

CLEMENTE INSIDE OUT

INTERVIEW BY: **KIM HEIRSTON**
PORTRAITS BY: **TATIJANA SHOAN**
ALL ARTWORK BY: **FRANCESCO CLEMENTE**



I DO NOT REMEMBER PRECISELY WHERE I MET FRANCESCO, OR WHEN, EXACTLY, WE MADE THE TRANSITION FROM ART WORLD ACQUAINTANCES TO FRIENDS. LIKE MANY FRIENDSHIPS, THIS ONE EVOLVED OVER A SERIES OF ENCOUNTERS—A GALLERY OPENING HERE, AN AFTER PARTY THERE, A LECTURE, A PORTRAIT SITTING. WHEREVER OUR INITIAL ENCOUNTER, I SOMEHOW FEEL AS THOUGH I HAVE KNOWN FRANCESCO FOREVER.

IN PART, THIS FEELING COMES THROUGH THE CONSTELLATION OF SELF-PORTRAITS THE ARTIST HAS GIFTED US OVER THE YEARS. FRANCESCO HAS DEPICTED HIMSELF IN PROFILE, UPSIDE DOWN, SPLIT IN TWO, AS A WOMAN, AND BURIED UNDERGROUND. AS CRITIC G. ROGER DENSON PUT IT, FRANCESCO “TURN[S] HIS MIND VIRTUALLY INSIDE OUT FOR OUR INSPECTION AND DELIGHT.” STILL, I AM NOT CERTAIN ANY OF THIS HAS MADE IT EASIER TO FULLY GRASP FRANCESCO.

I HAVE OBSERVED THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THIS COIN IN THE MANY PORTRAITS I HAVE WATCHED FRANCESCO PAINT OF OTHERS. DURING ONE SITTING, I WITNESSED HIS SUBJECT, A FRIEND AND FILMMAKER, REVEAL SIDES OF HERSELF TO FRANCESCO THAT SHE HAD NEVER REVEALED TO ME. ON ANOTHER OCCASION, I WATCHED HIM PERFECTLY CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF A SULTRY RUSSIAN BEAUTY. IN STILL ANOTHER INSTANCE, A VERY NERVOUS YOUNG LADY, THE DAUGHTER OF A CLIENT, SAT FOR HER GRADUATION PORTRAIT. ALL OF THESE WOMEN ADJUSTED AND SQUIRMED AND PRIMPED BEFORE FRANCESCO’S EYES. I HAVE FELT THAT INTENSITY TRAINED DIRECTLY ON ME.

PERHAPS MY “KNOWING” FRANCESCO STEMS FROM OUR SHARED ATTACHMENT TO ITALY AND INDIA, AN ATTACHMENT SIMILAR TO THE ONE YOU FEEL TO THE PERSON WHO GREW UP IN YOUR HOMETOWN. LIKE FRANCESCO, MONUMENTAL MOMENTS OF MY LIFE PLAYED OUT AGAINST AN ITALIAN BACKDROP. AS A STUDENT, I COMPLETED MY THESIS ON FRESCOES BY GHIRLANDAIO IN FLORENCE’S SANTA MARIA NOVELLA. I MARRIED IN CITTÀ DELLA PIEVE, A STONE’S THROW FROM PERUGINO’S BIRTHPLACE. AS AN ART ADVISOR, MY VERY FIRST CLIENT WAS A COLORFUL NEAPOLITAN. I CURATED MY FIRST EXHIBITION, AT HIS INVITATION, IN NAPLES ON THE OCCASION OF THE 20TH G7 SUMMIT. DURING MY NUMEROUS VISITS TO THE REGION, I WOULD SNEAK DOWN TO POMPEII AND HERCULANEUM. THE FRESCOES THERE—THE EROTIC ONES, IN PARTICULAR—WOULD LATER REMIND ME OF FRANCESCO’S WORK, AS WOULD THE CARVINGS I ENCOUNTERED IN THE SOUTHERN INDIAN TEMPLES FROM KHAJURAHU TO MAHABALIPURAM.

FRANCESCO ONCE SAID, “I NEVER WENT TO INDIA THINKING I WOULD DIVE INTO THE PAST; FOR ME INDIA WAS AN ALTERNATIVE CONTEMPORANEITY. IN HINDI, THE WORD ‘KAL’ REFERS TO BOTH YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW—THEY ARE JUST BRACKETS THAT SURROUND THE PRESENT MOMENT.” AT ONCE, FRANCESCO DEFINED THE COUNTY FOR ME IN A WAY THAT I COULD NEVER QUITE ARTICULATE. SOMETIMES, FRIENDSHIPS ARE BORN OUT OF A SINGLE SENTENCE.

RECENTLY, FRANCESCO ASKED ME TO HELP SELECT WATERCOLORS MADE IN INDIA FOR HIS MOST RECENT EXHIBITION, “TWO TENTS,” AT MARY BOONE GALLERY. I LEAPT AT THE CHANCE TO BE IN IS SPHERE... AGAIN.



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · US
2013–2014 · watercolor, miniature · painting/handmade paper · 12.5 x 16.25 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · HANDCUFFS
2013–2014 · watercolor, miniature · painting/handmade paper · 12.5 x 16.25 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · DORMIVEGLIA I
1998 · oil on canvas · 129.92 x 45.28 inches

AS IF: In an interview with Charlie Rose, you say, “Boredom is important; it is the origin of any good idea.” Why do you think that people today are so deathly afraid to experience boredom?

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE: Boredom is a very mysterious feeling. One longs for nothingness—and then, when you are there, it is difficult to leave boredom alone, to not to fill the void with small talk, leftover impressions, or childish fantasies. Boredom is a very serious affair, it requires great seriousness.

AS IF: You go on to say, “In painting, waiting is a very big part of the effort... Painting is not about decision-making. It is about acceptance.” Explain this.

FC: Grand failures are the substance of great art. But then, who is interested in greatness? Or in failure? The excesses of the rational mind have turned the world into a jam of small scope assignments; who has time for ideas when management is so comforting?

AS IF: Lately, so little has been written on your Italian heritage. May I explore this a bit? In your work, there is a lineage that traces back to the first century frescoes of Pompeii and Herculaneum. For a child growing up in Naples, what was your relationship to these sites? For instance, did your parents take you to Pompeii on a weekend excursion, or did you visit the site on a school field trip? How did the imagery of a world, violently frozen in time, influence you?

FC: I would go further back to pre-Roman memorabilia: to the exotic, Asiatic feel of Etruscan funerary sculptures, to Fayum portraiture on Egyptian sarcophaguses, and most of all to the Mannerist figuration of Canosa ceramics, to Magna Graecia—the syncretic, over the top America of antiquity.

AS IF: I spent a semester in Florence researching the frescoes of Ghirlandaio in Santa Maria Novella for my senior thesis. At what age did you first encounter some of your country’s national treasures, i.e., the Sistine Chapel, the frescoes of Giotto in the Arena Chapel, or the Uffizi, where you recently had an exhibition of portraits? You have mentioned Fra Angelico. Which other Italian Renaissance masters resonate with you?

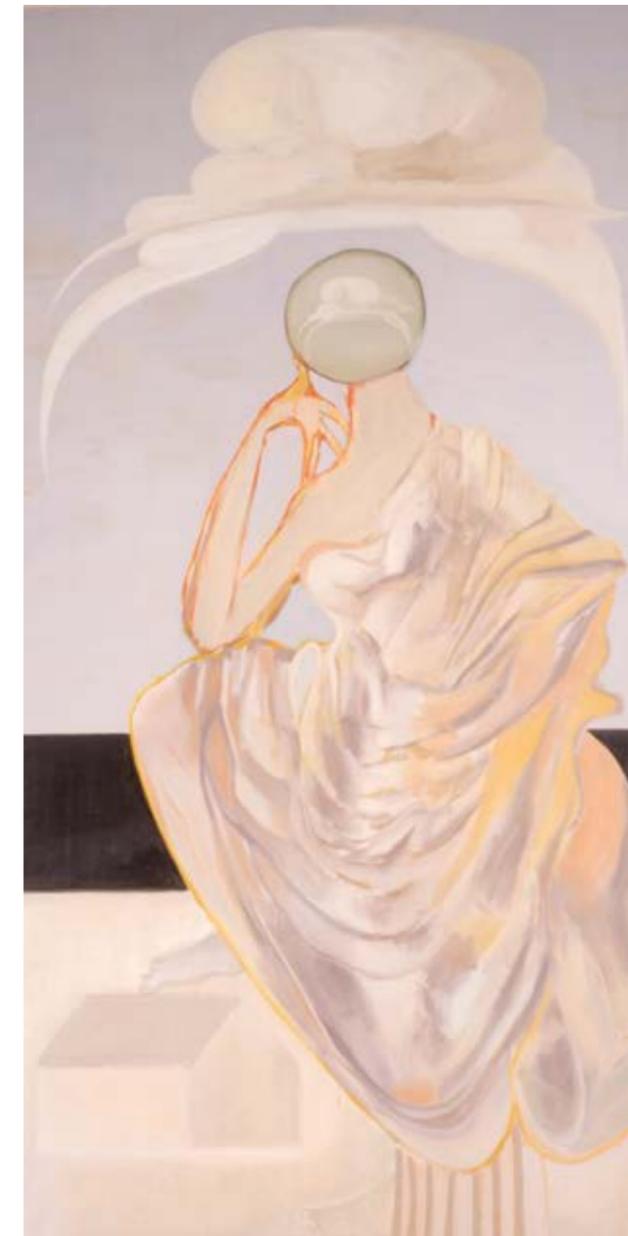
FC: Every summer my parents and I, their only, overprotected child, would travel from town to town, looking at architecture and paintings. I squeezed in the back of the car, on top of the luggage; we had a tiny Fiat 500! I found out I had an affinity with Spanish painters rather than Italians. Could I tell at such young age that I was completely cut off the reasons and sensibilities of the Renaissance, while Goya, Velasquez, and specially Zurbaran were already “modern”?



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · DORMIVEGLIA IV
1998 · oil on canvas · 129.9 x 45.3 inches

AS IF: I have to admit, when I first saw your *Two Tents* exhibition at Mary Boone, my mind went instinctively to Arte Povera artist, Mario Merz. I specifically thought of the Italian artist’s *Igloo structures*, and the questions they raise regarding materials and space, inside and outside worlds. How aware, immersed, or disinterested were you in the Arte Povera movement of the late 1960’s?

FC: Up to the moment when they realized that I had my own view, the artists of Arte Povera were very generous to me. For several years I spent every afternoon with Boetti, who had the most original mind, a kind of “musical”



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · DORMIVEGLIA V
1998 · oil on canvas · 129.9 x 45.3 inches

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mind, even richer than his work. Boetti and I came to Rome at the same time, and were seen with suspicion by the Roman artists; we didn’t share their macho “who cares about Picasso” postures. I visited Milan and Turin every two weeks to look at second-generation minimalist work, before it was bought by Panza Di Biumo. I had no money for hotels. Often enough Calzolari would get me a room to stay, or, in Turin, I would crash in Mario Merz’s apartment, after witnessing spectacular drunken fights between Mario and his artist wife Marisa, arguing about their work all night long. This was my fortunate schooling; I never went to proper art school.



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · A HISTORY OF THE HEART IN THREE RAINBOWS III
2009 · watercolor on paper · 73.1 x 147.9 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · PORTRAIT
2005 · oil on canvas · 46 x 92 inches

AS IF: With regard to your use of the self-portrait, tell us why this is so fundamental to your practice.

FC: My work expands and contracts in a non-linear fashion. This makes me singularly incompetent at my age, because I never return to the same places; I am always a beginner. This also keeps what I do alive. There is something to the expression "beginner's luck." I return to self-portraiture to check if I am still there, at the core of what unfolds.

AS IF: You once mentioned seeing a fashion show by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, and being blown away by the juxtaposition of texture. Could you tell us a bit more?

FC: She is also an artist as alive today as she has ever been! She didn't build anything, she lived through her passions! I notice that women have two strategies when they dress: "match" and "contrast." Painters do that too, when they paint. I fear I am limited by my desire for harmony, for matching, and I long to embrace and master contrast.

AS IF: Painting is sometimes dense, and almost chalky. Other times, it is fluid and color-field like. How do you choose between these two paths? Is it subject matter, or Francesco's mind state, that drives the choice of handling?

FC: But once you have embraced a subject and a reason to make something there is no choice! I can make a painting in a day, or it can take four or five years to complete something. I remain faithful to the emotional pitch of a work; that is my only compass. I dismiss formal considerations of right and wrong.

AS IF: You first visited Delhi when you were nineteen, then travelled to the mountains. What was it about India that initially drew you there?

FC: Europe had nothing to offer me. America was out of reach. India was a contemporary place that was fantastically rich, culturally, and fantastically unaware of this richness because culture was made by the poor and the poor do not keep a record of what they make.

AS IF: How did you end up at Theosophical Society in Madras? Describe a typical day there. You have spoken of the "spiritual luggage of India," saying that, "In Chennai I was exposed to esoteric texts." Which texts, in particular, most influenced you?

FC: A Theosophist, Surrealist painter, and translator of Breton gave me an introduction to the Theosophical Society. The headquarters of the Society, in Chennai, had an enormous garden, one side facing the Adyar River, another facing the sea. Alba and I had no money and a small

child, Chiara. Food cost 5 rupees a day, that's 10 cents, and the food was safe. Lodging 120 rupees, 2 dollars, for a large room with cross ventilation from the sea. In the library were my favorite texts: St John of the Cross, Plotinus, the Soundarya Lahari, and among the contemporary, René Guénon and Henri Corbin...

AS IF: How did the craft culture of India (i.e. miniatures, Kalighat painting, block printing) influence your work? You were born Catholic, presumably. I understand you do not like labels, but try... How might you label yourself?

FC: To paraphrase J. Krishnamurti: how would you label the spiritual inclinations of a flower? The Theosophical Society had raised J. Krishnamurti to be the Buddha of our time. We went to hear him speak every Christmas. He had rejected his role of Theosophist prophet, giving a memorable speech saying: "Truth is a pathless land." I believe that too.

AS IF: I am often reminded of our trip to Naples for the opening of your retrospective at the MADRE Museum in 2009. On that occasion, we all migrated to the home of your wife, Alba. I so vividly recall that endless flight of steps—to heaven. I was struck by the fact that she, and so many generations before her, had been born in

that house. The sheer sense of familial history, and the depth of her roots, was almost overwhelming. I distinctly remember thinking, then, that she was the rock to your nomad. How did you meet Alba? How long have you been together?

FC: 38 years? Hoffmansthal, in an unfinished novel, *Andreas*, describes a couple bound by taste. I read it with disbelief when I was very young. But it is true that the only bond between two people which can remain is their way to "see" things: how they set objects on a table, in which exact spot they place a chair...

Similarly, two people will have to furnish their inner life, perceive the colors of a bigger picture in the background of their emotional lives...

AS IF: Do you have siblings? What is the notion of family for you?

FC: I was an only child, inexperienced in family life—my parents were always out. I now have children and grandchildren, but it is a family without "glue": each one is his own or her own person; there is no binding measure or expectation.

AS IF: You have experienced two significant milestones recently—the marriage of your daughter, Chiara, and the passing of your father. Tell me about these two milestones. Tell me about your father.

“THE BEST ADVICE AN ARTIST CAN RECEIVE IS: ‘YOU DON’T HAVE TO OCCUPY EVERY CHAIR IN THE ROOM.’ THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE AN ARTIST MAKES IS TO THINK THAT WHAT IS EASY FOR HIM IS EASY.”

FC: My father was a person without luggage. He remained innocent and full of curiosity until the end.

AS IF: Did you know Leo Castelli? What is the definition of a great dealer or gallerist? How have certain gallerists helped or hindered your career?

FC: Leo Castelli, like my father, was a person who still measured himself by the strength of his character. These kind of men had no interest in "knowing themselves"; their goal was to act like gentlemen. I think all gallerists have

helped my narrative, particularly the gallerists who were hindering it.

AS IF: What constitutes a great studio visit? What is the best advice you have ever been given?

FC: The best advice an artist can receive is: "you don't have to occupy every chair in the room." The most common mistake an artist makes is to think that what is easy for him is easy. In a studio visit one should remember what Stendhal wrote: whoever walks into the *Stanze di Raffaello* and says, "I like them" is a fool. It is ok not to understand anything; it is ok to wait.

AS IF: In your *Made in India* interview with Salman Rushdie, he touches on the influence of Indian Modernists such as S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, and M.F. Husain. In response, you emphasize the influence derived from contemporary commercial India, such as billboard culture, along with your engagement with local Indian craftsman. This engagement, or collaboration, has always been important for you. You have collaborated with miniature artists in Orissa, signboard painters in Madras and, in the case of your recent exhibition, *Two Tents*, craftspeople in Rajasthan. In 1983, there was your famous collaboration with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol.



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · SELF PORTRAIT
1980 · oil on linen · 19.8 x 15.75 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · SELF PORTRAIT IN DISGUISE
2011 · oil on canvas · 41.75 x 31.5 inches





FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · **PRIAPEA**
1980 · fresco · 78.75 x 125.9 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · **RADICI**
1980 · fresco · 78.7 x 118 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · **SCISSORS AND BUTTERFLIES**
1999 · oil on linen · 92 x 92 inches



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · ANGELS' TENT (DETAIL)
2013–2014 · mixed media · 118 x 236 x 158 inches

Describe the genesis of this particular collaboration. How did this experience inform you and your work? Do you feel the collaborations are a success? Obviously, I am not speaking commercially.

FC: Art historians tend to group things by the way they look. Often artists relate to each other not on the basis of who they are but on the basis of who they are not. The collaborations were a success as much as they offset everyone's expectations.

AS IF: Basquiat and Warhol had actually considered Julian Schnabel for the collaboration, but Basquiat rejected the idea, saying Julian was too strong-willed. Were you aware of this?

FC: I wonder who told you this, have you not read the Warhol Diaries?

AS IF: Yes, I have read the Diaries, but ages ago. I will go back and look. I was referring to an essay written by Bruno Bischofberger.

AS IF: I know you are a huge Dylan fan. What, specifically, about the artist speaks to you? What is your favorite Dylan song?

FC: I saw Dylan perform only very late in my life, and I was somehow shocked to realize he is a musician, he stands on the stage, he plays, he moves as a musician would do. In my mind I had always perceived his work as poetry unattached to anything physical. Songs that come to mind? Too many! *Tangled Up In Blue, I Shall Be Released, Girl From the North Country...*

AS IF: In the Huffington Post review of your Rubin Museum exhibition, G. Roger Denton states, "Clemente is nothing if not the premiere watercolorist alive, and only after his virtuosity registers with some time do we shift our admiration to his ability to turn his mind virtually inside out for our inspection and delight." That's pretty cool! I am imagining an extreme asana... Do you practice yoga or meditation?

FC: I would never admit it.

AS IF: How might you define your relationship to Symbolism? Surrealism?

FC: In a funny way Symbolism is more 20th century, and Surrealism more 19th century don't you think? Surrealism posits a completely

materialistic view of the human mind, whereas Symbolism is more up to date with 20th century physics, which disputes any fixed notion of matter, and accepts that the viewer always alters the view.

AS IF: Denton also posits that there are few artists engaging (without irony) in the imagery of the "arcane." Would you agree? Are there any emerging artists, whose work you would like to bring to his attention?

FC: I think we'll have to wait a bit for such an artist to emerge. There was a time, at the dawn of the Modern Age, when the Rosacrucians, Bruno, Dee, or Fludd attempted to liberate natural science in harmony with the Sense of the Sacred. All these thinkers got either killed or contained. Protestants and the Church alike didn't like mankind to be free and here we are today, in a world from which the sacred has been exiled until further notice, and natural science run amok at the service of profit.

AS IF: After reading the biography of Steve Jobs, I have developed a healthy curiosity/appreciation for the mind-expanding



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE, JEAN-MICHAEL BASQUIAT, ANDY WARHOL · ORIGIN OF COTTON
1984 · oil on canvas with acrylic and silkscreen ink · 50 x 70 inches

capacity of drugs. I am envious of those who have embarked on wild journeys without ever venturing out of the bedroom. What are your thoughts on drugs and creativity? Have you ever painted under the influence?

FC: I once met doctor Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD. He was in favor of full liberalization of all drugs. I would not be who I am without my encounter with LSD at age 19. I do believe it should be mandatory as an introduction to how things stand, but then again whoever is in power doesn't really want reality to "dematerialize" and for mankind to be adult.

AS IF: You once told me you are a weeper. What has recently made you cry, or even just tear up?

FC: I weep at all the movies, comedies included. I wept in China when I realized that the young person I was talking to had never heard of the Beatles!

AS IF: On one hand, the art world is becoming increasingly commercialized. On another, there is an enhanced connectivity, and near democratization that is happening

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simultaneously, as a result of Internet art platforms. Any thoughts on this?

FC: The Internet is great for democracy, democracy is terrible for art.

AS IF: I looked for you on Instagram. There were about 10 Francesco Clementes! But none of them were you. Are you active user of social media?

FC: No. See, the greatest strength of technology is the apparent neutrality of it. Once technology

offers a choice it appears as a free choice but is it? If you were offered a car ride, why would you walk? I find it comforting to send an image or a word to a friend if I wake up in the middle of the night. I always reply to emails a day, or a week, or even a month later. When some famous aviator was about to fly across the Sahara for the first time, he told the local guides it would take him a day to do the crossing. The guides, who would spend a month to cover the same distance, asked the aviator, "You are crossing in one day? What are you going to do for the other 29 days?"

AS IF: I would love to think that you are addicted to Game Of Thrones (because I am). Or Labyrinth. In this new era of intelligent television, do you indulge at all?

FC: Isn't the expression "intelligent television" an oxymoron? I do indulge in adolescent states of mind, but they are rather phantasies of rebellion or jail breaks, where jail stands for our society.

AS IF: It's AS IF you could enter the mind of one great thinker, past or present, whose would it be and why?

FC: Buddha, do I need to explain why?



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE · ALBA
1997 · oil on canvas · 46 x 92 inches