

# FASHION SPECTRUM™

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the flow

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*The minute I sat in front of a canvas, I was happy. Because it was a world, and I could do as I liked in it.*

Alice Neel, 1980

**H**er name was Gladys. She was one of those simple women everyone remembers from growing up, an aunt or a distant cousin who came for a summer visit every year, not someone who attracted a lot of attention or made a lot of fuss. She worked in a beauty parlor, taught Sunday school at her church. And she kept in touch through the mail, talking through letters, cards, all kinds of correspondence to friends and family, the kids she lectured in the lessons of the Lord.

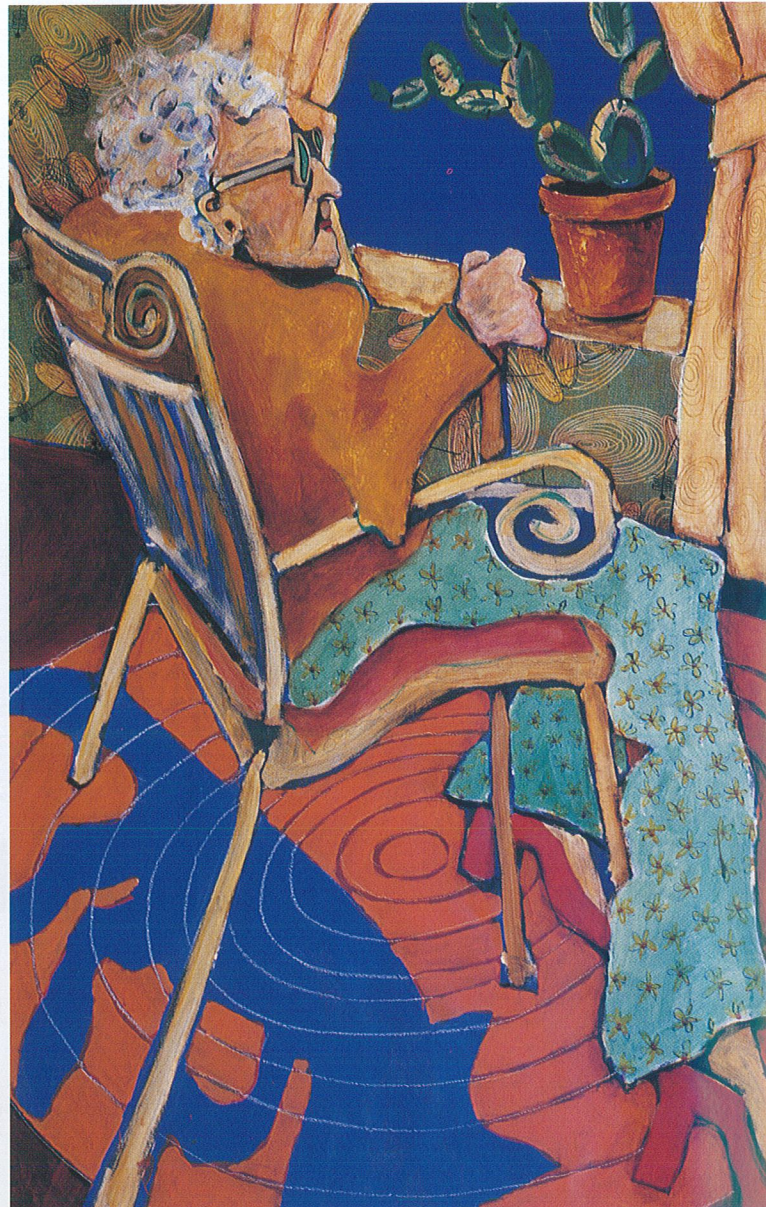
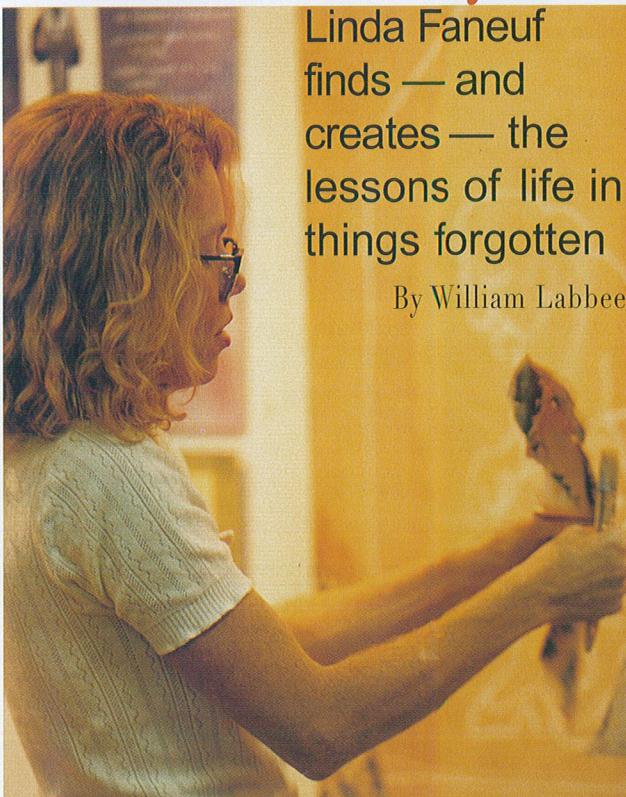
Through her mail and the countless other scraps she saved religiously, Gladys held on to her memories. There were love letters from a fiancé off to war. Birthday cards and little notes from relatives planning for the holidays and chatting about packing vegetables in the freezer and figs in jars. Faded photographs of picnics on the beach. Grocery lists and reminders of things to do, receipts even, for rent, for bills, for beauty supplies. They were the postmarks of her forgotten life, now unceremoniously awaiting the trash man on the stoop of her Little Havana home. She was gone, dead or taken away to a nursing home. Nobody knew or cared — except Linda Faneuf. It was through Gladys' mail that Faneuf, a painter in Miami Beach, met her, and then made her up, but only after Gladys was gone.

"Here was a record of her entire life — what she liked, what she thought about. Just the fact that she saved all this said so much. I just couldn't bear to let them throw it all away," recalls

## Making Up Gladys

Linda Faneuf finds — and creates — the lessons of life in things forgotten

By William Labbee



Faneuf of the day she stumbled upon the trove while hunting for found objects with fellow artists Carlos Alves and Pablo Cano. "And when you think about it, what was the chance I'd find this stuff and it would fuel my work for the next six years? I just started painting about her and I haven't stopped. She's exactly what my art needed. She changed my work and my life forever."

Elderly women have passed the days on the front porches of Faneuf's keenly observant paintings since before the 33-year-old artist arrived here from New York seven years ago. An Air Force brat who lived throughout the South and the East Coast before studying painting at Louisiana Tech and the City University of New York's Queens College, she was instantly drawn to the little old women who at that time symbolized Miami Beach. In many of their habits and rituals she found compelling clues about our society's idea of beauty. Her characters shuffle down the sidewalks of their lives in high heels despite swollen ankles, their shoulders bent from the weight of a purse or tote bag.

Carefully chosen and applied lipstick matches a floral-print dress, outdated but neatly pressed; a new hat rides a recently rinsed and set head of hair. They struggle against irreversible time, against a society that is

Above right: ...As Gladys Dreamt of Horatio.

Left: Linda Faneuf creates in her Lincoln Road studio.



unforgiving of old age.

But in these women obsessed with their looks even in the twilight of their lives, Faneuf found far more – a fragile elegance, a dignified spirit, a beauty all its own. As she poked fun at society's values, the painter found only compassion and sympathy for these icons of all we have come to fear in aging. She is useless, this old woman, she is unseen, she is of no importance to anyone. But for Faneuf, she is a wonder, a joy, a history of memories and snapshots of laughter with family and tears with friends and hard times and good times, and life, always, always complex, wonderful life.

"We've been brainwashed to believe that only youth is beautiful," says Ellie Schneiderman, founder and former director of the South Florida Art Center, where Faneuf paints. "Well, nobody comes out of this life alive. We all age and we all end up looking old. But to Linda, there is something very beautiful and venerable about this process."

Into this world came Gladys, too late in real life, but never too late for Faneuf. And besides, real life is only the beginning of what takes place in her paintings, usually executed in acrylic and collage on wood. Many times ideas begin there, when Faneuf is walking the streets and an image will paint itself in her mind; she'll then rush back to the studio to capture it in a unique expressionistic style blending abstraction and realism, fusing intuition and influences ranging from the stark, probing portraits and still lifes of Alice Neel to the rich collages of Romare Bearden.

Her subject might be an old lady at a bus bench, or in a storefront, or sitting quietly at the kitchen table. Usually Faneuf's imagination then takes this old lady by the hand. She digs around in her boxes and piles of memorabilia – the letters, the pictures, the old sheet music and stamps and bits of wallpaper – and the idea evolves. It might take on a fictional element. It might become an entirely new idea born of the search and then enhanced with the addition of whimsical details, such as a garish of collaged food wrappers surrounding a woman seen at

McDonald's or Dunkin Donuts, or an old map – a symbol of travels through both time and space – replacing the wrinkles on a snowbird's weathered face. Usually these added touches serve as visual hints about the point of the piece, making it accessible to even the most uninformed of viewers.

"I think the paintings I like the most have a little of both," says Faneuf. "They usually have a nice, fine balance between something I took from real life and something from my imagination, something I came up with from digging around in my box. If I get it just right, I think the message really comes through, and that's a very important thing to me, because I want anybody who looks at my work to get it."

Gladys has been at once contributor to and consequence of Faneuf's maturation as an artist. As a central element in the painter's work, Gladys is not a theme in the exploration of vanity but rather represents the untold stories hidden behind her tired gaze, and those of all the other women like her. In the best of Faneuf's paintings, Gladys rocks back and forth between fact and fiction. In *...As Gladys Dreamt of Horatio*, she peers deep into her memories, her

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Right: *Woman with 'Stella D'Oros' and Gun.* Below: *Man Floating, Woman Swimming.*



"We've been brainwashed to believe that only youth is beautiful. Well, nobody comes out of this life alive. We all age and end up looking old. But to Linda, there is something beautiful and venerable about this process."



# Making Up Gladys

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back almost to the viewer, the abstract cookie-cutter silhouette of a cat adorning the scatter rug beneath her chair. On a branch of the cactus set on the windowsill, almost lost in the saturated hues of the painting, floats a small photograph of Horatio.

In reality, Gladys' husband wasn't named Horatio, and the picture is not of him. But it doesn't matter. Gladys' life is only a departure point for Faneuf's imagination. Through old photographs collaged next to painted portraits, the elderly woman reminisces about her youthful days as a dancer, a musician, a prom queen, an actress in the school play. She dreams of her children smiling from family snapshots trimmed to form the flowers beyond her front porch. She even becomes other women, with other names. "It doesn't have to be about a particular person," says Faneuf. "It can be about those little remembrances or little areas of memory we all have, and the messages we take from them."

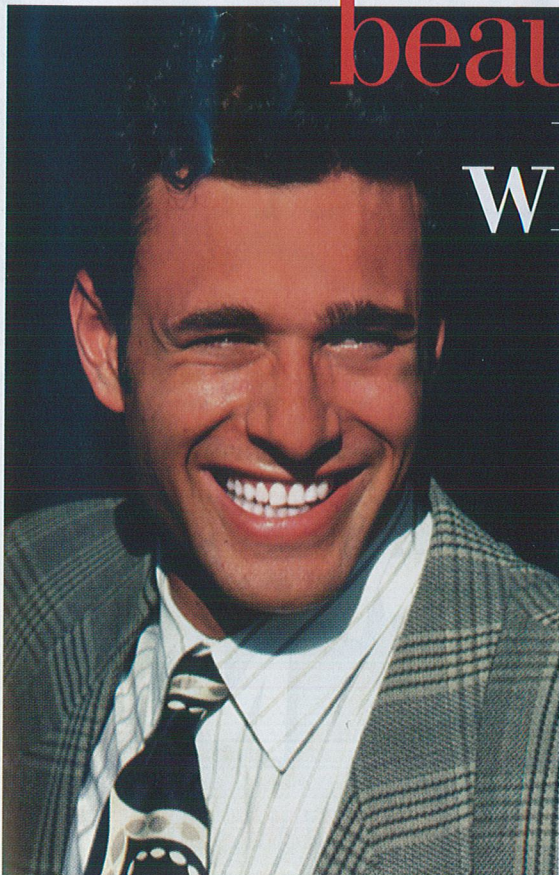
In a sense, Faneuf is anthropologist and biographer, but more importantly, she is an artist, and in the spirit of Neel, she does as she likes in the world of her own creation. Her paintings are entries in a visual diary that is both documentary record and mythical novel decades in the making and assembled in her studio; it is not strictly a true-to-life retelling, but also an imaginary exploration of what a person might, or might not, have been, and what we all are. When that balance is upset, Faneuf has learned, the resulting work may lose its inner voice, that "soul or two buried deep below the gesso and layers of paint" that to her define a sincere and heartfelt painting.

Take her latest show, a group of mixed-media pieces titled *My*

*Friend Irene* that focused on a quirky character recognizable to nearly every regular visitor of Lincoln Road. A stenographer, Irene is best-known for her "art to wear," a handcrafted wardrobe of brightly colored pantsuits and purses, hats and handbags she creates and exhibits on her way to work every day. "How could I not paint her?" asks Faneuf. "She was just perfect."

But what began as an attempt to explore Irene's sense of style, her daily obsession for coordinating color, her spirit for creating, raised serious questions about the distinction between using literal fact as a springboard for visual exploration and using it as an end in itself. "I want to be able to change the names, I want to write my own little book, I want to make it up," Faneuf explains. "To a large extent it took my imagination out of the project, and when I lost that, I lost my inspiration. I want to go back to Gladys."

From the shoe boxes bulging with the children's diplomas and first drawings, the torn pieces of construction paper with their crudely traced little hands, the hymn-book markers quoting the psalms, and the envelopes scrawled with the worries of many lifetimes, Gladys smiles. Hers was a history, maybe only a modest one, recorded in the discarded ephemera of everyday life, but it was one not like those of so few of us. It was one like those of so many. This was Gladys' lesson, and it is Faneuf's. These simple things, the little lists and letters and cards, illustrate the richness of life, of every life. They are memories. And they are what Gladys held so dear, even if no one else cared anymore, even when everyone else forgot. ♦



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