

Sylvia Fein MATRIX 275 NOVEMBER 13, 2019–MARCH 1, 2020
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM • PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

In 1919, the year Sylvia Fein was born, André Breton and Philippe Soupault wrote *The Magnetic Fields*, which is considered by some (in particular, Breton himself) to be the first Surrealist work. On this, the hundredth anniversary of Surrealism and also the hundredth year of Fein's life, BAMPFA presents a survey of over half a century of her extraordinary Surrealist-inspired work.

Fein's work is small in scale, personal in theme, and refined in technique. Although she received an MFA from UC Berkeley and has lived in the Bay Area—in the East Bay city of Martinez—since the 1950s, Fein's work shares little with that of her local and regional contemporaries. Fein was never involved in Abstract Expressionism, nor was her work part of the Bay Area Figurative movement. Instead, Fein pursued a highly idiosyncratic approach that derived from her involvement with a group of artists whom she met at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and with whom she developed a unique style referred to as Magic Realism and, sometimes, as Midwest Surrealism.

The art historian Robert Cozzolino, who has written extensively about this little-known group, explains:

[They] drew on the visual language of surrealism, read psychology, studied myth, and looked to nature for meaning. Unlike the abstract expressionist artists, they asserted narrative, the visible body, and tangible objects in order to explore sexuality, identity, history, and the wonder of nature. . . . By departing from overtly political social realist or romanticized agrarian artwork that is often associated with the Midwest, they established a tradition of the absurd, magical, and introspective that persists in the region.'

The key figure in this group was Marshall Glasier, a painter who had traveled from Wisconsin to New York, where he studied with the German expatriate artist George Grosz. Upon returning to Madison, Glasier became the center of a lively community of artists, art historians, philosophers, and writers. While inspired by the expressive freedom accorded by Surrealism, they were also drawn to the highly refined techniques and quasi-naturalistic styles of the late medieval and Renaissance periods. James Watrous, an artist and art historian who was a core member of the group, became an expert on traditional European painting techniques and helped to catalyze a widespread revival of the challenging technique of egg tempera.

Sylvia Fein and her classmate John Wilde were among the few students who were accepted into this coterie of established Madison artists and professors exploring Surrealism and arcane painting techniques. Fein began working with egg tempera, which she continues to use to this day, and studied the work of Old Masters such as Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Breughel the Elder, Joachim Patinir, Carlo Crivelli, and Albrecht Dürer for clues into the artistic interface between the real and the imaginary.

The lively artistic scene in Madison was shattered by the outbreak of World War II. Fein's husband, William Scheuber, was drafted and sent overseas for three years. During this difficult period, Fein—along with many other artists in the US, such as Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and others—turned to myth as a source of meaning and wisdom in a world turned upside down. Fein's own work, however, rarely departed very far from her own personal experience and self-representation. She frequently cast herself in the guise of a mythic heroine.

Deeply troubled by the war, Fein left Wisconsin in 1944 for Ajijic, Mexico, a village on Lake Chapala, where she spent two years in intense concentration on her artistic practice. In Mexico, Fein was focused on creating works for her 1947 solo exhibition at the prestigious Perls Gallery in New York City. *Island for Cats* (1946), painted in Mexico, embodies the combination of close scrutiny of nature, emotional upheaval, and fantasy that is characteristic of her works from this period.

After the war, Fein and her husband moved to Oakland, California. She enrolled in the MFA program at UC Berkeley, where she received her degree in 1951. In part because Fein and her husband had acquired a boat and spent weeks on end sailing, Fein's paintings during this period became increasingly small, sometimes tiny in scale. She turned to Indian and Persian miniatures for inspiration, even as she continued to discover her imagery in the world of dreams and personal psychological symbolism. Many of Fein's paintings from this period also refer to subjects such as the primitive forms of the California landscape and the turbulent melancholy of the sea. In the Bay Area, Fein reconnected with the composer and musician Harry Partch, who had been in residence at the University of Wisconsin in the mid-1940s. Partch's music, like Fein's painting, balanced references to myth and legend with idiosyncratic style and personal invention.

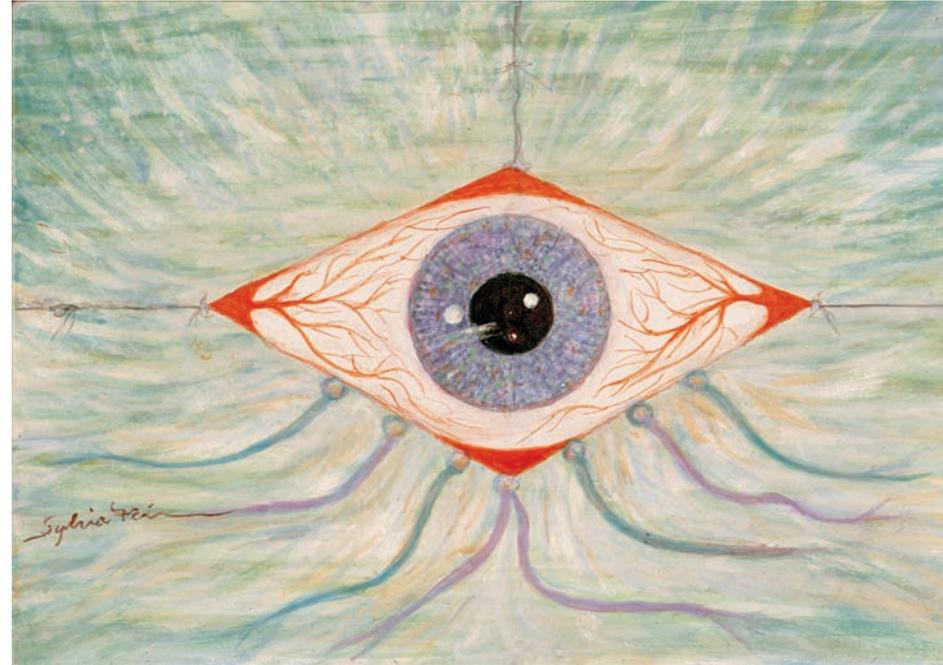
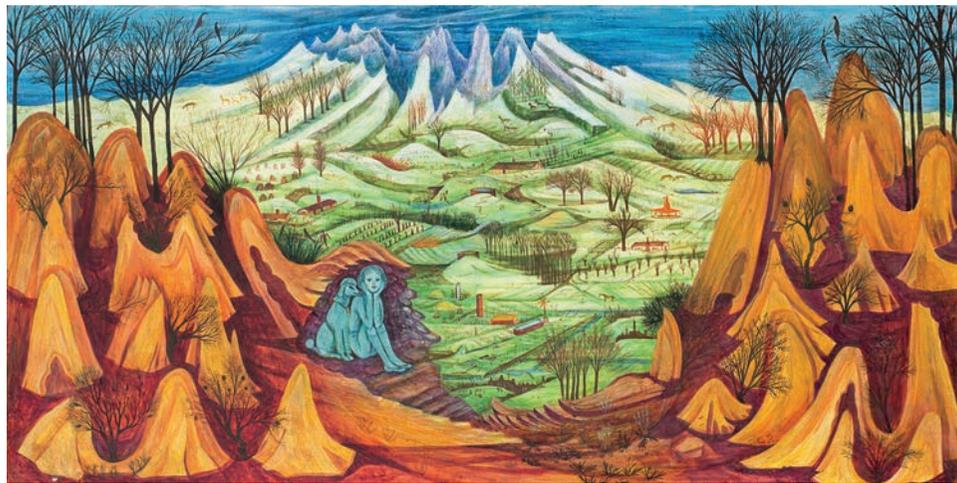
Another key inspiration for Fein beginning in the late 1940s was the art theorist Henry Schaefer-Simmern, who believed that all visual art emerged from a common set of evolutionary formal principles. Fein studied with Schaefer-Simmern, first at UC Berkeley and later at his own institute. In the early 1970s, Fein ceased painting in order to focus on writing two books based on Schaefer-Simmern's ideas: *Heidi's Horse* (1976), an analysis of her own daughter's drawings of horses, and *First Drawings: Genesis of Visual Thinking* (1993), which explores the development of visual logic in children, professional artists, and members of tribal societies.

After a thirty-year hiatus, Fein resumed painting in the early 2000s. Her art, in its new incarnation, focused on a number of key images and themes: parts of her own body, cats, disembodied eyes, the cosmos, and trees (which symbolize her husband, who passed away in 2013). Fein's works—especially her cosmic visions—capture a sensation of simultaneous vastness and microscopic dimension, of both inner and outer experience. Alternately dark and radiant, Fein's cosmoses feel organic, sentient, and not wholly benign. Yet all of her paintings suggest the artist's unceasing wonder at the richness and mystery of life and being.

Lawrence Rinder
DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR

1. Robert Cozzolino, *With Friends: Six Magic Realists 1940–1965* (Madison, WI: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison), 1–2.

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Biography

Sylvia Fein was born in 1919 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and studied painting at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions at galleries and museums including Perls Gallery, New York (1947); Feingarten Galleries, San Francisco (1957); Kunstkabinett, Frankfurt (1960); Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland (1962); Bakersfield Art Museum (2007); and Krowwork Gallery, Oakland (2014). Her work was also included in the Whitney Museum of American Art Annual Exhibitions in 1945 and 1946; *With Friends: Six Magic Realists 1940–1965*, Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin (2005); and *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Female Artists in Mexico and the United States*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2012). Fein currently lives and works in Martinez, California.

Artist's Talk

Wednesday, November 13, Noon

Artist in Conversation with Garrett Caples

Saturday, December 7, 2 p.m.

FRONT

Musical Sky Eyes, 2010

BACK

The Painting Told Me What to Do, 2012

View of the Valley, 1956

ABOVE

Kite Eye (or Eye Kite), 2006

All photos: Nicholas Pishvanov

Checklist

All works courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted.

Island for Cats

1946
Egg tempera on gesso board
14 ½ × 19 ½ in.
Collection of Bernard Friedman

Sylvia with Baby Heidi

1949
Egg tempera on gesso board
2 × 1 ½ in. (oval frame)

Reliez Valley Walnut Orchard

1955
Egg tempera on gesso board
8 × 14 in.

Five Mountains Near Red Bluff

1956
Egg tempera on gesso board
4 × 8 in.

View of the Valley

1956
Egg tempera on gesso board
12 × 24 in.
Collection of Andrew S. Teufel

Blue Sea

c. 1960
Egg tempera on gesso board
3 × 2 in.

Walnut Orchard

c. 1960
Egg tempera on gesso board
3 ¼ × 3 ¼ in.

Bleached Trees

1961
Egg tempera on gesso board
8 × 4 in.

Breakers

1965
Egg tempera on gesso board
3 × 5 ¼ in.

Birds Flying into the Face of the Storm

1965
Egg tempera on gesso board
9 × 18 in.

Shape of the Sea

1965
Egg tempera on gesso board
9 ¼ × 18 in.

Landscape with Mountain

2004
Egg tempera on gesso board
2 ⅝ × 3 ¾ in.

Cat's Eye

2005
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 × 8 in.

Ancient Frantoio Olive Tree

2005
Egg tempera on gesso board
10 × 8 in.

Kitty in the Garden

2005
Egg tempera on gesso board
7 × 5 in.

Old Pinot Noir

2005
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 ½ × 3 ⅝ in.

Two Kitties in the Garden

2005
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 × 7 in.

Kite Eye (or Eye Kite)

2006
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 × 7 in.

Chondrosium Gracile

2006
Egg tempera on gesso board
7 × 5 in.

Homage to Mucha

2007
From the series *The Faces*
(a.k.a. *Ten Faces*)
Egg tempera on gesso board
8 × 6 in.

Martinez, CA

2007
Egg tempera on gesso board
12 × 24 in.
Collection of Lynn and Ron Chiarello

Dandelion Eye

2009
Egg tempera on gesso board
4 × 4 in.

Lavender Eye in Orbit

2010
Egg tempera on gesso board
24 × 24 in.

Musical Sky Eyes

2010
Egg tempera on gesso board
24 × 20 ½ in.

Eye of the Storm

2010
Egg tempera on gesso board
20 × 24 in.

Cri de l'eau

2011
Egg tempera on gesso board
24 × 30 in.

The Painting Told Me What to Do

2012
Egg tempera on gesso board
24 × 24 in.

Beginning Over

2012
Egg tempera on gesso board
24 × 24 in.

Gone for a Swim

2016
Egg tempera on gesso board
11 × 14 ¼ in.

The Demons Down Under the Sea

2017
Egg tempera on gesso board
40 × 30 in.

Good Night

2017
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 × 7 in.

Homage to the Olive

2017
Egg tempera on gesso board
5 × 7 in.

Silent Moonlight Swim

2018
Egg tempera on gesso board
6 × 8 in.

Pastorale

Date unknown
Egg tempera on gesso board
1 ¼ × 1 in.

Tiny Blue Seascape

Date unknown
Egg tempera on gesso board
2 × 1 ½ in.

