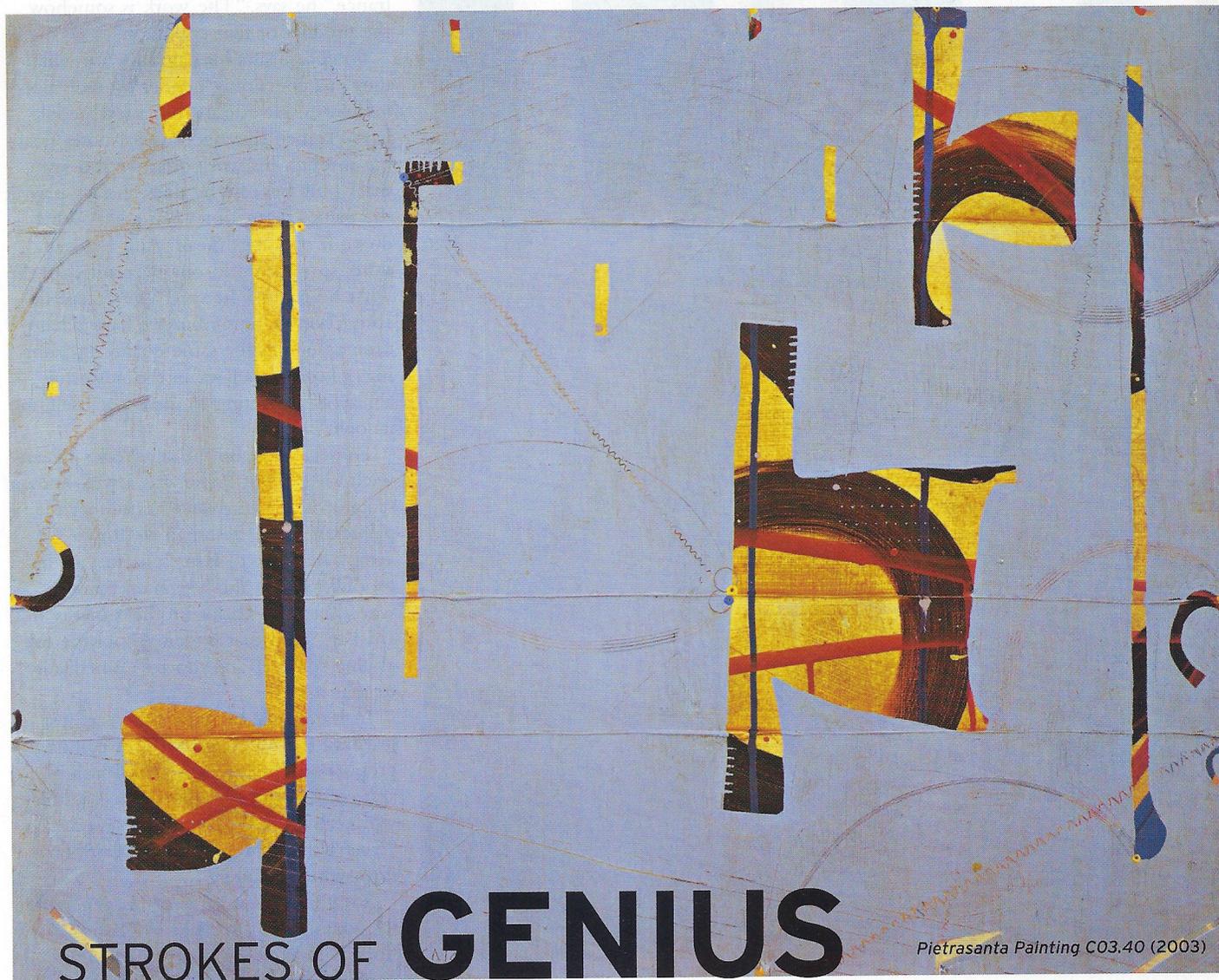


# Culture Watch

THE STATE OF THE ARTS AROUND THE WORLD



## STROKES OF GENIUS

*Pietrasanta Painting C03.40 (2003)*

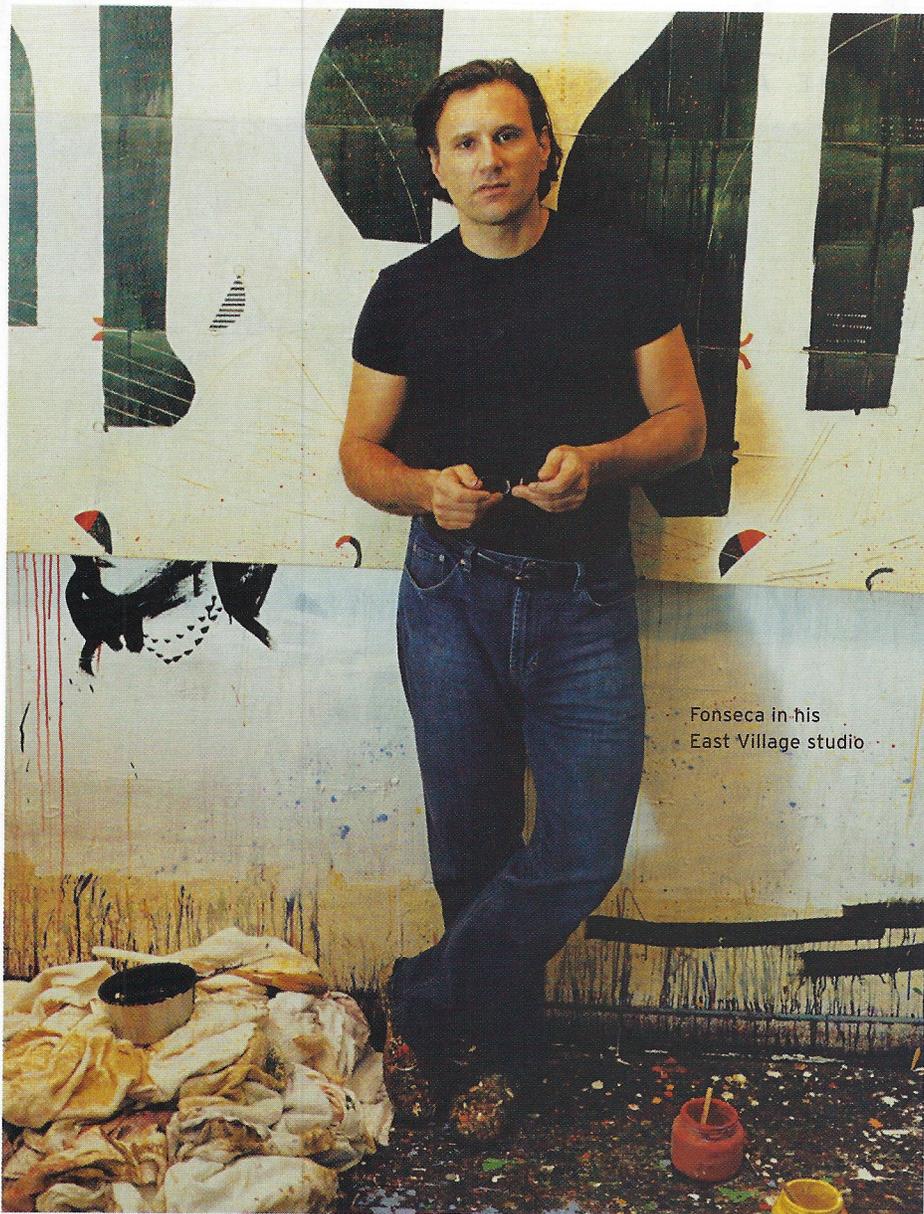
Abstract painter Caio Fonseca gets his first major museum exhibition in America.

**C**AIO FONSECA'S STUDIO IN HIS SPACIOUS MANHATTAN apartment would on most occasions be in total disarray. But on this sunny afternoon, as his studio manager helps him prepare for his upcoming show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., more than 30 of his vibrant abstract paintings are hung in perfect chronological alignment on the walls. His messy painterly touches have been hidden away.

"For the first time," says the artist, at 45 years old boyishly handsome and dressed in a blue shirt, khaki shorts, and paint-splattered shoes, "I have the chance to examine a great deal of

my work together in one place. To see the stages I've passed through. For instance, I see the germ of an idea I explored in my twenties surfacing in another guise ten years later. I have been planting seeds without being aware of it."

Fonseca has been showing at major galleries, like Paul Kasmin and Knoedler, for more than a decade. The Metropolitan Museum of Art even bought a Fonseca from his 1993 debut show, and a 1998 exhibit sold out before it even opened. The Whitney Museum, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston have all collected his pieces. In 2003 he had a major show at the prestigious Institute of Modern Art



Fonseca in his East Village studio

in Valencia, Spain. The Corcoran Gallery show, opening October 9, is really his first major museum exhibition in America.

"Rich, beautiful, and profound" is how Jacquelyn Serwer, chief curator at the Corcoran, describes his work. "He paints in the tradition of artists like Miró, Klee, and Rothko. I love how his forms mysteriously relate to one another."

Fonseca's universe is replete with geometric and biomorphic shapes, calligraphy, zigzags, and playful squiggles. Some pieces suggest Matisse's cutouts; others bring to mind the whimsy of Klee and Miró; still

others explore the relationship between music and painting, à la Kandinsky and Mondrian, creating works that seem to dance. In the end, though, he remains singularly himself.

Fonseca spends anywhere from a few days to weeks on a painting. He begins by drawing lines, in charcoal, on a blank surface. After that, he layers the canvas with various tones of paint. Next he begins carving shapes out of the paint by scratching thin, barely visible lines across the surface with all manner of strange dental, cooking, and piano-tuning imple-

ments that he has collected over the years. "When I'm painting, I'm completely absorbed. I almost feel like I am in a trance," he says. "The work is somehow the product of that condition."

Fonseca insists his paintings are what they are, containing neither symbols nor references. He admits that a few people have claimed they see musical notes floating through his works, but he also says that's only because he does, in fact, play the piano. "Sometimes I'm asked, What do your paintings mean? And I always think to myself, No one ever asked Bach what he meant," he says. "We accept the abstraction of music but we have a hard time accepting the same quality in painting. I strongly believe in the powerful ability of a painting to speak for itself, in its own language."

Fonseca grew up in New York's Greenwich Village. His father was a well-known sculptor in Uruguay, and his mother is a painter. While a freshman at Brown University, he went to Barcelona to visit his brother, who is also a painter. Fonseca was so taken with his brother's life as an artist in Spain that he left school the following summer and moved immediately to join him.

In Barcelona, he spent ten years just learning the building blocks of painting: proportion, rhythm, tonal relationships, and color. "I felt completely free. I didn't worry about the art world," Fonseca says. "I can't think of a better prescription for a young painter."

So while other artists of his generation were scrambling to make a splash in New York City, Fonseca chose to live alone in Spain and later in Italy, where he now resides four or five months a year. Amid the Renaissance, Spanish, and Gothic masterpieces, he learned his craft by drawing and painting still lifes and portraits. The Prado became his university.

"I wanted to paint the absolute painting. Now I'm happy to have each painting reflect a part of that vision," he says. "I'm very lucky that the thing my soul most requires is to fulfill that responsibility." Seated at the piano, he bows his head and begins to play a piece by Bach. His fingers begin creating, this time, beautiful sounds. **VALERIE GLADSTONE**