

## An Artist's Way

In *Vanity Fair's* recent profile of painter Caio Fonseca, his brother-in-law, writer Martin Amis aptly described the artistic Fonseca family as "glamorous in the old, true sense—very beautiful and equally talented." Fonseca is a classically trained pianist who speaks French, Spanish and Italian. Having spent his 20's in Europe intensively studying his craft, training for five years in Spain with Augusto Torres, son of Joaquin Torres-Garcia, a pioneer of modernism, Fonseca now splits his time between Italy and New York City.

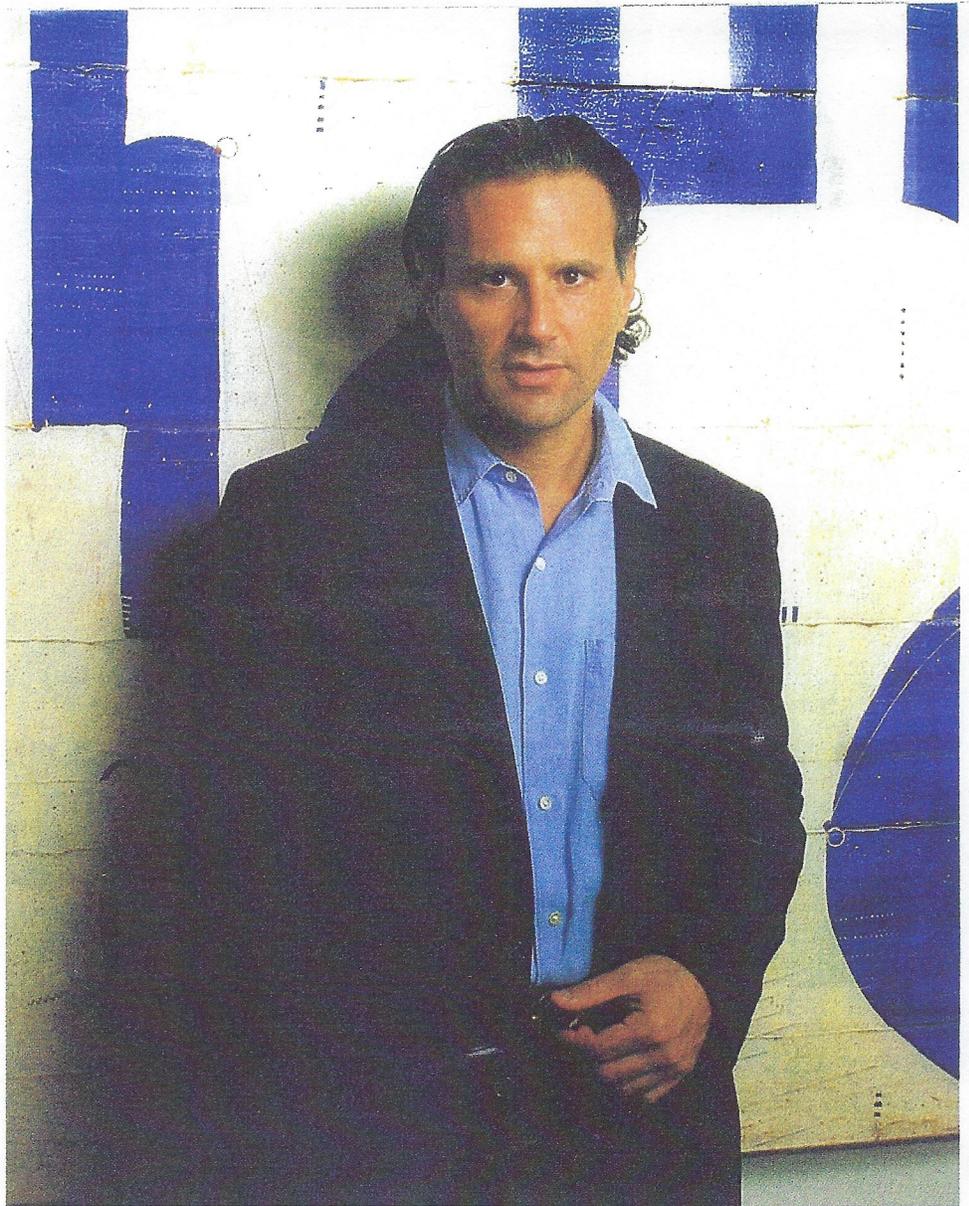
His paintings are displayed in New York's Whitney and Metropolitan museums as well as in the Smithsonian and the Houston Museum of Fine Art. On the eve of the opening of his first solo exhibition in the United States at the Corcoran Gallery of Art (on exhibit until February 14), Caio Fonseca sat down with *Washington Life's* editor in chief, Nancy Bagley to talk about his life and his work.

**Washington Life:** What is your artistic process? Do you visualize or conceptualize a painting before you begin, or do you prepare the foundation and let it lead to where each layer takes you?

**Caio Fonseca:** To break it down to the practical, it involves things as simple as deciding on the size of the painting and beginning to draw. What's most curious about the way that I work is that I begin putting down a color composition of related material and then work backwards covering it in a layering process in order to leave behind forms. I have to add something to subtract it, and in the first half of the work, I lay down the potential that a future painting might have to draw from in the second phase. It's almost like the cliché of a sculptor eliminating stones to find the piece.

**WL:** What do you want to impress upon people through your art?

**CF:** I've chosen to speak with paint and not writing, not film, nor German, ect. What I have to say is very idiomatic to the potential of paint to speak in its own language. If I play a Bach piece for someone they might like it but they would never say, "That was beautiful but what does it mean?" We seem to agree that music is capable of speaking for itself and a helpful invitation to my work might be to allow yourself to listen to the painting in that way.



Caio Fonseca at the Corcoran Gallery of Art

**WL:** You come from a family of artists, so it seems almost pre-determined that you would express yourself creatively. If you were not an artist or a musician, what do you think you would be?

**CF:** That's unfair to eliminate those two possibilities. What else might I have become? I would have to be a different person because I am a strange combination. I can function in the real world but I am much happier out of it. So, it's hard to say what I would be and still be me. Hmm, mid-level management comes to mind. [laughs]

**WL:** How did your father, a sculptor, influence your work?

**CF:** My father had the wisdom not to teach us directly. Father, son, and master are all very different relationships. My father is such a towering example of integrity, which was a benevolent form of pressure that my brother and I both felt. I think my father's abhorrence of mediocrity was a great sort of fuel. He used to say, "If you strive to be

excellent, you'll be very good. If you strive to be very good, you will be poor" and so on. He was also an example of what an artist's life is like on a day-to-day basis, so it was not alien to us. Our father was the kind of artist that for the last ten years of his life checked out from even exhibiting, [because] he said he wanted time. I have the privilege of arranging a massive retrospective of his work at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in a few years. He was a supreme artist and you will hear about him in due course.

**WL:** How has sculpture affected your painting?

**CF:** I've done sculpture and worked with all kind of stone and wood, [but] I am firmly convinced that I feel the two dimensions of painting, even with its ambiguity and spatial relationships. Nothing I can do in sculpture would supersede what I want to do with painting, except for that interesting relationship of removing things. And maybe that is the link between my painting and sculpture.

**ZL:** You said your father has a lot of integrity. What is integrity to you?

**F:** Integrity is following your work to its ultimate limits. In his case, I use the word integrity because I abandoned everything else for that cause, including the quest for renown and all other goals. It's also the quality of the work, the difficulty of executing it and the physical integrity of exertion and living alone on a hilltop.

**ZL:** It seems Pietrasanta, Italy, where you spend half the year painting, is a refuge for you—solitude away from the commercial and frenetic world of New York. What is about Tuscany that inspires you, and do you see a difference in the work that you complete in Italy from the paintings you do in New York?

**F:** Well, I've been going to Italy for twenty years [consecutively] I love being in a small town as an antidote to the big city of New York and I'm not so interested in the middle ground. The phone doesn't ring, which is a luxury. And to have four or five consecutive months of studio time is inimitable. I'm an all or nothing person, so much so that I can't handle mundane details in the morning and do my best work in the afternoon. I can do either but can't do them together. I used to say that my work from Italy is no different from New York, but I think inevitably palette and mood creep into the painting, but not automatically.

**ZL:** What have you learned in Europe that you couldn't learn here?

**F:** I was away from my country and my language for such a long period of time. From age 19 to 32 years old] [But] it gave me an incubator to study in, and I think it liberated me from the need to be original and the self-inflicted pressure to exhibit immediately and have something neo or post or some statement to make at 21 years old. I don't see how that [pressure] isn't an inhibition to learning who you are. I think you have to form yourself as much as possible in your early years.

**ZL:** You once said, "Ultimately our work is to understand ourselves." And that you are the kind of person who likes to look under the surface. What have you learned about yourself through your painting that you did not know a year ago or five years ago?

**F:** One thing I have learned is that I am not trying to express Caio Fonseca, and how I am feeling, as any artists legitimately do. Ultimately, our goal is to understand ourselves, not just our personalities, but the very nature of form and the complex set of circumstances that make up an individual. I

compare it to a young painter confronted with a still life, it's such a complex plethora of visual information and shadows. But over many years, you begin to understand and reduce these things to irreducible elements, if that makes any sense. Then try to imagine it projected on to an individual with all its complexities, and you begin to learn what is essential. In the last 26 years, I have learned that it's not just about becoming a better painter, but it has to do with understanding the nature of a human being.

on that. The cheap answer would be I'd love to own the painting I'm trying to paint. That belongs in a Hallmark card.

**WL:** When you view other artists' work what qualities do you most enjoy?

**CF:** Other living artists?

**WL:** Living or not.

**CF:** Well, the living ones, I most like the fact that they are living—their breath of life. No, seriously it's rare for me to embrace the whole work of an artist. In some artists, I admire a sense of proportion, in others, a sense of color.

**WL:** What are the qualities you most admire in yourself?

**CF:** When I was a kid and there was a block of ice on the street—I kicked it once and then I kicked it again and it got smaller. Then I just decided I was going to kick it until it disappeared. I always remembered that, I don't know why? I think one quality that has been a great aid to me is that when I decide something I stick with it and I pursue it to its conclusion.

**WL:** Is that stubbornness or conviction?

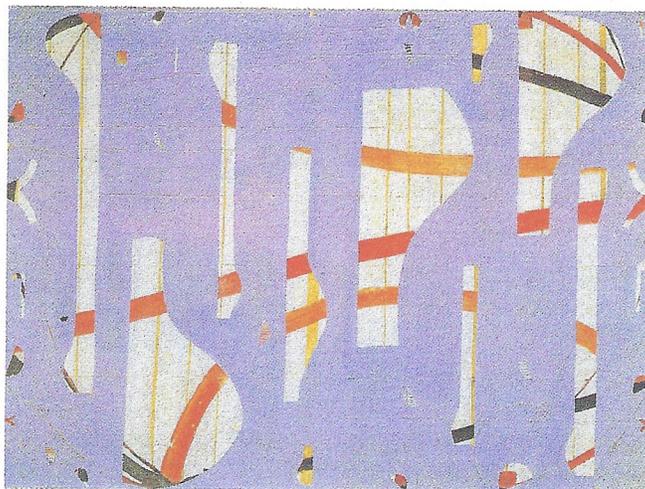
**CF:** No, I don't have a Bush-istic stubbornness. [laughs] The minor quality of mine that I most enjoy, is turning a dull situation, seeing the humor in it and just skirting the border of inappropriateness without ever, ever going beyond it.

**WL:** What qualities do you most admire in others?

**CF:** Mental agility, with a pinch of goodness, humor and smarts. Throw that together and...

**WL:** How do you measure success?

**CF:** There are different ways of answering the question but to me the whole question about success revolves around how successful the work is. Just recently, I began thinking about this, as my work goes out into the world—divorced from my personality. I think the kind of success that I'm after might be in a painting's autonomy, and its ability to speak for itself. I am more ambitious for my work than for myself. The more mundane forms of success and notoriety can all be enjoyed in their just place. But you better be in very good health artistically. When I come back from a few months in Italy, I can enjoy and handle a couple months of all this stuff. So I would say that success for me would be that the painting speaks for itself. Then the painter can stop talking. □



(Top) Fifth Street Painting C04.13, 2004  
(Bottom) Pietrasanta Painting C01.20, 2001,

Photos by Zaidman/Fremont

Painting is a vehicle for understanding the nature of forms of which we are one.

**WL:** Why is now the right time for your first national museum show in the United States?

**CF:** The timing was right a few years ago but they didn't call me... no, just kidding. I think events like a Corcoran opening make you understand milestones with a certain hindsight and the things you think should come earlier you realize came at just the right time. It's a miracle that events like a museum taking interest should occur when I believe I'm at a very strong moment in my work.

**WL:** If you could have any painting in the world... which one would it be?

**CF:** Hmm...I'm gonna have to get back to you