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By Catherine Wagley

Interview with Feodor Voronov

In grad school, my studio was kiddie-corner from Feodor (or Theo) Voronov's. I was always there and he was there more often than I was. I respect smart people who do the work, or people who are smart because they do the work, and seeing them get better and better and get recognized for it is sort of a thrill — it means the world can make sense sometimes. Theo's first solo show at **Mark Moore Gallery** in Culver City opens in January, and all the paintings shown here will be included in that. But we didn't specifically talk about the show. We talked instead about method.



Feodor Voronov, "Insurgent", 2011, 48 X 48, Acrylic, marker and ball-point pen on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Mark Moore gallery.

Catherine Wagley: This morning, a friend and I were talking about abstraction that's transcendent, but transcendently funny, like kick-ass stand-up. I thought of you, and pulled up your "Pellucid" painting on Google as an example. It's seriously crafted, seriously systematic, but doesn't take itself that seriously. How'd you start working with words?

Feodor Voronov: I started working with words about one year after graduate school. I most of all wanted to step away from grad school work, which started to feel dated, short sighted and just way too safe. I initially was attracted to just the raw physical power of text, and I attempted a few pieces where I would build these circular patterns by first translating words into ancient runes and then using the result to begin the process of building a composition. Pretty soon, I realized this was all too cautious and gimmicky. So I decided to see what would happen if I just put an English word in the middle of the canvas and forced myself to deal with it being there. It seemed too simple and really goofy, but, for me, this move began a project that is now going on its third year.

CW: You told me about finding and printing out that huge list of 1000+ words—what was it called again? Something along the lines of "words that will make you sound smart but not pretentious." That's still your source, right?

FV: Yes, this list is my source for the current word paintings. It is a list that is supposed to enable you to write with greater accuracy and not sound too wordy. I don't think it is really important what the list is. It's just there and I choose from it. I scan the list and grab words that look good at the moment. I do not consider the meaning or sound when doing this, in fact, I don't even know many of the words but I do look them up in the dictionary for my own self betterment. My interest lies primarily in their shape, look and compositional capabilities. (The meaning is something I can't truly control and my relationship to it is pretty much on the same level as the viewers').

CW: Yeah, I think that's what I was digging for: "compositional capability." It reminds me of the other term you use from John Rajchman's book, "operative formalism." You're honing in on units you can work with, that can work for you. In fact, I have a really hard time picturing you tossing something out or giving up on it because it failed—do you ever do that?

FV: No, nothing is lost, ever. I just keep going until a certain point of compromise is reached. You can always bring something back to life even if you have to bury it first. I've got nothing to hide so restarting something is kind of pointless. I'd rather make work directly over the so-called failure, even if it is just for a point of comparison.

CW: That's what I like about the painting of yours in my living room: the underpainting and over painting that looks more like competent problem solving than inspiration. Are you still working on raw canvas?

FV: Yes, I work on raw canvas all the time. I do not like the idea of priming a surface and getting it all ready for the act of painting. I prefer to treat it sort of like paper, where you just take it and begin working on and with it right away. Why negate the possibility of the surface by covering it in white? The act of priming is incorporated into the actual process of painting and becomes about the culmination of the marks working together to transform a given surface. Maybe I'm over thinking it; basically, priming is part of the work and gessoing a canvas to me is unnecessary.



CW: Do you like Kenneth Noland? He was a raw canvas guy.

FV: I admire his work, but he's not someone I look at regularly.

CW: I remember, in this interview with Diane Waldman from '77, he said he and Morris Lewis really tried to learn from Pollock but Pollock was too emotional for them, and when Frankenthaler (another raw canvas fan) came along, that was a relief. She made painting about material. Then, talking about why he initially painted his Chevron circles on mostly 6 foot squares, he said, "It turns out certain picture shapes don't allow you to use different kinds of quantity distributions of color for different expressions."

Maybe that's obvious—that the shapes you choose to paint limit other choices you can make if you're going to compose a painting effectively—but his work looked the way it did because he really thought about stuff like that. Do words with certain shapes, maybe something with lots of round vowels in it, pose problems for you?

FV: Sure, each word is a new problem in itself. I don't tailor the surface dimension to a particular word simply because words can be broken apart and rearranged to fit different compositional situations, which basically means there is more than one solution and that is both very exciting and challenging. But that is a big part of what the work is about: problems and solutions. I welcome problems because you cannot have solutions without them. I don't play favorites and will not disregard a word because it has too many a's in it, for example. I just deal with it.

CW: I like that — "I do not play favorites." How many works have you done on paper, using Raymond Carver text? I imagine, like, "Where I'm Calling From", being more angular than, say, "Cathedral." Can you even sum it up like that: rounder, more angular?

FW: Well, I actually haven't worked from those. I have done several pieces from "Will you please be quiet, please?", both on canvas and paper. The results all looked fairly different. The pieces were really based on the rhythmic flow of words and how that can be physically restructured into a different visual situations or arrangements. But this is still just a side project at the moment.



CW: The truth is, I'd probably rather no one know where the text comes from in your work, which means that question may've been counterproductive. I just like that you read Carver.

FV: Yeah that was a sticky one. It's like a side conversation that wants to wander off into other worlds, so may be a scratch...

CW: You said earlier you wanted a project that wasn't short-sighted, was more sustainable, but wasn't safe. I want to understand that better. Sustainability and long-sightedness seems safe to me; still, I don't feel your paintings are safe.

Or maybe this is what I mean: there are artists who do "projects"— Steven Bankhead did that painting show informed by Malcolm McLaren, or Whitney Bedford's new paintings are all expressly about the moment a storm gathers. Then there are artists — Rebecca Morris, Peter Voukos, Jasper Johns (though he's gotten drier over the years) and you, I guess — looking for something to keep them going for a long time. Where does that urge come from?

FV: "Inner necessity" according to Wassily Kandinsky. No, really, we have to make work and fit our lives in or around it, and that's it.