



Frances Ferdinand: **Connective Threads**

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The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington  
July 16 – August 13, 2017  
Curated by **Todd Tremeer**

## Frances Ferdinands: **Connective Threads**



LOOKING IN  
1980; Acrylic on canvas; 152 × 91 cm



WOMEN'S WORK  
1980; Acrylic on canvas; 102 × 127 cm



ON DISPLAY: PROMOTING THE WAR EFFORT  
1985; Mixed media acrylic on canvas; 142 × 109 cm

# Connective Threads

by **Todd Tremeer**, Exhibition Curator

Frances Ferdinands is an accomplished painter. Born in Sri Lanka, she immigrated to Canada with her family at age six. She graduated from York University's fine arts program in 1974 and has since exhibited across Canada, the United States and in Paris, Bogota and Honolulu. Her paintings may be ironic, allegorical or witty. Sometimes realistic, other times more abstract, she merges popular culture, art history and world issues. By doing so, she highlights the discontinuities she sees in the world around her. This survey exhibition provides the rare opportunity to identify and explore common threads across differing bodies of work created between 1980 and 2014. From this retrospective vantage, her creative trajectories are mapped and patterns found; the artist's evolving voice, and sense of self is made present.

Ferdinands works along thematic lines to create a series of paintings that explore an idea. Over the three decades surveyed here, her paintings have explored women, food, cultural belonging and difference. She incorporates elements of her Sri Lankan heritage and touches on themes related to colonialism, cultural identity and population migrations. What marks her practice as unique is her sense of the peripheral. She, like many other first generation Canadians, grew up in the hybrid space created by the overlap of two cultures, yet has forever felt somewhat outside of each. It is a unique vantage for an artist. For from it, she observes that which for most of us goes unseen.

For an artist the studio is a special space focused around creating. It may be a place within the home or elsewhere; private or shared with others. Ferdinands learned early in her career that a home-based studio came with challenges. Besides blurring the lines between work and life, there were domestic distractions and the isolating effect of working long periods of time alone. *Women's Work* (1980) and *Looking In* (1980) were painted for her first solo exhibition following university. Exhibited originally in Toronto, at the former Merton Gallery, these paintings were conceived through her isolated struggle to paint within her home studio.

*Woman's Work* depicts a woman sewing. The scarf around her neck is fed through her sewing machine. Ferdinands notes the scarf, having ceased to serve any practical protective function, symbolizes the domestic restraint of fashion and societal expectations placed on women. In the other painting from this formative stage of her career, *Looking In*, an undressed woman washes her hair. The intimacy of the scene is symbolized by the model's nudity. Both paintings imagine isolated women in domestic spaces—a sentiment then felt by Ferdinands in her newly built home studio. Notably, in the thirty-plus years since *Women's Work* was painted, work in Canada has changed. For better or worse, today's "new economy" means more people working from home, piece-work and contract labour.

The voyeuristic detachment shared by these two early paintings owes something to the influence of photography. The camera exerts a subtle distancing influence in art. The lens mediates between first-hand actual experience and the second-hand retelling of an event. For these paintings Ferdinands hired a model and photographed her as she staged various domestic actions. Paintings were subsequently made from the artist's photographs. There are other signs too that give these paintings their voyeuristic quality. The women

ON KING LEAD ON  
ETERNAL  
WAR  
FIERCE  
SHALL  
WHISPER  
AMEN  
PEACE  
OF  
SWEET  
LEAD ON.....



ON A MIGHTY MISSION  
1985; Acrylic, letraset and pencil  
on canvas; 152 x 81 cm



AMERICA

2000; Acrylic on canvas; 91 × 168 cm

BEWITCHED

2002; Acrylic on canvas; 91 × 137 cm



do not return our gaze and our view of them is partially obstructed. In one we watch her through a partially closed door. In the other, we seem to be awkwardly below the height of the table on which she sews.

Throughout her art career, Ferdinands has used a mix of her own photographs, archival images and contemporary photo-reference material. She attributes a 1983 television documentary by Gwynne Dyer about the nature of war as the spark that inspired her series *War*. Two paintings from this series demonstrate her “homefront” vantage of the subject. *On a Mighty Mission* (1985), shows soldiers marching off to war. Lyrics from the hymn, *Lead On O King Eternal* fills the upper register of her canvas. The other painting, *On Display: Promoting the War Effort* (1985) contrasts a fashionable lady against a line of female factory workers. The background shows captured allied soldiers crammed into a POW camp.

Ferdinands’ “history paintings” quote archival black and white photographs from the Toronto Reference Library. The mechanical flatness and traced quality of the marching soldiers in one painting alludes to her working process at this time. Interestingly, however, the marching soldiers wear pastel pink, violet and viridian uniforms and not the army green battle-dress of history. By such “prettiness” one may recall the false Technicolor tints used to colourize many black and white films in the decades following the two World Wars. The other painting, *On Display: Promoting the War Effort*, is as much photo-collage as painting. Ferdinands intended this second painting to comment on photography as a propaganda tool. Thus the fashionable lady represents capitalists made rich by war. On the right, but only nominally sharing the same space, a line of German factory women are presented as model workers for the Reich. Close inspection reveals Ferdinands has created a museum space. The women are perhaps

mannequins, the captive soldiers, a photo mural, created by collaging photocopies of an archival photograph.

*Fashion Meets Art* is a series also informed by collage. In it, Ferdinands juxtaposed fashion advertisements sourced from 1940s and 1950s *Art News* magazines with paintings from art history. Ferdinands has here paired and recreated in paint, vintage advertisements with historical works by artists Hopper, Manet and Sargent. The message being, in a magazine dedicated to the elite contemporary art market, we are reminded that haute couture fashion is a luxury good like art. In a parallel vein, Ferdinands describes Pop Art superstar Jeff Koons designing handbags for Louis Vuitton. Koons' task in the partnership, seemingly being that of the celebrity, who selects which famous painting will be further commodified through its printing upon a Louis Vuitton handbag.

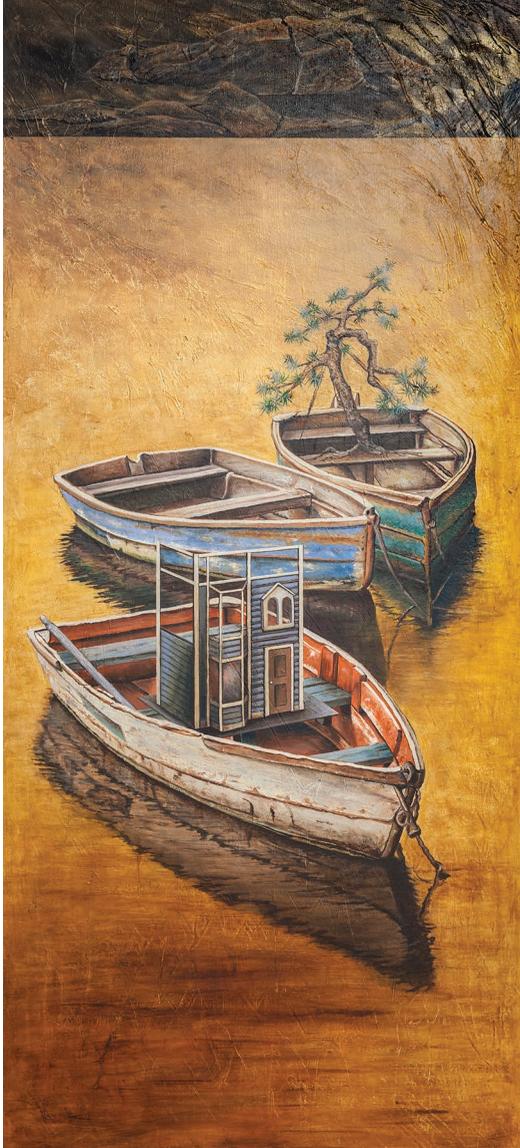
Following a different course, Ferdinands' *Adrift* series began in response to a personal crisis. Her father died suddenly on his birthday; her mother was terminally ill. The artist felt at the time, in her words, "adrift and without family." *Precious Cargo II* (2004) comes out of these dark times. Here three rowboats, called "punts," float upon dark waters. A rocky shore looms in the distance. Punts traditionally served to ferry crew, passengers and small cargos between ships and shore. In her painting one punt carries a bonsai tree, another, the façade of a house, perhaps a dollhouse. The third looks empty.

*Quarry Quandry* (2010) from the same series, pictures a dark, flooded rock quarry. The only figurative element is an empty boat, which floats adrift on the still water. Ironically, the most human element may be the red graffiti-like image of warplanes on the quarry wall. The juvenile rendering of these bombers adds a touch of dark humour to an otherwise desolate scene.

QUARRY QUANDRY  
2000; Acrylic on canvas; 81 × 122 cm  
Private Collection







PRECIOUS CARGO #2  
2004; Acrylic on canvas;  
137 × 61 cm  
*Private Collection*



BLUE BUDDHA  
2010; Acrylic on canvas w/plastic toy; 76 x 76 cm; Private Collection

Today looking at this painting, one thinks of the undersized boats that flee North Africa for Europe across the Mediterranean Sea and those who have fled across oceans to escape previous conflicts. Probably more than any other device, boats have served to save, threaten, feed and free us.

The series *Food for Thought* marks another evolution in the artist's thinking. By mining the space between her Sri Lankan heritage and Canadian upbringing, Ferdinands comments and observes the space between two worlds. There are two paintings of Buddha in this exhibition. Each Buddha cradles a loaf of Wonder Bread (paintings from 2007 & 2010). The message satirically proposes enlightenment and perfection or conversely, Westernization, convenience and preservation (at least sarcastically if one considers shelf-life). Another painting in the series, *Seven-Day Wonder* (2011) appropriates the serial imagery of Pop-Art while evoking the Book of Genesis. In contrast, *Measuring Identity II* (2008) critiques our love of coffee "to go." A Timbits box and coffee cups are declared "junk" by the artist, yet loved by many Canadians. Coffee's ever increasing cup-size and the popularity of walking about town, work and the outdoors is something of a North American idiosyncrasy. Outsiders, however, might criticize our habit as wasteful and littering.

Ferdinands' series *Tropicals and Beyond* are some of her most photo-realistic paintings to date. *Corporate Jungle* (1996) captures the sunlight as it filters through jungle greenery. Close inspection of this canvas reveals a stylized *Dole Fruit* brand logo because, Ferdinands explains, Dole's monocrop banana farming ruined Hawaii's soil years ago. *Palm Breeze* (1998) shows a coconut palm tree. A scarf caught around the tree trunk recalls the scarf being sewn almost two decades earlier in the painting *Woman's Work*.

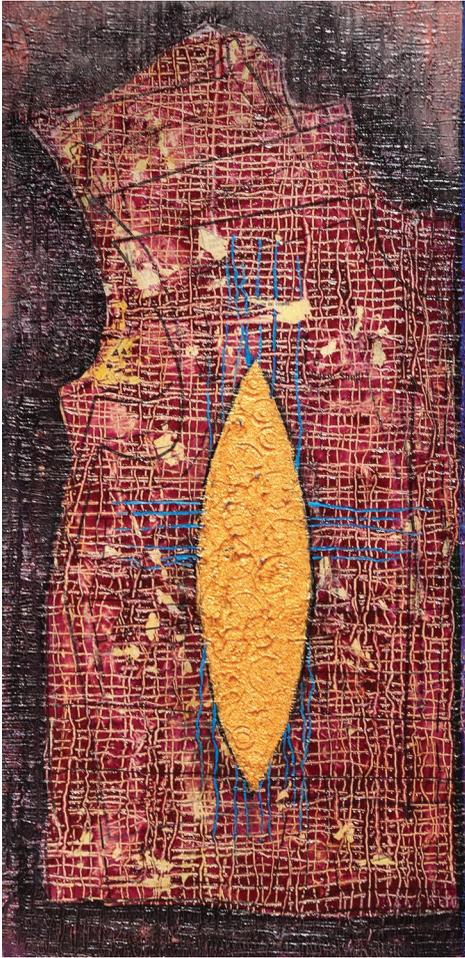


PASSAGES  
2014; Mixed media acrylic on canvas; 91 x 91 cm





ELEGY  
2014; Mixed media acrylic on canvas; 76 x 76 cm



PIN  
TRACE  
OUT  
STITCH



Its reappearance years later, reminds us that our domestic footprint at home has a long-lasting global reach.

Fabric, sewing and pattern are key features in her *Mining Beauty* series. There is a paisley pattern in paintings *Wallflower* and *Passages*. The pattern originates from Persia but travelled to England and the west with colonialism. In Sri Lanka the motif is called “mango pattern.” Today, this pattern and others leave their countries of origin through the sweat-shop factories working for large Western clothing retailers. Like the scarf motif that returns to Ferdinands’ work after years away, “mango pattern” embodies the discourse surrounding migration, labour and colonization.

Greater abstraction marks Ferdinands’ *Mining Beauty* series as another shift in the painter’s artist voyage. In this series, perspective rendering gives way to symbolic space. Paintings are richly textured and layered with text, pattern and personal meaning. Two paintings incorporate dollhouse chairs affixed to the canvases. Others include fabrics, sewing bobbins, wire and buttons. *Elegy* (2014) eerily resembles a grave marker. Two black eyes stare out at us; a stone sits on a grave. This series marks the artist’s return to personal narratives, yet now, her symbolism is personal, private and connected to her past works and family history. When discussing her motivations for collaging fabrics and other items into her paintings, Ferdinands tells how as a child, her mother made her clothes. Young Frances did the cutting, her mother the sewing. In the earlier described painting *Women’s Work*, a woman sews and is watched from below. Reflecting back upon this formative work, this upward gaze may belong to that of a child.

To close, Frances Ferdinands paints with a purpose. She takes a matter-of-fact approach to painting; yet, common through all her work is a focused

message, viewpoint and voice. *Feed Me, Free Me* (2006) perhaps best illustrates her approach and so appears on this catalogue's cover. A rice bowl with chopsticks sits upon a table. There is a bird about to be released in one corner. In another corner, she inserts part of a Buddha sculpture. Through titling and imagery she cites the aphorism: "feed the body to free the spirit." ■



## Artist Biography

Born in Colombo Sri Lanka, Frances Ferdinands is a Toronto-based, mid-career Canadian artist. She holds a Visual Arts degree from York University, an A.R.C.T. (Piano) from the Royal Conservatory of Music, and Education degree from University of Toronto. She was co-editor of *Eclectic Eve*, a collection of fifty interviews with Toronto women artists. (Coach House Press, 1973). Noted American art historian and contemporary art critic Lucy Lippard wrote, “*Eclectic Eve* is a book I’ve often used and much enjoyed. I wish other cities would do the same.” Ferdinands’ paintings are featured in two Artbooks: *Rethinking Acrylic* (Northlight Books, 2008) and *Acrylic Innovation* (Northlight Books, 2010). Ferdinands created the winning design for the 2017 Diwali commemorative coin for the Royal Canadian Mint.

For over three decades, Ferdinands has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions across Canada and in the United States. She has exhibited as far afield as Paris, Bogota and Honolulu and has been the recipient of many Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council grants. Her paintings are held in private and corporate collections including Standard Broadcasting Corporation, Franco-Nevada Mining, and the Dresdner Bank of Canada. Museum collections include the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, the Judith & Norman Alix Gallery and the Royal Ontario Museum. In 2015 and 2017, Ferdinands returned to Sri Lanka to be mentored in traditional arts and crafts. There she studied temple mural painting, bobbin lace making, and mask making. This experience has served to enrich Ferdinands’ cultural understanding of her Sri Lankan heritage and her sense of place within it.

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