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FRANTA: THE BODY AS A METAPHOR FOR HUMAN SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE

Curtis L. Carter

Franta's ten years of classical training as a painter in the art school of Brno and the Academy of Fine Art of Prague provided him with the solid painterly skills that underlie his work. Unlike many of today's artists, whose training has suffered from neglect in this area, Franta is highly skilled in draftsmanship and painting technique. He follows a well established tradition in selecting the human body as a primary theme in his art.

When he arrived in France, his contemporaries were mainly engaged in abstract art. Instead of following this trend, he chose to work in a figurative mode, emphasizing the relations of persons to nature, machine, and each other. He identified in part with the French Nouvelle Figuration group in the sixties, which was a reaction against abstract painting and included artists such as Valerio Adami, Jacques Monory, and Eduardo Arroyo.

As Franta began to paint in France in the early sixties, he quickly moved away from the realist foundation of his prior training. His move to France brought him in contact with Picasso and other modern masters whose images were not then available to art students in Czechoslovakia. Understandably there were in Franta's early

works traces of Picasso, whom he greatly admired, especially in works such as *Beaches* and *Fishermen* of 1960 and *Horses* of 1961. His *Total Strip-tease*, 1965, is reminiscent of Rouault. These early works display such characteristics as somber muted colors and strong, linear structures that recall the works of his mentors.¹ Francis Bacon's influence on Franta's uses of the human body can be seen in works such as *Mountain*, 1963, and *Shelter*, 1966. As Franta's work progresses, the linear forms remain, but the human flesh of the body appears more like carnage than the "temple of the spirit" of Christian and enlightenment ideology. By the late sixties and early seventies the human forms in Franta's paintings have become mere blobs of color in which the organs of the body begin to dissolve into indistinct masses of flesh, *Yellow Corridor*, 1969.

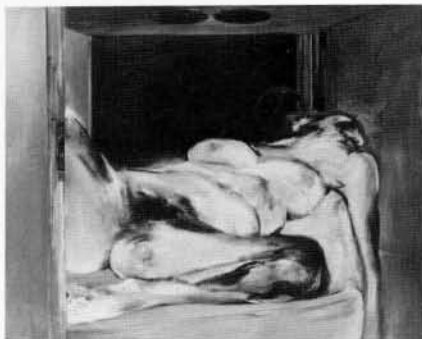
The body has been used by artists in many ways throughout the history of art. It represented an aesthetic of ideal beauty in the sculpture of ancient Greece, and has also served numerous religious and secular aims. Franta uses the body as a metaphor for exploring the anguish inflicted on human beings living in the second half of the twentieth



Fishermen, 1960, oil on canvas, 28¾ x 36¼ in.



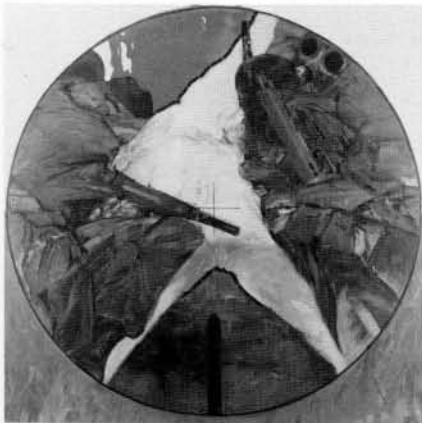
Total Strip-Tease, 1965, oil on canvas, 63¾ x 51½ in.



Shelter, 1966, oil on canvas, 51½ x 63¾ in.



Yellow Corridor, 1969, oil on canvas, 39¾ x 39¾ in.



Target, 1972, oil on canvas, 63 x 63 in.

eth century. His art is in part a search for meaning in a technology driven culture where nature, ravished by human ambition and needs, is increasingly unable to assure the conditions necessary for ecological survival. Pain, suffering, and dehumanization were the message for quite some time in Franta's art as he forged his own distinctive imagery. In *Target* of 1962, the headless torso of a disembodied human form is stretched between unmistakable khaki forms outfitted with weapons depicting military power. The scene is structured as if it were being seen through the sight of a combat rifle; intense patches of red above and below the human figure accent the violence of the assault.

Franta sees the dehumanization facing mankind in the late twentieth century in part as a consequence of the misuses of technology for exploitation and entrapment of the body.² Earlier in the century, artists such as Duchamp had advanced the notion that the machine had shaped modern consciousness.³ His painting, *Nude Descending A Stair Case*, 1912 (Philadelphia Museum of Art), as well as his uses of manufactured materials in his constructions, reflect a more favorable attitude toward technology than can be found in Franta's art. Franta is closer to the Surrealists, who viewed the machine as an intrusion and proceeded to retreat to the inner depths of the mind. He focuses on the dangers inherent in modern machines for enslavement and exploitation. *Live Transmission*, 1966, warns of the dangers of a passive human mind susceptible to the manipulative influences of television media. By intertwining human

flesh with machine parts, as in *Yellow Line*, 1970, and *Crane*, 1973, Franta evokes an apocalyptic fear suggesting that human beings will be consumed by the very machines intended to help them achieve dominion over nature. This theme continues through Franta's works of the late seventies culminating, perhaps, in *Escalator* of 1977 where he deploys a body resembling a deflated plastic figure lying "in state," its coffin being a modern machine whose colored forms dominate the subdued human form.

There exists a parallel concern with the body as a metaphor among late nineteenth-century philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, and twentieth-century authors including Walter Benjamin, Karl Jaspers, Mikhail Bakhtin, and of course Michel Foucault. Their interests are in part the basis for the current resurgence of theoretical interest in the body as a symbol of human repression, gender issues, and race. For these writers, the body serves as a powerful signifier. Schopenhauer sees in the body the nemesis of an impossible dilemma of existence, that is, an irreconcilable clash between the world of will, which we experience from inside the body, and the body functioning as a representation of the self in the world.⁴ From inside, the body is driven by its own subjective needs and aspirations, while from outside it is perceived as an object to be exploited for the purposes of others. For Nietzsche, the human body is the root of all human culture and the source of whatever truth can be discovered including that which is to be found in art.⁵ The body, con-

sisting essentially of biological powers including thought, thus dictates the ways in which we structure and interact with the external world. Both Benjamin and Bakhtin find the human body a useful symbol of their own revolutionary philosophies which were designed to awaken humanity from its fallen state.⁶

Franta himself is keenly interested in the philosophical. He views his art in part as a philosophical reflection on the condition of mankind.⁷ Perhaps Franta's visual representations of the body most closely parallel the thoughts of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Writing in the second half of this century, he portrays the body as the object of power and also the actualizer of power relations.⁸ According to Foucault, machines, as well as institutions of modern society including jails, hospitals, even families, function to exercise power over the human body. Franta's images, particularly many of those executed between 1959 and the mid-eighties, poignantly visualize the situation described by Foucault.

Given the widespread attempts to see in the human body a symbol of the struggles of modern man with the world, it is not surprising to find the body so prominent in the images of a contemporary artist such as Franta. The crisis of which Franta attempts to speak through his paintings has been put simply into these words by the philosopher Jaspers in his book, *Man in the Modern Age*:

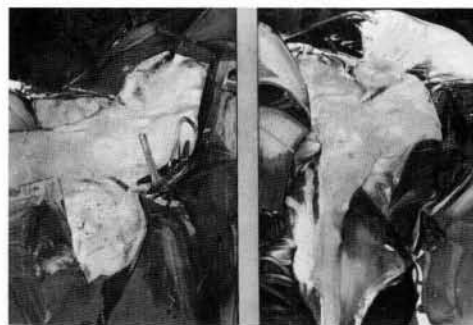
... there has grown contemporaneously with its fantastic success an awareness of imminent ruin tantamount to a dread of the approaching end of all that

*makes life worth living... The dread of life attaches itself to the body.*⁹

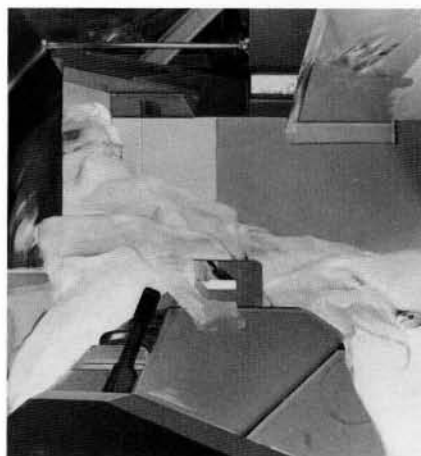
Beginning around 1978 with such works as *Birth*, Franta's work undergoes a dramatic transformation. Previously the body had been a symbol of human suffering and domination by machines. Along the lines called for in Foucault's writings, and also implicit in Jaspers' views, the body now expresses resistance and celebrates life. Even the machines that he previously represented as being oppressive are more brightly colored and less ominous. *Oasis* 1978-80 and *Raid* of 1982 reflect this change. More important are the changes in his depictions of the human figure. From this period on to the present, the images are predominantly of black Africans and occasionally black Americans in Harlem. Communication and relationships replace the previous isolation of bodies and their parts, as in *Messenger* of 1988 (Cat. no. 14). When a single figure is featured, it appears more in harmony with the surroundings rather than alienated as before.

Nature frequently, but not always, supplies the settings for these new works. The environments depicted in Franta's works have expanded to include desert, tropical, and urban settings from burnt African landscapes to the New York subway and Grand Central station. Franta's subject matter includes occasional images of wild beasts of Africa such as water buffalo and wild dogs.

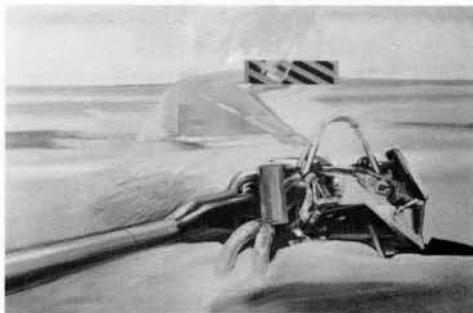
The introduction of sculpture, as represented in the Haggerty Museum exhibition by *Sitting Woman* and the colossal male figure *The Eighth Day* of 1991,



Yellow Line, 1970, oil on canvas, 102 3/4 x 63 3/4 in.



Escalator, 1977, oil on canvas, 77 1/2 x 68 7/8 in.



Raid, 1982, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 118 1/8 in.

extend Franta's scope to a three dimensional medium. The more than life size scale of *The Eighth Day* offers a dramatic celebration of the human figure as a symbol of hope. In its battle scarred forms, it affirms the priority of the human spirit over manipulative power relations that so often tend to dominate human relations in the late twentieth century.

It is worth considering that some of these changes in Franta's art have benefited significantly from the transcultural immersion that he had undergone while becoming involved with the peoples of Africa encountered during his travels there. These experiences appear to have provided for him a spiritual perspective that had eluded him in his transition from Eastern to Western Europe. The new work employs the human figure to express hope for the future rather than the notion of alienation, found in his earlier paintings. It is considerably more life affirming.

The images of Franta's recent work are powerful and dramatic as were the earlier works, and they maintain a critical social perspective. The critique is now addressed more openly to issues concerning the exterior world rather than to the anguish of the soul. Along with the positive depictions of relationships among African people, Franta shows the destruction of the African desert and the environmental catastrophe that such mindless acts will entail for the future of people living there. He also refers to the urban homeless, *Homeless* (cat. no. 15), and to the plight of people living in Harlem. Differences in perspective found in Franta's current work can be summed up in these words of Jaspers:

*The first sign of awakening circumspection in the individual is that he will show a new way of holding himself towards the world.*¹⁰

NOTES

1. Bernard Noël, *Franta: Paintings and Works on Paper* (Washington, D.C., MAGE Publishers, 1986), 38-40.
2. The body and technology are integrally connected in studies such as Alice Jardine and Michel Feher's, "Of Bodies and Technologies," in *Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987) 159-172.
3. Walter Benjamin refers to Duchamp's views on the influence of machines in "The Age of Machines." See Margo Lovejoy, *Post Modern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992) 57, 58.
4. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2. See also Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990), 153-172.
5. Eagleton, draws together various sources from Nietzsche's writings on this point, 234-261.
6. Eagleton, 316-340.
7. Conversation with the artist, Milwaukee, September, 1991.
8. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Countermemory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1977), 148.
9. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul, (Garden City, New York, 1957), 62.
10. Jaspers, 195, 196.