



# CORNELIA FOSS

## RE-EXAMINING REPRESENTATION

**C**ornelia Foss (b. 1931) has been making art for more than 60 years, ranging from monumentally sized oils on canvas to intimate watercolors on paper. Most depict beaches and landscapes in the Hamptons, the garden of her Long Island home, views of Central Park, and simple yet elegant portraits; many have landed in major public and private collections throughout the country. Today, at 92, Foss is still exploring ways of capturing the essence of nature and the figure.

Born in Berlin, her father was Otto Brendel, an expert on Etruscan art and archeology who managed to obtain prestigious teaching positions in America when the Nazis made life difficult for Foss's Jewish mother, Maria Weigert, a specialist in classical art. In the U.S., Cornelia began drawing in earnest at age 12 under the tutelage of the figurative painter Stephen Greene (1917–1999). In 1949 her father won a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome, an experience that offered his daughter the opportunity to study art history with Lionello Venturi, as well as art with Greene (again) and Mirko Basaldella. At the academy she met, then married in 1951, the German-American composer, pianist, and conductor Lukas Foss (1922–2009), whose portrait by her is now displayed regularly at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. The couple lived for a time in Los Angeles, where the painter studied with Howard Warshaw.

Foss has a unique place in the trajectory of postwar American representational art. Early in her career, she witnessed the rise and dominance of abstract expressionism, which, though remembered for its macho milieu,



*Beach in Blue Hat*, 2022, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., private collection



(TOP) *Wainscott*, 2014, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in., private collection  
 ■ (BELOW) *Sandpath to Beach*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 59 3/4 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York)



did encompass several female artists. Between the 1950s and early 1970s, however, Foss was one of comparatively few women active in representational art, an approach to which she and such colleagues as Fairfield Porter remained dedicated. Often dismissed as anachronistic, these “painterly” artists moved forward even as the influential critic Clement Greenberg declared in 1954 that “representational painting and sculpture have rarely achieved more than minor quality in recent years, and that major quality gravitates more and more toward the nonrepresentational.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, cross-pollination occurred regularly between the two groups and some formed close bonds, as Foss herself enjoyed with Willem and Elaine de Kooning. In his 1979 foreword to a volume of Porter’s incisive critical essays, Rackstraw Downes observed that Porter did not concern himself with classifications of style: “With Porter, classification turns into insight, and the history of art becomes a series of attitudes to reality.”<sup>2</sup> This has also been true for Foss, who still teaches privately after many years serving on the faculties of the Art Students League of New York and National Academy of Design. Recently she noted that she shows her students primarily “how to see” and to understand that, in the end, “all painting is a form of abstraction.” It was with these “attitudes to reality” that Foss, still firmly in the world of representation, embraced and admired abstract expressionists, particularly Joan Mitchell, from whom she learned “a lot about brushstrokes.”<sup>3</sup>

#### RECENT WORKS. LONGTIME PRACTICES

Foss’s body of work stands at the intersection of nature and abstraction. Her painterly style offers a loosening of lines, edges, shapes, and masses formed by colors, inviting viewers to join her in contemplation and self-reflection. Illustrated here is the 2022 painting *Beach in Blue Hat*, which portrays a solitary bikini-clad figure observing the ocean. The turning of her back to us recalls Caspar David Friedrich’s famous scenes of men observing expansive vistas. His figures are generally depicted slightly above or below our eye level, but Foss’s woman is at eye level; it’s as if we are standing directly behind her, reflecting upon the same sea. This painting, it seems, is a metaphor for seeing within the creative process.

Foss frames *Beach in Blue Hat* with a red border that echoes her 2014 painting *Wainscott*, where a cobalt blue border draws attention to her technique of *mise en abyme* — the placement, within the larger composition, of a smaller painting; both of them depict Wainscott Pond, where Foss has long summured on Long Island’s East End. Such practices underscore her exploration of how our minds engage in reveries on the creative process.

Foss has long considered water “a most fascinating subject” because of its constant motion, and indeed the beach scene is not altogether tranquil. There is an element of danger suggesting the awe-inspiring experience of the sublime in nature, and the dark cresting waves almost appear ready to crash upon the figure. Sky, ocean, sand, and figure are all pushed forward, heightening our sense of foreboding. Yet the scene is depicted in an abstracted, elemental fashion, where flat strata of color suggest that



*Summer Day, Long Island, 2022, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York)*



whatever Foss leaves out of her painting defines her way of seeing as much as what she puts in.

Devoid of figures, *Sandpath to Beach* (2021) is a study of the gradations of value and color that imply specific times of day. The play of light in the sky, formed by swathes of pale yellow and the pinkish gray clouds, leads us to the next layers of color capturing the ocean. Where the sun's rays hit the horizon, the sea is cerulean blue, but then as the waves begin to crest, they take on a blackish hue conveying the ocean's dark mystery, and the potential for danger. As they crash toward the beach, their darkness is transformed to a very pale blue mixed with white to suggest foam.

In *Summer Day, Long Island* (2022), gone are the horizontal layers of color we admired in the beach scenes. Here Foss foreshortens so that viewers are fully immersed in the profusion of lush green vegetation. At the bottom of the canvas, rounded strokes of red and muted pink suggest flowers. At the top, strokes of cerulean blue indicate water and lead our eye to the verdant trees. Also at the top, the strokes of green and a thin line of yellow — perhaps a strip of sand — divide the painting into two sections, or rather two moods. Below it's all excitable energy, conveyed by the foliage from which

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(LEFT) *Yellow Sky*, 2022, oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York) ■ (BELOW) *In the Distance*, 2020, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York)

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emerges a well-camouflaged bird. The canvas's top half, by contrast, offers tranquility.

*Yellow Sky* (2022) exemplifies Foss's propensity to explore different styles of brushwork. In addition to her customary flat strokes, *Yellow Sky* offers thicker applications similar to Van Gogh's. What prevails is the subject's mysteriousness, vaguely recalling the twilight scenes of the tonalist George Inness. With her brushwork, values, and color choices, Foss delights us with an invitation to ponder the mysteries of varied interpretations, and to wonder at nature itself.

*In the Distance* (2020) is a model of deft composition. In the foreground we see vegetation evoked with sweeping strokes and slight touches of diverse colors. They lead us to the left and right margins' green formations indicating groups of trees that act as *coulisses*, a technique that ultimately directs our focus to the distant blue water.

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*Evergreen Tree*, 2022, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York)

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A delicate stroke of yellowish pink produces a strip of sand glistening in the sun. The *coulisse* technique also spurs us to admire the spectacularly billowing white clouds; between them hover windswept blue-gray clouds through which glimmers a soft pink light.

In *Evergreen Tree* (2022), viewers are invited to explore a forest where grass and trees become studies in different hues of green. At the forefront are two oaks whose branches and leaves create an arch interlocking with the trees beyond. The grassy areas display more gradations of green, deftly pierced by bands of sunshine pouring across the middle of the composition.



*Yellow Pitcher*, 2022, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in., private collection, Bridgehampton, New York, photo: Christopher Foss ■ (BELOW) *Sabina*, 2014, oil on canvas, 14 x 14 in., MM Fine Art (Southampton, New York), photo: Christopher Foss

slightly mysterious contrast to the scene's overall vivacity. In *Sabina* (2014), Foss depicts a girl in profile, facing almost blinding sunlight and set against a light green backdrop. The slight cropping of her head at top enhances our appreciation of the artist's deft management of dark and light values. More delicate effects of light are conveyed with strokes on the nose, upper lip, cheekbone, closed eyelid, brow, and forehead. Stray strands of hair swept by the breeze are picked out in yellow, enhancing the painting's charm and immediacy.

All of these works demonstrate that Foss's artistic practice continues to investigate distilled memories — or accumulations of them — in order to capture transitory moments within a day or a season. Her paintings never memorialize every detail. Rather, they offer intimations of her perception of nature, reduced to its most elemental essence and imbued with the poetry of feeling.

Foss recently completed her memoirs and also a book with the working title *How Did You Do That? How to Be a Painter*. Both should be published next year, and this autumn New York City's Century Association will honor her

with a retrospective. At 92, Foss seems to be as busy as ever. ●



Foss's still lifes and portraits deserve admiration, too. *Yellow Pitcher* (2022) presents a cornucopia, not so much of fecundity as of utter felicity. From the pitcher bursts a profusion of colorful flowers that expand into a backdrop that seems to radiate with energetic hues of green and touches of yellow and pink. At the top, an area of colder blue-gray offers a

**Information:** For more, see *Cornelia Foss: A Retrospective* (Skira Rizzoli, 2015) with essays by J.D. McClatchy and Karen Wilkin, foreword by John Guare, preface by the artist, and photography by her son Christopher Foss. See also *Cornelia Foss: Ten Years of Paintings and Drawings, 2003–2013* (Peter Marcelle Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York). Ira Goldberg's 2015 interview with Foss in the *Art Students League's* journal *Linea* is available at [asllinea.org](http://asllinea.org).

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#### Note

- 1 Clement Greenberg's "Abstract, Representational and So Forth," 1954, repr. in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 135. See Karen Wilkin's contributions to the catalogue accompanying the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center's 2020 exhibition *Figuration Never Died: New York Painterly Painters, 1950–1970*.
- 2 Fairfield Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935–1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zoland Books, 1979), 22.
- 3 Willem's de Kooning's *The Women* series exemplifies figuration's cooption by an abstract expressionist. Some figurative painters, such as Rosemarie Beck (1923–2003) and Seymour Chwast (1923–1999), started as abstract expressionists but later embraced representation. Major works by artists of this kind are displayed regularly at New York City's Center for Figurative Painting ([cfpcollection.org](http://cfpcollection.org)).