





IN THE
STUDIO

CAIO FONSECA

AT THE PEAK OF HIS
POWERS, THE ABSTRACT
PAINTER STRIKES OUT
IN A NEW DIRECTION
FOR HIS LATEST SHOW

BY SCOTT INDRISEK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LESLIE HASSLER

“FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AGES, I did a lot of bad paintings this summer,” says Caio Fonseca. It’s a startling declaration coming from a 52-year-old artist who is otherwise so confident in his practice. Those “bad” works—as well as the related “good” ones, which will be in his fifth solo exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery, in New York, opening March 29—were prompted in part by a studio visit last year from a fellow painter, who gave Fonseca some tough love. “‘Caio, we’ve seen this, we understand this, you do this so well—stop!’” Fonseca says the friend told him. “It was just like a kick in the pants.”

An informal retrospective of Fonseca’s 30-year career, during which he developed the familiar style that he now seeks to reinvigorate, fills the expansive loft in Manhattan’s East Village where the painter spends most of the year. Stepping from the elevator into the former ballet studio, visitors are confronted with a wall of traditional still lifes and portraits, among them oil studies Fonseca completed in the 1980s. The rest of the apartment presents a well-curated display of his colorful and playful abstractions from the ’90s and aughts. Most of these he created using his signature technique: first laying down swaths of color, next applying a mask of white or occasionally yellow and other colors that leaves uncovered an assortment of “floating forms” to dance across the canvas, then covering the whole in wax. “I put down

IN THE STUDIO



everything that would be contained in the possibility of a painting," he says, "and then I cover up 90 percent of it and leave behind the painting."

Fonseca has a refreshingly romantic relationship with the medium. He rhapsodizes about the "magical activation" a finished painting possesses and praises the concrete qualities of an artwork as object, often running his hand over its surface. This freedom from art-school conceptualism may stem from his background.

He was raised in the West Village, where his father, the Uruguayan sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca, kept a stone-working studio (the same workspace in which Daniel Chester French carved the statue for the Lincoln Monument). "Having a father like I had, I grew up with the proximity to what an artist's life is," Fonseca says. "It wasn't exotic, it was a known possibility in life—there are people who are in their studios all day!"

As a teenager he decided to forgo a college degree in favor of practicing his craft. He painted for 15 years in Europe and South America, including five years in Barcelona studying with Augusto Torres—who also instructed his late brother, the artist Bruno Fonseca—before making his solo debut in the States. "I lived on nothing, for nothing, and I didn't notice," he recalls. "It cost nothing to live in Barcelona in 1978. I did whatever I could until I began showing, much less selling. I don't think I ever signed a painting until well into my 30s. It's just something that

didn't occur to me, to think of it as a finished thing to sign." From Spain, Caio moved to Uruguay, where he lived and worked rent-free in the caretaker's quarters of what he describes as an "abandoned pre-Columbian art museum with all the pieces still in it—looking back, it was out of Gabriel García Márquez." Next he spent several years in Pietrasanta, Italy, and then Paris, where he began to more fully develop an abstract style. "It was there that I began looking at the canvas as opposed to a model," he says. "It was the first time I got that activation of left to right movement, one thing leading to the next, mimicking the way the eye links forms as it traverses a canvas."

The years of training, practice, and travel culminated in what might have appeared to be overnight success in the U.S. Fonseca's first New York show, at Charles Cowles's SoHo space in 1993, resulted in the purchase of two works by the Metropolitan Museum. His market has expanded steadily ever since. In 2001 the Whitney bought a painting, and in 2005 the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased three for its permanent collection. In 2003 the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, in Spain, staged a major solo exhibition of his work, which was followed the next year by one at the Corcoran, in Washington, D.C. At Kasmin, Fonseca's canvases bring between \$22,000 and \$175,000; his pieces rarely come up at auction. "In terms of my market, I just feel very lucky," he says, noting that, with the exception of 2008, he hasn't been much affected

A view of Fonseca's New York loft studio. "I grew up with the proximity to what an artist's life is," he says. "It wasn't exotic, it was a known possibility in life—there are people who are in their studios all day!"

IN THE STUDIO

by the global recession. “Dealers have wanted to raise my prices, and I’ve kept them steady—just because I wanted things to feel solid, not like a lark.”

In the East Village loft, Fonseca’s primary studio space is a cavernous room with paint-splattered hardwood floors. It’s uncluttered, with rows of Golden-brand acrylic paints arrayed on shelves in one corner. The pieces on the walls are mostly complete. He began work on them not long after his friend’s visit last winter, when he awoke at four o’clock in the morning struck by sudden inspiration and completed a small canvas that still leans against one wall of the studio. Its vertical black-and-white forms, augmented by lines of red and yellow, formed a blueprint for the later compositions.

These represent a marked shift in Fonseca’s vision. The majority of the larger pieces are chiefly black and white

Right: *Pietrasanta P09.18*, 2009, a gouache on paper named for the Italian town where Fonseca spends part of each year. Below: Recent canvases in Fonseca’s New York studio.



but, as he puts it, “pregnant with the suggestion of a lot of color.” A few smaller canvases and some works on paper deploy similar forms in bright blue or red. Most strikingly, he has decided to do away with the distinction between back- and foreground. In some ways the paintings resemble details of earlier works blown up and with a new density. There’s less breathing room in the canvas and new visual associations—the shapes occasionally suggest an unreadable abstract alphabet. (Fonseca lightly scoffs at other interpretations: roads or, perhaps, pianos, like the one in a neighboring room where he plays each morning and studies musical composition.) The delineation of the vertical forms is sharp but leaves room for human error. Fonseca, who has always worked without an assistant, paints by hand and never tapes off the forms he outlines. Bumpy, imperfect lines of molding paste cut from left to right, a backing grid based on the golden section, which ensures that “order and spontaneity are at play.”

“I don’t want the painting to just be a great graphic idea,” he says. “It has to survive on so many different levels. It has to have a physical life; I don’t want it to become a static thing.” Whereas the bulk of his previous canvases are horizontally oriented, suggesting a left-to-right reading—quite a bit, as many have noted, like following musical notation—these new paintings are all vertical rectangles or squares. Fonseca has also largely forsworn his earlier practice of marring his surfaces with a wild variety of instruments, everything from children’s Play-Doh tools to pizza cutters. “One of the big differences is the purity of these paintings—there’s very little leftover room for embellishments or adornments,” he says. “All of that felt superfluous. I’ve had to discard a lot of my habits, things that have always worked well for me but don’t have a place in this language.”

Fonseca completed the paintings in both New York and Pietrasanta, where he spends around five months of each year. The importance of the latter studio is more logistical than aesthetic. The Tuscan light, he says with a laugh, doesn’t have any particular effect on his compositions. But the secluded location enables him to work with minimal interruption for months on end. “I do think being away from the United States of America” has an influence, he says. “Speaking a different language is already an abstract thing. You can say ‘bread’ or ‘thigh,’ and it doesn’t have all the charge of ‘thigh’ in English. I live there alone, playing



IN THE STUDIO



Fifth Street C11.20, 2011. More than seven feet high, this mixed media on canvas is among the largest works in Fonseca's new series.

music all morning; it's a very abstract part of your brain. People say to me, 'How can you spend five months in a room alone?' But painting is not a solitary sport. If I put a brushstroke down, then the painting responds. It's like a chess game. Music, too—you play a chord, it's a dialogue. That's why it's doable." Of course, over the past three years, he hasn't been completely alone in Tuscany. He's allowed a young fan and documentarian, Michael Gregory, to shoot hundreds of hours of his working practice, which became the film *Painter: Caio Fonseca*, debuting in New York this spring.

At the time of our visit, only a few people had seen the

fruit of Fonseca's recent creative turn. The artist himself says that at the moment he's both a "spectator and so-called author" of the works. "On the surface a good one and a bad one are going to look very similar in many ways, but they really aren't, to my eye," he says. "Figuring out why is the self-training process here. This is about really trying to have the nerve and the ability to execute with fluency in this language that I am both inventing and trying to learn at the same time. And it's my major responsibility to believe in them, not—God forbid—to produce 'Caio Fonsecas.' I want to produce paintings that I believe in." 田