

## Connie Fox's Reflection of the Artist... and Writer

By Annette Hinkle

Connie Fox is an abstract painter.

But sometimes, she gets an idea that can't be ignored — and sometimes it might just be an idea that takes her out of her normal realm of abstraction.



Connie Fox "Self as M.B. with Cigarette I," 2007. Charcoal on paper. 15 x 11 in.

"I've been at this game for a long time and I've been an artist since before I knew what an artist was," explains Ms. Fox, who lives in East Hampton and turns 91 this year. "A lot of what you do is not intentional, it's something that seems compelling that you want to do. Then really the job is to acquire the ability to make the ideas work."

"And this is not just how to use the brushes and paints," she adds. "It's how to take an idea and make it visible — which is the difficult part."

Case in point, "Connie Fox: Self As..." an exhibit showcasing a unique collection of Ms. Fox's representational work which goes on view this week at the Parrish Art Museum. The show, which is part of the Parrish Perspectives series, features 22 drawings by Ms. Fox which she created over the course of a few weeks in 2007 and, unlike the abstract paintings for which she is best known, this work is decidedly figurative.

Specifically, it consists of a series of charcoal self-portraits in which Ms. Fox replicated the photographic and painterly poses of two well-known figures from early 20th century Europe — German painter Max Beckmann and French novelist Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette — and then put her own face in their place.

Both Beckmann and Colette were towering figures in their day.

Colette — who, like men of her era, went by her last name — is best known in the literary world known for



Connie Fox "Self as Colette in Tux II, 2007," Acrylic paint and pencil on paper. 22 x 15 inches

town in Colorado with only 1,000 people. It was not like growing up in New York with access to friends and people who knew people in Paris."

"I wasn't a New Yorker," she adds.

In fact, it may be that Ms. Fox's interest in Colette and Beckmann as subjects can be traced to the fact that, unlike a lot of artists, she didn't live in Europe during her formative years.

"I had a totally ignorant understanding of what was going on in Paris, and it was romantic," says Ms. Fox. "[Colette's] spirit was great. Here she was, so young when she was taken into Parisian society. It was liking someone without knowing a lot about them."

"I latched on to the idea of Colette, I didn't know much about her so I got a book," said Ms. Fox. "I don't know why I picked her, I can't really say."

While she may have been captivated with the photographs of Colette which eventually became her self-portrait source material, Ms. Fox can't say the same thing about her novels.

her 1944 novella "Gigi." But Colette was also known for pushing the envelope of Parisian societal expectations by cross-dressing and challenging the notions of feminine power and sexuality. This is evident in a couple of Ms. Fox's drawings in which she is wearing a tuxedo, a la Colette.

"I had fun with that," admits Ms. Fox with a grin.

In his work Beckmann, one of the main artists associated with the New Objectivity art movement, offered a vision of the cultural, social and political climate of Europe between the world wars. He also indulged in self-representation by painting numerous self-portraits that reflected his own place as an artist in the world. Several of these, too, including Beckmann's 1938 "Self-Portrait With Horn" have been appropriated by Ms. Fox and it is she who stares out at the viewer from the drawing, not Beckmann.

For earlier generations of American artists and writers, living abroad for a while was long considered a rite of passion and it was just the kind of setting where one might actually expect to meet the likes of Colette or Beckmann. But this was not Ms. Fox's reality.

"When I was young, I didn't spend a lot of time in Paris and believe me, I feel like I've really been deprived," says Ms. Fox. "This is what I really wanted to do. It was kind of beyond my ability. I came from a very small

“Once I read more of her writing, I found it boring,” admits Ms. Fox.

Upon deciding which images of Beckmann and Colette she wanted to duplicate in her drawings, the next challenge for Ms. Fox was to figure out how to set it all up in the studio.

“This was the major accomplishment of the whole thing — getting the idea and making it work,” explains Ms. Fox. “I was on a stool and I had to be able to hold a mirror and look at my image in the mirror. If I was working from the book of either one of them, I had a book that I had to look at at the same time.

I looked at myself and tried to make sense out of the image,” she adds. “I had to make all these things look of a piece, like they all belong. So one time I was working with photos of Collette, then I was working with Beckmann’s paintings, and they’re very different.”

“I really think I did it,” she adds.

Something else Ms. Fox did was finally get across the Atlantic. Just a few years after the end of World War II, she and two friends took off on a 1,000 mile trip through Europe — and they did it all on bikes, riding from Rotterdam north through Scandinavia, then south to Italy.

“I can’t believe my parents let me go. Here we were, three girls on bicycle, gone for 10 months,” she says. “I’m so grateful it turned out as well as it did.”

“We’d get a letter at an American Express office once every six weeks,” adds Ms. Fox who admits she didn’t get to see a lot of museums on that trip because there was no place to safely secure the bikes with all their personal items on them while they were inside.

But that doesn’t mean Ms. Fox stopped being an artist on that trip.

“I took pictures, which I still have,” she says. “And I had two pieces of plywood about 11” by 8” that fit on the back of the bike — and in between there was drawing paper.”

*Parrish Perspectives’ “Connie Fox: Self As...” runs March 13 to April 24. The Parrish Art Museum members opening will be held Saturday, March 12 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. On Saturday, March 19, at 11 a.m. “The Artist’s View” features a conversation with Connie Fox and curator Alicia Longwell. Reservations recommended. Also on view as part of Parrish Perspectives is “Brian Gaman: Vanishing Point” and “Lindsay Morris: You Are You.” Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill. Call 283-2118 for details.*



Connie Fox “Self as M.B. with Trumpet II,” 2007. Charcoal on paper. 22 x 15 inches