

SARAH WHEELER FRASSINELLI

Sarah Wheeler Frassinelli was born in 1930, a descendent of the early Connecticut settler Thomas Wheeler. Her adolescence was spent in Bridgeport and Easton with winters at Daytona Beach, Florida where she remembered attending a "happy-go-lucky, pink stucco school overlooking the beach." In contrast to her joyful childhood, at the age of 13, Frassinelli entered New York's Hospital for Special Surgery to undergo three corrective surgeries for curvature of the spine. Spending six months in a full body cast marked a period of decided isolation for her. Upon her recovery, she entered The Master's School in Dobbs Ferry, New York where her interests in painting, drawing, theater, writing and languages became evident. Indicative of a spirit that would define Frassinelli throughout her life, an art teacher at the time wrote, "Sally has unlimited creative ability and some originality which is gay and humorous rather than solemn."

It was at Sarah Lawrence College in 1947, however, that Frassinelli's focus on fine art took formal direction. Throughout her college career, she studied under Kurt Roesch, the noted, German abstract painter whose work was included in both documenta I (1955) and documenta II (1959) in Kassel, Germany. Roesch's dramatic and radical depictions of flora and fauna seem to have made an indelible mark on Frassinelli and would, in time, be referenced in her own evolving body of work. She was also instructed by Joseph Campbell, a preeminent mythologist and author, who taught at Sarah Lawrence for thirty-eight years. Campbell introduced his students to the philosophies of the psychotherapist Carl Jung, of whom Campbell was one of the leading proponents. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious asserted that many of the universal symbols used in the interpretation of dreams were also seen across various mythologies. It is worth noting that a 1920s Columbia University fellowship allowed Campbell to live and study in Paris, exposing him to such modernists as Paul Klee, a master of color theory. In turn, both Jung and Klee's influence on Frassinelli's work is immediately evident.

Shortly after graduating from Sarah Lawrence in 1951, she married Ferdinand Frassinelli, a prominent businessman with an avid interest in art, architecture, and literature. The couple's shared creative ardor manifested itself in their Black Rock residence "La Dolce Vita," named by Sarah for the Fellini film. Over three decades, the property became a three dimensional interpretation of Sarah's artistic point of view. In a characteristically structured and academic approach, she documented plans for the grounds with detailed sketches including the Greek and Latin names of the selected species. This preliminary planning and design is depicted in a collage entitled *Frassinelli Courtyard*, which illustrates the evolution of the landscape over a ten-year period.

The 1960s and early 1970s were particularly productive years for Frassinelli. She continued formal education at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and mastered a range of mediums including printmaking, oils, pastel, collage, and watercolor. Her exhibition activity was also vigorous at this time, including shows at Bridgeport's Museum of Art Science and Industry (now The Discovery Museum), Ball State Teachers College (Muncie, IN), The Society of the Four Arts (Palm Beach, FL), and Silvermine Arts Center (New Canaan, CT).

Follow Your Bliss, a phrase coined by Joseph Campbell, was the title of the artist's first posthumous exhibition held in 2013 at ARC Fine Art in Fairfield, Connecticut. The show was comprised of seven large-scale pastels, a rare oversized oil on canvas, and nearly two-dozen watercolors and collages. The featured pieces embody the spirit of Campbell's maxim while revealing the tension between joy and melancholy. The watercolors, for example, illustrate Frassinelli's dedication to filling the sheet with fanciful pattern, jubilant color and organic forms. They also incorporate almost supernatural faces and forms, referenced specifically, for example, in *Members of the Board* and more vaguely, in *The Upsidedowners*. Coupled with such text as "rain rain go away" and "keep off," these works of the early 60s seem to reflect Frassinelli's acknowledgement of life's tribulations and reference her interest in mythology and psychology.

As her work progressed, Frassinelli, like the Surrealists, continued to draw from the unconscious, her words and phrases wrapping around anthropomorphic shapes to create an intricate web of color, form, and calligraphy. This unique comingling is best evidenced in *I plan to have a lot of fun in Nineteen Hundred and 71....* In this pastel, a mythical figure reclines luxuriantly, its limbs sprouting verdant, botanical forms, while abstract, forlorn faces hover above. Brilliant hues of pink, purple, orange, green and blue cover every inch of the surface in a fantastical fashion. As with much of Frassinelli's work, the complex color palette and whimsical, yet fervid, composition conjure ideas of reality and imagination, pleasure and pain. Tucked away and preserved in portfolios for decades, these pastels still possess the vibrant palette and spirited energy of the days they were produced.

As literal manifestations of joyous pursuits, Frassinelli's collages of the period integrate travel stamps, Bergdorf Goodman labels, and orchestra tickets - all vestiges of a life well lived. A charming sketchbook of watercolors from the 1960s remains intact in which Frassinelli conceived of ideas for finished works as well as menus for one of the many elaborate evenings at "La Dolce Vita" she regularly hosted until her death in 1992.

EXHIBITIONS

Annual Art Show, Pequot Library, Southport, CT 2013

ARC Fine Art LLC, Fairfield, CT, 2013

The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, Florida

Norten Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida

Silvermine Guild Arts Center, New Canaan, CT

National Academy of Design, New York, NY

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Housatonic Community College, Bridgeport, Connecticut