

# Caio Fonseca

The artist talks to **Yvonne Lai** about the influences that shaped him, his double life and his first exhibition in Hong Kong.



**ALL IN THE FAMILY** My father [Uruguayan artist Gonzalo Fonseca] used to say: 'Your autobiography will be in your work.' I think he's right. In my work, I have all my contradictions. I'm a hermit that can work a crowd. I'm a humorous person but extremely ascetic as well. We all have contradictions, mine show up in the miracle of colours housed in fierce structure.

My parents and siblings are all artists. My father was wise enough not to become my teacher, so we didn't confuse father-and-son roles with master-and-pupil roles, but I saw what the life of an artist can be from him. It's a huge responsibility. My mum used to joke that it wouldn't kill the family to have one

dentist, something useful. But we ended up all being artists and she's very proud of that.

**SLOW AND STEADY** I grew up in New York. I left school and went to Barcelona [Spain] for five years to study under Augusto Torres, alongside my brother, Bruno. That was a very intensive Socratic method of learning figurative painting. For me, to become an artist was such an undertaking, in terms of what I thought a painter was. My father is such a towering example of integrity and excellence that, for me, it was like an Everest to climb and master. College was great for other things but not for what I wanted to learn. I was lucky to have a teacher I respected so much. My teacher was friends with [Pablo] Picasso and knew [Piet] Mondrian, so we heard all these stories. My father had studied with Augusto's father [Joaquin Torres-Garcia; the father of Constructive Universalism]. So I feel I have several generations of mentorship behind me through a connection to that long line of work. They gave me the underpinning of a great education.

There is no prescribed way to being an artist; I certainly wouldn't prescribe my way to other people. Some people burn out, others make that part of their education. Some people get gallery representation straight out of art school; people today are finding galleries while they are in art school. I ended up waiting 13 or 14 years before I had my first New York show – but from there, the Met [the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] bought two paintings. Maybe I was the tortoise, not the hare. The more I mature as an artist, the more I am painting for myself. It's great to get response from the outside world – it's always a minor miracle when someone is connected to your work, or buys a painting; but I'd be painting even if no one did.

**WONDERFUL ISOLATION** I have an interesting double life; I spend six months a year in New York and six months in a very small town in Italy, called Pietrasanta, near the coast. I've been doing it for 25 years. The knowledge that I won't be interrupted, not just for days but months, is a tremendous boon to my development. Every year I try to surpass myself and make sure I am not producing 'Caio Fonseca paintings' but something new that I believe in and that is at the forefront of my research. Everyone who has lived in a foreign country knows that being away from your language, your familiar reference points does aid the wonderful isolation that an artist feels. It's an added purity to your days. I go to

Italy to discover new ideas – those are the hardest to find in New York, or anywhere where you are diluted in your concentration. As for confidence – if you don't have it, you have to fake it. You have to go down into the studio every day, even if you don't feel you can paint. In New York, my studio work would be at 60 per cent capacity of what I'm able to achieve in Italy. But after six months of such intensity, New York is the perfect antidote to that kind of isolation.

**HEARING IN COLOUR** Music is one of my biggest influences. I've played classical piano all my life and, for the past two years, I have been studying, rather seriously, composition with a professor in New York. That has really gotten into my painting. It's not so much the rhythm of music or the shapes of instruments, but the inner workings, the counterpoints, how intervals resolve themselves, how the architecture of melody might translate.

I do not listen to music when I paint. If I put on great music, it becomes a distraction. If I put on horrible music, it's a nightmare. And everything else in the middle is an ode to mediocrity. I do play piano for a few hours in the morning and that does set the day in an abstract mode. When I paint, I need silence. It's not just for concentration; it's also that I have a strange connection between sound and space so much so that a yellow might have a higher pitch to me than another, and I need that sound-spatial quality when I work.

**HOW TO LOOK AT ART** I just spent 150 days in Pietrasanta, then flew across to Asia, landing in Hong Kong [to host an exhibition] for the first time. It's a great opportunity to let the work speak for itself, on its own terms. This is not the kind of work that needs wall text [written explanations]. What it needs is for people to spend the first minute or two just looking. It is my hope that coming to Hong Kong is a chance to show it to a fresh audience. Human beings can decipher these paintings without the use of language. They want to explain themselves. Everything there within is inter-related. If you 'travel' through the painting, you'll find that there is spontaneity and structure, interplay between the two is what I believe gives it the enduring value – which you can keep looking at, which will keep revealing things about themselves over time.

*An exhibition of new paintings by Caio Fonseca is on view until November 12 at Ben Brown Fine Arts, 3/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, tel: 2522 9600.*