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Arts: Features

The Natural Thing to Do

By Moira Jeffrey

His artwork has dabbled with drugs, but Fred Tomaselli the artist is also a clean-loving dad and naturalist, discovers Moira Jeffrey



Fred Tomaselli: *Metal Destroyer*, 2004, mixed media and resin on wood, 72 x 72 inches

Fred Tomaselli and I are swapping birdwatching stories. I'm telling him about the sad fate of an American robin, blown off course to the UK and quickly snaffled by a sparrowhawk. He's telling me about the peregrine hounded out of his Brooklyn garden recently by a band of defiant sparrows.

You may have heard about Fred Tomaselli, the New York-based artist, whose exhibition, *Monsters of Paradise*, will open at the Fruitmarket Gallery tomorrow. You're most likely to picture him as a former California skate punk, whose youthful experimentation with psychedelics led him to produce beautiful hybrid paintings that include over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, and a few more organic compounds trapped beneath their complex resin surfaces.

But, as I find out when we meet, Tomaselli, at 48 an internationally-renowned artist, is as much the

contemporary version of an eccentric Victorian naturalist, an avid collector, and clean-living dad as he is a product of the counter-culture.

He talks about the "scourge" of white-powder drugs such as heroin. Doesn't drink or smoke, exercises regularly. "But I'm nobody's cop.

My work takes care of all kinds of impulses that might be destructive in my life," he laughs.

"I get to use all these impulses, but I get to rearrange their use value. I get to collect maniacally, and to fetishise drugs, but it's not so destructive as it used to be."

He cuts himself short: "Isn't that a positive spin? I hate that 'I've been through the dark side and I've come back', that talk-show fodder. I hate how we're supposed to sympathise with rich people who've abused themselves into a corner."

Tomaselli himself doesn't really do dark side; he's far too sunny. But his work - a wonderful hybrid of painting and collage that fuses the angelic vision of Blake with the latest copy of a children's toy catalogue, or creates monsters from hundreds of tiny body parts cut from books and magazines, surrounded by

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dancing butterflies - does touch on the dark side of American escapism.

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It's an ambiguous kaleidoscope of the consumer culture, psychedelic imagery, renaissance paintings and natural history. In short, these are some of the grand old American subjects: culture versus nature, life and death, utopia or pragmatic politics, pleasure versus puritanism.

Tomaselli's work grew out of the west-coast art scene, characterised by artists such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley. "Everybody was trying to expose the repressed," he says. "I guess one of the things that was most repressed in my milieu was any talk of beauty, and the sublime and that was considered sort of hippie garbage, and I was interested in poking around to see if there was anything interesting in it."

From 1989, he began to make his paintings in which the stuff he surrounded himself with, from field guides to the contents of his bathroom cabinet, found themselves into the work. "It initially just started with aspirin as signifier for drugs," he says. "It was just pills, for me whether they were pharmaceutical drugs for physiological needs or whether it was pot, they all seemed to be about changing consciousness. I was coming from this notion of the ideal of painting as a window to another reality, and this idea of losing yourself in it."

Losing yourself, he believes is one of the great pleasures and risks of American life. "When I started, it seemed like the culture of escapism, with Ronald Reagan in power at that time, seemed to be manifesting itself in some of the most troubling things that were happening in the world. With Bush, it seems that the culture of escapism has reached its most malevolent personification. I was interested not only in the pleasure of escapism, but also its dark side. It got us to some interesting and beautiful places, but it also got us into a lot of trouble."

Growing up next to Disneyland gave him a particular perspective on American escapism.

"Part of why I am so dislocated is because I saw my first waterfall at Disneyland, and seeing a real waterfall was a shock, there were no pumps or conduits running it. The impetus for loving nature came from finding out later in life that it really existed."

And his work touches on the fear, or perhaps the simple realisation, that we ourselves may be products as much as that Disney water feature. "I was always wondering whether my desires were a product of advertising or if they were in fact real."

These days, Tomaselli's desires seem pretty straightforward, if his work is far more complex than it might at first appear: encompassing both a critique of a nation stultified by Prozac and a celebration of the good old-fashioned pursuit of knowledge and pleasure. "It seems like all my hobbies eventually got into my work I guess," he smiles. "Getting high and birdwatching, going out kayaking and camping."

Fred Tomaselli, *Monsters of Paradise*, is at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, from tomorrow until October 3. The artist is in conversation with Tim Marlow on Saturday July 31, 2pm. Free. Booking advised.