

## *Return to Light: The End of Yisrael Feldsott's Self-Exile*

By **Jonathan Curiel**

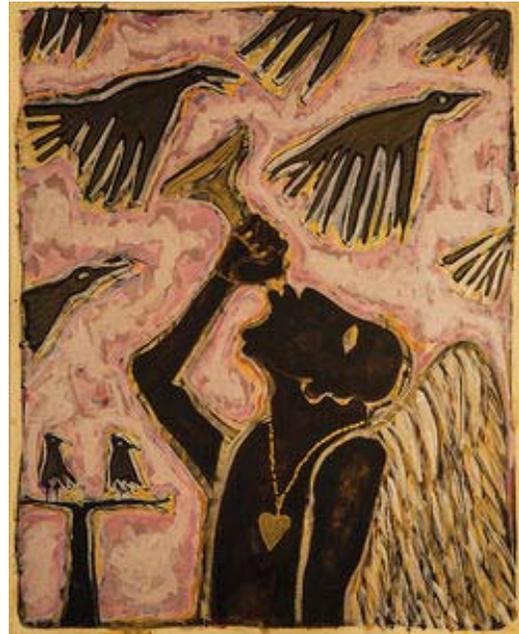
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It's too simplistic to say that Yisrael K. Feldsott was the J.D. Salinger of the art world, but the parallels are entirely there. The early fame and adulation from critics. The obvious talent that was still peaking. And then the sudden retirement -- a disappearance that was unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. Feldsott left the art world when he was in his early 20s. He still painted in private, almost every day, but he never planned to exhibit publicly again, and retreated as far as possible from his U.S. upbringing — to remote regions of South America. Unlike Salinger, though, who remained a recluse till the day he died, Feldsott had a change of heart, and he re-entered the art mainstream (by accident) a decade ago. Slowly, Feldsott, now a resident of Bolinas in Marin County and almost 60 years old, is again making a name for himself — a one-time prodigy whose output is once more drawing raves from the art establishment.



Courtesy of Yisrael K. Feldsott

*Wheels of Democracy* suggests Western aid isn't always what it's cracked up to be.



*Gabriel's Horn* takes the mythic and makes it ominous.

### [Meridian Gallery](#)

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Lots of people call it quits early in their career. Comedian Dave Chappelle did. So did cartoonist Gary Larson. Some decide to stay retired. Others, like Chappelle, return reinvigorated. Feldsott is in the latter category. His new exhibit is a chance to see the inspired work of someone who never tired of painting; he just tired of the art gatekeepers, who Feldsott thought would steer him into a corner from which he couldn't escape.

No less a dignitary than Peter Selz, the founding director of the Berkeley Art Museum and MoMA's former chief curator of painting and sculpture, has said that Feldsott's work is absolutely astonishing — that when he first saw Feldsott's work in 2011 at a small San Francisco gallery, "I hadn't seen anything like that before. ... The work really made you stop in your tracks."

Feldsott's work is transfixing because it hits art-goers in three parallel ways: with its primal subject matter of death, violence, and survival; with its wide array of colors and materials, including textures of paint that emerge from the canvas like volcanic ash; and with potent symbols and iconography — like skulls and skeletons — that seem familiar but that in Feldsott's hands take on haunting dimensions of the bizarre, the spiritual, and the primordial.

Feldsott says he took his early talent — and his early opportunities, such as having multiple shows at SFMOMA, where he was the youngest exhibiting artist in the museum's history — for granted, and that his current show at the Meridian Gallery is another opportunity to connect with new audiences, who seem to respond to the "collective unconscious imagery" that Feldsott says is in his work.

"At the exhibit's opening — and this is common — people told me that they feel my paintings physically; that they don't have any experience that paintings can do that to them," Feldsott says.

Co-curated by Selz, Feldsott's Meridian exhibit, "Cries, Chants, Shouts and Whispers: Songs of the Forgotten," is a retrospective of more than 30 works that take up all three floors of the gallery. One of the first canvases that people see, *Wheels of Democracy*, is a hellish, wall-sized scene that puts the viewer right in the middle of an execution. Four naked men — their hands held above their heads, their bodies already riddled with bullet holes — look right at the art-goer. The men's faces seem almost like aboriginal masks. A cross lurks in the background, next to soldiers' guns, next to rivers of blood. *Wheels of Democracy*, from 2006, is a commentary on Western aid of despotic regimes, but even without its political overtones, the artwork is a tour de force — elements of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, a Frida Kahlo Day of the Dead painting, the work of a Yoruba master, and something of Picasso's *Guernica*. The difficulty of classifying Feldsott's work makes it that much more alluring.

Feldsott hints at misgivings when he talks about leaving his early art career behind. "After my second show at SFMOMA, that whole art rock-star/career meteor started taking off, and people were becoming very interested in my work," he says. "At that point in my career, if you had told me it was hard to get a show at SFMOMA, I would have said, 'No.' I was ridiculously naïve and ignorant of what was really happening. I didn't realize how fortunate I was. ... I was more aware of little things that people would say to influence or have power over my work or process.

"Those inferences of control — like, when the collector/art dealer is going, 'In your next show, you should do more of these' — made me think, 'This is a process that I'm doing, and I don't want anybody's hands on it, and I don't want anyone controlling it. And I don't want to be influenced by the money, the politics, and the greed.' I was coming out of this whole mythos of the late '60s. I was the kid who was marching at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968, and into anti-war rallies and burning flags. I was so in battle that my attitude was 'fight or flight.' If something seems unbeatable, you disappear, and disappear into the underground, and you become invisible. That process went on for more than 20 years."

In 2002, Feldsott was living in Quito, Ecuador, when he was with a friend who happened to meet a curator from the Museo de Guayasamin, one of Quito's big museums. The chance conversation led to Feldsott's about-face, from hoarding his art to displaying it for public view — first at the Museo de Guayasamin, which gave him a major exhibit and a chance to start over.