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Making Art That Imitates One Man's Life

By DAVID GONZALEZ

Work and art swirl together in Ralph Fasanella's palette. A self-taught painter, he captures the color and energy of blue-collar characters in his kinetic cityscapes. They reflect his life and politics. So when somebody called his style naive, he swore he didn't know the meaning of the word.

True enough. Over 82 rough and tumble years, Mr. Fasanella has been a leftist, a labor organizer, a worker in factories and gas stations and a victim of McCarthy-era blacklisting. Those experiences have become part of his painting, which he took up 50 years ago in his spare time.

"Somebody once said I was a primitive," he said. "How can I be a primitive in an industrial society?"

What does that make him in a post-industrial one? Work and radicalism aren't the same anymore. Socialism is dead. The children of immigrants have left their old neighborhoods and the traditions of political activism that he cherished. It bugs him.

"This period, I don't know," he said. "I thought I knew where the world was going. I'm hanging in the air."

He knows where he's going tomorrow, when he will receive the Vito Marcantonio Award during a conference on "The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism" at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. Mr. Marcantonio, a charismatic political leader a half-century ago in East Harlem, was one of Mr. Fasanella's idols. He was a politician who stood up to brickbats (sometimes in the literal sense) while looking out for the little guys who fill Mr. Fasanella's paintings.

"In our culture, we don't talk about working people," said Gil Fagiani, the chairman of Italian Americans for a Multicultural United States, which sponsors the award. "Everybody's poor, middle class or rich. We don't honor working people. But that's something Ralph celebrates."

The sweeping vistas of Mr. Fasanella's more impressive pieces reflect a fascination with the sheer size of the city, where streets snake past crowded apartment buildings and towers, some playful, others ominous. The view makes you feel on top of the world, although its origins are closer to the ground.

"My old man used to pick up rags on a horse and wagon," Mr. Fasanella recalled. "I used to sit on the top and look around the world."

His father later delivered ice, a tough life which his son immortalized in "Iceman Crucified." A man hauling an ice bucket hangs on a cross that dwarfs a tenement. Tongs close in on his sides. Tacked to the cross is a sign that reads "Lest We Forget." The phrase appears often in Mr. Fasanella's work.

"If you forget your roots, you get messed up emotionally," he explained. "The freedom you have is the

freedom to destroy yourself. You start thinking you're brilliant; Charlie Rose puts you on his show and nobody understands you."

Roots give life a rhythm and order.

"You don't have the right to be neurotic if you're a worker," he said. "You got to step up to the plate every day."

Some of that ethic, he said, was lost on the successful children of immigrants who now go around talking down to the people who succeeded them in tenements, factories and kitchens. And "The Movement" changed when 60's radicals courted the common man with lots of fancy talk but little experience.

"It lost its footing among workers," he said. "It didn't have roots in the shop or the neighborhood. It had its roots in kids with excess money who did what they wanted to do. They bought pants, put holes in them and called themselves workers."

Paint flecks cover Mr. Fasanella's pants. Although he paints and lives in Ardsley, N.Y., he still comes to the city when time and health permit. He needs to, he said, to get a sense of life and politics. The faces and names have changed since his youth, he said, but not the hard-luck world of those trying to pay the rent and put food on the table.

"You know what I found out about working people?" he said. "Modern art doesn't satisfy them. There's nothing in it. Blank art. With form you have to have content. They're searching, reading, looking."

His current project is a triptych titled "End of the Cold War," an ironic take in fiery reds and yellows. Although collectors would love to see more cityscapes, Mr. Fasanella insists on making art, not money.

He faced a canvas depicting the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and pointed to buildings in one corner.

"Here's New York City," he said. "To the left."

Figures.