

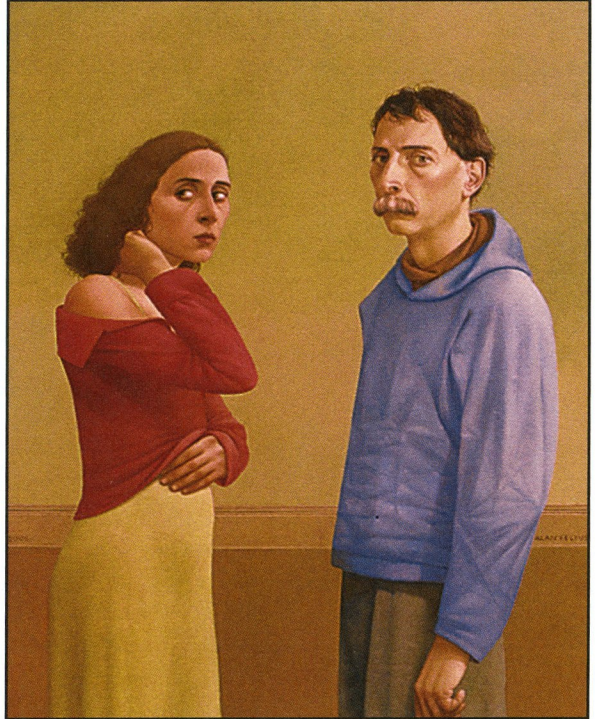
Alan Feltus, *Two Trees, Two Chairs, Two Arms*, 2002

Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York City

Alan Feltus's figures seem both reticent and freighted with psychological meaning. His characters are dark-haired and wary-eyed, and both sexes bear a family resemblance to the artist as depicted in his self-portraits. The figures are deployed, singly or in couples, in simplified settings. In *Me and Mrs. Jones* (2001) a man and a woman stand close together yet distinctly apart; their bodies turn toward each other, but they stare out at us. Their body language simultaneously suggests intimacy and estrangement. There is more fresh air in *Two Trees, Two Chairs, Two Arms* (2002), in which a solitary, contemplative young woman sits in front of a landscape. The geometric forms of the title provide a kind of scaffolding through which we view the soft forms of earth and sky. We seem to have entered a world familiar yet slightly uncanny, idealized yet pervious to the uncertainties of human relationships. While there is little in these images of historicist pastiche, Feltus's characters have a courtliness that suggests the early Renaissance, an era that is part of the air the artist breathes. Feltus, who was born in Washington, D.C., in 1943, has lived in Italy since 1987. His adopted home, Assisi, offers a constant source of inspiration—the Basilica of San Francesco, with its frescoes by Cimabue, Giotto, Piero Lorenzetti and Simone Martini. In an unusually straightforward painting, *Autumn Self-Portrait, Assisi Earthquake* (1997), he depicts himself with the rescue pass he wore as a volunteer in the aftermath of the natural disaster that devastated this beloved town. In another image from that period, *Giotto Earthquake Portrait* (1998), the grave young woman in a russet smock and turbaned scarf stands in front of a simulacrum of a Giotto fresco featuring a half-collapsed church and a group of mourners. Her long fingers reach out of frame, and she has the gravitas of the women at Christ's tomb.

The spirit of the early Renaissance permeates Feltus's work well beyond the occasional image-within-an-image quotation. Although his figures wear contemporary clothes and project modern anxieties, their emphatic, enigmatic gestures recall the stylized body language of earlier art. Mural painters had to convey meaning and emotion clearly to an audience at a distance. The conventions of physical rhetoric—codified in the ritual movements of the Christian liturgy and the mudra of classical India—provided a base language. But artists also used the spontaneous human gesture, the involuntary spasms that grip us when we are subjected to strong emotion. Giotto effectively combined the two modes, as Moshe Barash has documented, infusing “gestures that appear to be ‘conventional’ with the spirit of life, of an immediate, almost urgent, psychological reality,” while maintaining, at the same time, a “quality of emotional restraint” that carries the solemnity of ritual.¹ Feltus's choreographed gestures have some of this quality. The elaborate positioning of his figures' legs, arms and hands hints at a rich psychological subtext just out of our—and perhaps their—reach. His movement vocabulary functions in a private, secular milieu.

In a recent e-mail Feltus offered a few clues. In some images, he suggests, the represented couple could be seen as the artist as an adolescent and his mother, “private material I was interested in dealing with through the meditative process of painting,” or the artist with “an imaginary lover, like Gorky's *Self with Imaginary Wife*.”² (The Gorky painting, c. 1929, is in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and



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Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.) Arshile Gorky's (1905–48) use of the word *imaginary* suggests the woman may be a manifestation of the anima, an ideal soul-mate, an avatar of the muse. Another Gorky painting, *The Artist and His Mother* (1926–29, Whitney Museum of American Art), indicates how artists transform the raw material, not just of an actual face and body, but of a pre-existing image into the components of a painting. *The Artist and His Mother* is based on a photograph taken in Armenia in 1912, showing the boy Gorky standing next to his seated mother in a photographer's studio. Through a decade of drawings and oil sketches, Gorky subtly manipulated shapes “dissected from the photograph”³ to create a poignant memory picture. Feltus, who never paints directly from models, similarly distances himself. The only exception to the model prohibition is when he looks at himself in the mirror. Otherwise, his references are to photographs of other artists' work, especially from the early Renaissance.

The situations Feltus depicts include private encounters with the muse, an

externalization of the feminine that comes, he remarks, “from the inside.” But the woman he depicts also has a number of art historical antecedents. *Wendy* (1999) replicates the tilt of the head and hand gesture from Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*; her rapt, slightly unfocused gaze has an intensity reminiscent of the twentieth-century eccentric figurative painter John Graham. In *The Painter and His Muse* (2000) the leggy woman in a short shift has the grace of a modern dancer, but her delicate hands and etched profile suggest the Italian Renaissance. In an epilogue to a recent book on Piero della Francesca, Feltus’s painting is reproduced to illustrate the long afterlife of the Renaissance master’s influence. Inspired by Piero’s ability “to use the crystalline world of mathematical purity to describe the numinous quality in human life,” modern painters as diverse as Seurat and Balthus have explored the mysterious relationships of figures in space.⁴

In Feltus’s *Time Together* (2001) the almost naked muse sits on a simple chair. Her arms are raised as if to arrange her hair. Her legs are crossed; her feet do not touch the ground but hover, somewhat mysteriously, casting a shadow on the rumpled white material below them. She gazes out of frame, acknowledging neither the viewer nor her companion. Her profile has a classical simplicity, as if she were a maiden escaped from a Grecian urn or a Renaissance marriage portrait. The young man who sits behind her on a low bed has one leg drawn up; he holds a letter, blank side out, to his chest. The blank letter, a recurring motif, is an economical way of alluding to a breakdown in communications, or perhaps the inaccessibility of personality in even the most intimate relationships. What the relationship is between these people and what the emotional temperature in the room at this particular moment may be remain tantalizingly vague. Yet the play of shapes has its own logic. The room seems so shallow that the man and woman might be figures on a frieze. Her bent elbow overlaps his bent knee. His hand echoes the shape of his bare foot, which visually impinges on her thigh. The compositional compacting of body parts communicates intimacy, yet there is palpable emotional distance between these characters.

Feltus’s figures may emerge from his own psyche, but they become known only through the process of painting. The content of these scenes is co-existent with and developed through the act of composition. The artist explains: “I search for form and balance elements within a space that has always to relate to the edges of the canvas. What narrative there is unfolds simultaneously within this struggle to find visual meaning.” The shape of an arm may communicate estrangement or longing, but that movement is also, even primarily dictated by a visual imperative. The past is alive in these paintings: visible in the skill of the artist and in his subtle allusions to older artists. Yet Feltus’s tableaux are unique. His women and men have escaped the constraints of time to inhabit a world of formal purity and becalmed emotion. “Alan Feltus: New Paintings” can be seen at the Forum Gallery, 8069 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles (September 6–October 12, 2002), and at the Forum Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, New York City (December 12, 2002–January 18, 2003). www.forumgallery.com.

Notes

1. Moshe Barash, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 13.
2. E-mail correspondence, April 2002.
3. Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky: The Implications of Symbols* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 29.
4. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Piero della Francesca* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), p. 336.