University at Sacramento. Interestingly, at one point he lived only a few blocks from the infamous Charles Manson. Though a psychology major as an undergraduate, Faccinto found that he spent most of his time taking art classes. "When I went to school, it was a very unstructured time for California universities," he says. "I sort of designed my own courses and learned my own way. The thinking by the administration was that anyone could be an artist or whatever else they wanted to be. Luckily, I was self-

motivated enough to get something out of that situation."

As a graduate student in art at CSUS, Faccinto decided that he wanted to make animated films. The controversial films that resulted from this desire were his first work to gain broad attention in the art world. Comic-inspired psychedelic animated fantasies, they feature cut-out characters with numerous heads and bodies that switch at will, and elaborately decorative painted backgrounds. "Actually, those early animated films grew out of some paintings I had done," he says. "Now my work has come full circle, and what I did in those films influences the work I'm doing now." His films were selected to be a part of the "New American Filmmakers" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art for three years in a row beginning in 1972.

After graduating with an MFA-equivalent degree, and with his work gaining increasing attention in the art world, he decided to move to New York and try the conventional route for success as an artist. With the help of friend and teacher Joseph Raphael, he was able to get a job as assistant to the director of the Nancy Hoffman Gallery. He spent the next four years working and building his reputation as an artist in New York.

In 1978, Faccinto came to North Carolina to accept what he thought was a temporary position (which he still holds) as gallery director of the Fine Arts Center at Wake Forest University. Shortly after he arrived in Winston-Salem, the Phyllis Kind Gallery began to handle his work, and it was then that he realized it wasn't necessary for him to live in New York to maintain his career. "I got kind of worn out by living in New York," he says. "There was a lot of energy, and it was fun for a while, but once I got used to it, it became something of a hassle. I've had a lot of years living a fast-paced life in the city, and now I need something to balance it out. You can't keep up that pace forever."

To some, it might seem odd that a successful artist who spent his early life surrounded by the experimental culture of California in the '60s and '70s, and who spent four years working in a major New York gallery, would settle in North Carolina. But this situation embodies Faccinto's belief in cyclical patterns that balance different forces: the tranquil environment of North Carolina balances the hectic life of New York.

This type of thinking permeates Faccinto's views about the art world as well as the world in general. "When I worked in New York, I saw what happens. People rise to the top and think life is always going to be that way, but several years later they discover that it doesn't last forever. Everything has cycles; when you go down, you're bound to go up again, but you can't count on it. In art, what it comes down to is that it has to be worth it in the studio. You have to get enough rewards from making art to keep you happy or content in order to keep doing it."

Faccinto's art is as unusual and compelling as his approach to his career; indeed, the two are bound together, for his art reflects his ideas about opposing energy forces. Using a hard-edged, somewhat primitive style, he creates a colorful, chaotic universe of bizarre characters and archetypal images that make up a personal visual language reflecting the world of experience. He openly confesses that his work is autobiographical. "My work is like a diary; it's a narrative about what is going on around me. Whatever I'm doing, thinking or reading, and what's happening around me during the two or three months it might take to do a piece, really influences it."

Though his work might be narrative and autobiographical, it isn't always so in a clear or obvious sense. More obviously it is obsessed with unseen cosmic forces that seem to manipulate people within the world. It expresses a somewhat stoical view of the universe in an unusual, sometimes violent, and always compelling manner. "Some people find my work beautiful at a distance," he says. "But when they get up close and see what's going on, they're instantly stabbed in the eyes. I used to concentrate on making that happen, but it's no longer a main emphasis." Though Faccinto first gained notoriety as a filmmaker, the techniques he used drew from other forms of art. These films fueled his interest in painting and sculpture, and he continues to draw inspiration from the vocabulary of images that he established in this early work.

Though the films represent a body of older work, I believe they provide something of a key to understanding all that Faccinto has done since. These 16-millimeter short pieces depict an ambivalent universe in which opposing forces



Above: still from "Book of Dead," 16mm animation over found footage, 1978. Below: "Hard to Swallow," 1980, acrylic on paper, 1½ x 7 in.

straints. "It's hard to do film work here, because you have to send the film away to be processed. I did most of my film work in New York and California, and I could take in a roll of film the day I shot it and get it back the next day and see what I had. It was easy to keep a sense of continuity about what I was doing. When I first came here, I was still working with film, but I had to send it to a place in Durham and wait for it to come back, so I was a week behind all the time. It just wasn't an interesting way to work."

Faccinto's work since he has lived in North Carolina combines elements of painting and sculpture with the style and some of the imagery from his film work to create art of unusual appearance and power. It relates to cartoons, the work of the Chicago Imagists and fantasy art; however, most strongly it reflects personal views. Certain images seem to hold particular significance for him, and these crop up repeatedly. He finds fascination with images of snakes, skulls, daggers, forks (from salad forks to the Devil's pitchfork) and military tanks. Rockets and airplanes also seem to be favorite images. Often he uses small sculptures or painted images of these things within larger pieces. Some of these—notably snakes, skulls, and forks—he has used as large-scale sculptural bases which he decorates with small sculptures, images, or found objects to create three-dimensional static work that has something of the narrative quality of film. In his words, "The eye moves from one element to the next, creating a narrative as it relates the different images together."

Though the work might be narrative, it isn't so in a linear sense; it combines personal archetypal images, autobiographical references, and

found objects and compresses their collective meaning and significance into one movement. Faccinto refers to these elements as parts of a "visual language" with which he conveys information that he has gleaned from the world around him. "I try to use this language in different ways with different pieces," he says, but he denies any intent to make moral or political statements. "Those kinds of issues don't bother me so much, because I don't see final solutions," he says. "There are temporary solutions, perhaps, but those issues are always going to be there."

It is the shifting and swirling patterns of opposing energies that interest Faccinto. During the early '80s, he took a year-long sabbatical and went back to New York. "I really did it up. That was my last insane period," he says. He became interested in the still-emerging New York punk rock music scene and spent time going to clubs and listening to the music. "A lot of the lyrics related to things I had been doing for years... tapping that realm at the edge of psychology. They twisted your nerves raw." Out of this period grew a series of "records"—wooden discs that resemble music albums decorated with designs and the ever-present daggers and snakes. One piece, "Her Friends," features lyrics spiraling in like record grooves that tell a violent tale of love gone bad. It's an exemplary Faccinto piece combining sexuality and violence as well as humor and seriousness.

In his most recent work, Faccinto uses sheets of plywood as a "canvas" on which to paint and arrange objects. For these pieces, he selects plywood in which the grain patterns suggest a theme or setting that he finds interesting. He

stains the wood with oil paint, generally following the grain pattern, to bring out the setting he wants. Against this background, he arranges images and objects that relate to his ideas. "Whatever I'm doing, thinking, reading, and what's happening around me during the two or three months it might take to do a piece really influences it," he says.

He refers to these pieces as "relief paintings," because many of the elements on them are small, three-dimensional objects or figures made from fimo, a modelling clay. These sculptural elements separate his work from normal paintings. He arrived at this type of work by combining things he enjoys. "I like to make things with my hands, and I like to paint, so this work allows me to do everything I want to do in one piece."

His latest piece along these lines, "Three On A Match," currently hangs at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art as part of the "Surrealism Continued" exhibition. Faccinto doesn't think of himself as a surrealist, but he doesn't object to the association. The themes in this piece span the whole country as well as a range of emotions, for outline maps of California, North Carolina, Florida, and part of Texas appear prominently in addition to images of two lovers, a priest, golfers, people sinking into the ground, tanks, skulls, and snakes. Despite some subversive elements, this piece is decidedly more sedate and upbeat than some of his earlier work. When I pointed this out, he said, "Well, it's spring, the birds are out, I'm relaxed and that piece grew out of this situation."

When I interviewed Faccinto for this article, he was working in his backyard studio making small snakes out of fimo. "These are earrings for my wife, Martine," he explained. He agreed that the tranquility in his current work reflects his state of mind, and he talked at length about his past, his art, and the art world in general. After an hour or so, he tired of talking and wanted to get back to work. He sent me off with one last statement: "I'm not trying to say anything or to preach. I'm just trying to scratch out that I'm here; for myself in a sense, but also because I went to art school and I'm labelled an artist. It's a way to function in the world and to have a purpose and to make some money. Ultimately though, it's the process of making art that keeps me going."

CHRIS REDD is The Arts Journal's resident critic for Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem. □

