

AMERICAN
art
COLLECTOR



The Here and Now

Nashville's Frist Art Museum celebrates 20 years of Ellen Altfest. By Gina Teichert

Imagine spending months in a forest painting a single pinecone, only to return a season later to complete the scene. Find a lichen or patch of moss and paint it at one-to-one scale. Describe a pile of gourds with such integrity they rot before your eyes. Dial in on a model and instead of painting the whole figure, focus on an interesting slice of anatomy complete with moles, veins and body hair. For Ellen Altfest, an artist known for her compact, rigorously detailed paintings, these works are as much about the passage of time as freezing it.

A survey of the artist's 20-plus year career, *Ellen Altfest: Forever* opens May 31 at the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, Tennessee, and runs through September 1. Her work "is in some ways a remedy to the times," says chief curator Mark Scala, calling it "diligent and poetic and concentrated in a way—everything that

most of us are not."

"You can see the deliberateness with which she will look at a tiny piece of the world and then put that tiny piece onto her brush," says Scala, describing Altfest's nearly physical transcription into paint. "There's something very special about that, something very much focused on the necessity of living in the here and now."

Altfest contemplates subjects like tumbleweeds and hair and bark, threaded together by technique, composition and equal reverence for every object in a scene. Her painting *Rock, Foot, Plant*, for example, gives the same hierarchy to all three. "I've always treated all my paintings as still lifes and so this is like, well, what if I construct an actual still life with a part of the human body?" says Altfest. The difference between this work and an ordinary still life? Altfest's living, breathing

1
Rock, Foot, Plant, 2009,
oil on canvas, 9 x 14"
Photo: Todd-White Art
Photography. Courtesy
White Cube.

2
Borrowed View, 2022-23,
oil on canvas, 10 x 9½".
© Ellen Altfest. Photo:
White Cube.

3
Torso, 2011, oil on
canvas, 10¼ x 13¾".
Private collection, NY.





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model stood there for the whole thing.

From the nearly clinical to the slyly comedic, Altman's renditions of the male form remain true to her vision of "anything as still life." An early review by *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz identified her ability to make "the penis a piece of furniture and the furniture erotic." Compositions like *Bent Leg*, which frames the male anatomy, and *Borrowed View*, a landscape revealed between a similar vignette of trees, offer up a sense of voyeurism, a peephole into equally benign and salacious worlds.

"I think that the whole men series was both painting the man and challenging his centrality at the same time," says Altman. "For example, *Torso*: There's a frustration because the torso is what you're looking at, but it's blocking the view," she says. Obscured works like *Three Folds* represent a culmination of the series, ushering out an era of men front and center—something Altman had become known for.

Born in New York, Altman studied at



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4
Gourds, 2006-07,
oil on canvas,
19 x 38". © Ellen
Altfest. Photo ©
Bill Orcutt, New
York. Courtesy
White Cube.



5
The Leg, 2010, oil
on canvas, 8 x 11".
Collection of the
artist.

6
Ellen Altfest.
Photo by Vincent
Dillo.

5

Cornell and Yale universities, received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2012, participated in the 55th Venice Biennale, and has done residencies from Maine to Marfa to Japan. Early shows at Bellwether Gallery in New York and Charles Saatchi's *USA Today* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London caught the eye of White Cube Gallery founder Jay Jopling.

Jopling was "entranced" by Altfest's work from the start, according to senior director of White Cube London Irene Bradbury. "At the time when we started working with her, she was also curating this great exhibition at I-20 Gallery, which I went to," says Bradbury. *Men* was a "radical and impactful exhibition" with multiple female artists responding to the male subject, she remembers.

Today Altfest toggles between live studio works and plein air painting in the forests of Georgia and Connecticut, with a focus on subjects that aren't immediately recognizable. "I feel like the paintings maybe can hold people a little bit longer. And I want them to have a certain generosity where there's a lot for them to look at, like something that would unfold over time or that you could live with," says Altfest. Bradbury adds, "In one sense they're like these incredible jewels...They've got such detail—I think Barry Schwabsky described it best, he sort of said that they are beyond perceptibility."

"When I have seen Ellen's work in the past, I've seen it as an enchanting distillation—I think of Emily Dickinson's work in the same way—that there are these monumental observations about the world that are contained within a tiny little thing," Scala explains, referencing the line of poetry that inspired the exhibition, "Forever - is composed of Nows." "It makes me ask what is a monument? Does a monument have to be big? Does it have to be a public spectacle? These are very private spectacles," says Scala.

"I think Ellen is an artist of many ages," Bradbury tells us. "She both looks back at great figures in history, and she's also very much connected to her contemporary scene in New York and beyond," Bradbury says. "She is a forever artist." ●

ELLEN ALTREST: FOREVER

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Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203 • (615) 244-3340

www.fristartmuseum.org

