

JERRY DAVID CORNELIA: ART IS A LAUGHING MATTER

By Scott McMillion



Little Fay's hair is not of a color nature ever put on anybody's head. As orange as a ripe persimmon, her thin strands twine in the kind of pigtails you don't see often on a woman beyond a certain age. But they look good on her, frolicsome when contrasted with her oversized features—giant ears, stung mouth, her wad of a nose, the loose waddle under her chin. Somehow it all adds up to make her look appealing, despite the incongruity of her attire: prison stripes, a number on her chest.

Look at her and you share her affectionate smile. Then look at the title of this painting—"At first glance, Little Fay seemed an unlikely candidate to lead the revolt."—and a full grin breaks out.

You know Fay is a corker. It's obvious. Take her to lunch and you'll laugh all afternoon, guaranteed. And naturally you'll want to join the upheaval.

It's a painting to make you laugh but it's based on a terrible sadness. Jerry

AT FIRST GLANCE, LITTLE FAY SEEMED AN UNLIKELY CANDIDATE TO LEAD THE REVOLT.

2004
OIL ON BOARD
8 1/2" X 11"

ARTISTS of the West

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The paintings often begin with a title, usually a long one.*



David Cornelia explained where it came from. Fay is his mother's middle name. Recently placed in the Alzheimer's wing of a Sidney, Mont., rest home, she's still the sharpest knife in that particular drawer and was eager to help.

So she got organized. She was busting out, and she was taking the other inmates with her.

"She was leading a revolt in the Alzheimer's unit,"

Cornelia said. Little Fay in the painting doesn't look anything like his mother, Cornelia explained, but the same spirit inhabits both of them, one that bucks bondage, especially when it's wrought by something so unfair and arbitrary as a disease. The number on Fay's prison shirt is the birth date of Cornelia's mother: 061730.



ACCORDING TO MYRNA, SHE KNEW IT
WHEN SHE MARRIED HIM.

2004
OIL ON BOARD
15" x 24"



OH MY! WHAT A PROFOUND EFFECT A WEEKEND
IN VEGAS HAD ON EDNA!

2004
OIL ON BOARD
8 1/2" X 11"

"Life works itself into a painting," he said. "What came out of it was Little Fay."

Cornelia said his family tends to react with jokes when bad news comes. "We have sort of a strange family," he said.

That might be an understatement, coming from a man who spent part of his childhood delivering meals to the prisoners in his father's jail.

Cornelia, now 50, returned a decade ago to his native Sidney, a burg of 4,700 people in the prairies of Eastern Montana. From the air, the town looks like an arrowhead pointing downstream along the Yellowstone River, a sluggish flow, there in the flatlands. North Dakota lies close by, and Sidney stands closer to Minot and Regina than it does to Billings. Most of a time zone and a big shift in attitudes separate it from the art galleries and tony subdivisions of Bozeman or the Flathead Valley. Real estate is cheap, school sports are popular and families tend to be old-time Germans

or Norwegians, the tough descendants of people who survived the Dust Bowl years. Things change slowly there and it's not the kind of place you'd expect to find a guy whose paintings have more in common with El Greco than Charlie Russell, who used to design shop windows for Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City.

But there he is, hunkered down in his little house full of easels and paintings and gadgets, puffing away on cigarettes and not missing New York one little bit. For Cornelia, Sidney is home. He's done the cosmopolitan thing, and life among the sugar beet fields and oil derricks suits him just fine.

There's still a lot of New York in Cornelia's work, the downtown world of androgynous models, women in elaborate makeup, dressed in retro funk. "I was kind of a downtown snob," he recalls. "Anything above 14th Street wasn't worth my time." Now he lives in a town of 2.2 square miles. And while many of his subjects look like city people, and their titles reflect angst more urban than agrarian, he generally surrounds his subjects with an empty prairie back-



IT HAD NOT BEEN THE BEST
OF YEARS FOR CLIFFORD.

2001
OIL ON BOARD
16" X 20"

ground. Or, just as likely, he'll depict a sheep or a greyhound, maybe a housecat, and somehow grant it the aura of a SoHo hipster.

New York was fun, he said, but he's glad to be home. "I'm pretty content out here," he said. "I'm a prairie guy. Even Livingston [where for years he's sold everything he makes in one gallery] has too many mountains for me. I need to be able to see forever."

He likes living where it's easy to put yourself in a place where the only sign of human endeavor is a fence, maybe not even that.

He's got a couple cats, an appaloosa colt he's training, an old farmhouse he's remodeling into a studio and a "neurotic little rat terrier.

"I've got this little life of my own, and I'm pretty reluctant to go anywhere," he said. "I'm not much of a traveler. I worry too much."

As a child growing up in Sidney, Cornelia's father was a policeman, then a sheriff, which meant the family lived in an

apartment in Sidney's jailhouse. Cornelia's mother cooked meals for the inmates, and if they didn't seem too dangerous, little Jerry took the trays to the cells.

"I brought my fifth-grade teacher his bacon and eggs one morning," he recalled. "I think he was in for drunk and disorderly. Then I had to run to school and tell them they needed a substitute teacher that day."

Things got even more interesting when women were jailed, especially the occasional illegal immigrants who gave him Spanish lessons. Those incarcerations meant the family had to move their dining table from the women's cellblock to another room and the kids had to climb down to their bedrooms through a trap door. One of his play areas was the storage room that held the county's emergency water and food supplies for the apocalypse that loomed over those Cold War days.

And when he wasn't delivering meals, Cornelia was making art: painting animals, drawing feminine eyes all over his homework, sculpting figurines. He even drew spots on his

He works in an odd process, synthesizing language into image.

horse so it would match the other appaloosas in his high school equine drill team. Most of his technique is self-taught—"I confess to not just borrowing, but blatantly stealing from the masters"—and though he focuses on broad-brush surrealism today, some of his earlier images are lifelike, almost photo-realistic in technique, though always ethereal in subject matter.

He married his childhood sweetheart at the age of 20, earned a junior college degree in fashion design in Atlanta, divorced at 30, and decided to take a bite out of the Big Apple.

There, he scratched out a living for a while selling small sculptures on the street. While it was a living, it was just barely that, and as he contemplated renting out his body for medical experiments, he found an even odder job: Painting the faces on mannequins. He was good at it, he said, learning to accomplish a makeover in about 30 minutes, and over the years he painted 17,000 imitation people. The work helped teach him, he said, both a sense of color and a work ethic. Eventually, he became a manager at the mannequin factory. He bought a house in Long Island, became a commuter. To help make his big mortgage payments, he taught himself to build ornate birdhouses he could sell for hundreds of dollars. He built clocks that fetched comparable prices. He sculpted figurines in the classical style and for a while was selling in 14 galleries at the same time. He was a busy professional artist, focusing on productivity and creating hundreds of pieces a year.

Then he chucked it and moved back to Sidney, to the tiny one-bedroom home that had been his grandmother's. New York had just become too much.

"It was the constant assault of everything, and the expense," he said of the city. Every season brought new trends to follow or ignore. Though he had work in many galleries, the competition was fierce and the talk was endless. "In New York, the shop talk just killed me. The art discussions were so boring."

Now, back in his native Sidney, he says creativity has blossomed, though he hasn't figured why, exactly.

"I'm much more creative here," he said. "I'm still trying to analyze that."

So are other people.

Cornelia's work invites questions—a vaguely obscene

half man/half blue monkey holding an apple, for instance—but he says he rarely has answers.

“I paint because it’s cheaper than a psychiatrist. It’s less effective, but it’s cheaper.”

He works in an odd process, synthesizing language into image. The paintings often begin with a title, usually a long one.

“I’ll be driving down the street, or in the shower, or out messing with my horse, and something snaps into my head.”

For example, Cornelia suffered a bad year in 2001. A fire consumed the studio he had built, destroying scores of art works and all sorts of tools.

Then he had a heart attack.

That double whammy inspired a title: “It had not been the best of years for Clifford.”

The painting shows a distressed sheep standing beneath an apple tree, a reminder of some vanished homesteader’s optimism, out on prairie washed with twilight. There is no sign of anything else breathing out there. Clifford, a knock-kneed and pigeon-toed ovine, looks tired. He’s walked far to find this shade, maybe a little fruit.

Would a sheep eat an apple? It doesn’t matter. Clifford’s luck is so bad that all he found under that apple tree was a lemon.

“I think he made lemonade,” Cornelia said.

Once again, the bad joke arises from a bad situation.

Other paintings arise from snippets of conversation. “According to Myrna, she knew it when she married him,” is one new work.

What did she know? Ask Myrna. She’s one of the girls on horseback in the painting. They’re talking it over, but whether you’ll get in on the secret is up to the ladies.

Another, “Oh my, what a profound effect a weekend in Vegas had on Edna!” shows a black and white greyhound dog, also alone on the prairie, smirking at her own memories. Edna has been a bad dog and Edna doesn’t care.

Like Cornelia, Edna’s back in the open spaces. Her voyage made its mark, but home is home.

When Cornelia first returned to Sidney, people assumed he was back for a visit. But eventually he became a local again.

“In some ways,” he said, “It felt like I’d been on a real long vacation.”

Cornelia is represented by the Visions West Gallery in Livingston, Mont. 

