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The dark side of the flower street artist



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GALLERY GOING

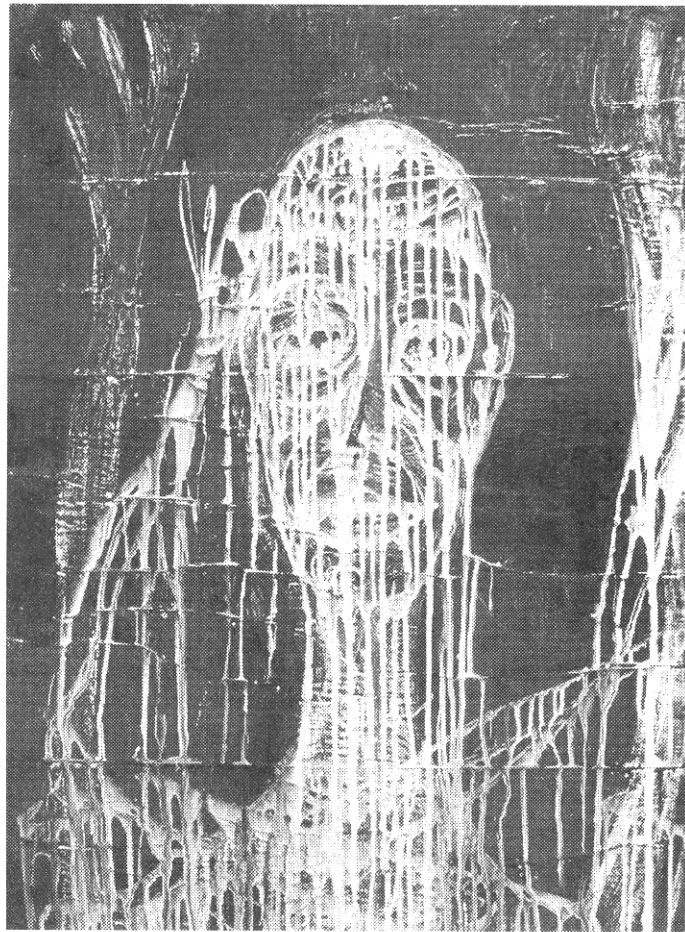
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MICHAEL DE FEO
AT THE ANGELL GALLERY

\$1,500-\$5,000. Until Aug. 29.
890 Queen St. W.; 416-530-0444.

The image for which New York City-based artist Michael De Feo is probably best known is a single, elegantly spare, graphically crisp flower – an almost childlike one with happy, ballooning petals and a stem with two rudimentary leaves near its base. It looks like a flower balanced on an arrow pointing straight down toward the ground.

These flowers – which seem to stretch up toward the light and, at the same time, head down toward their own dissolution – began with “a fat brush, a lot of paper and black paint” and eventually came to be produced as silkscreen prints, which De Feo then took to the streets. He has papered them all over New York City for years now (his work as a street artist goes back almost two decades) and also (he is a tireless traveller) in Amsterdam, Munich, Paris, Hong Kong, Leipzig, Barcelona, Geneva and Buenos Aires.



The latest blooming of De Feo flowers occurred when he recently came to install the exhibition of his paintings now at Toronto's Angell Gallery. But while he happily pasted his flowers on the streets of Toronto, they aren't what he's

showing in the gallery. Rather, the small but forceful exhibition turns out to be a gathering of only five self-portraits – glowering, mask-like things, formidable in their almost Giacometti-like anguish. The one reproduced here looks

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Michael De Feo's *Untitled (Self Portrait)* (2008): His self-portraits are formidable and haunting.

COURTESY ANGELL GALLERY

haunted and primitive, like the wicker men, the effigies the ancient Gauls used to burn in human sacrifices, according to Julius Caesar.

Despite the unsettling self-portraits, De Feo turns out to be not an angry, disaffiliated

street artist but a self-confessed “wearer of many hats” and an amiable high-school art teacher (in Fairfield County, Conn.), loving father to his five-year-old daughter, Marianna, and the author of a well-received children's book, *Alphabet City: Out on the Streets* (Ginkgo Press). But, as he explains to me on the phone from New York, the corrosive self-portraits were begun three years ago during a dark time when he and his wife were splitting up. “People would see these new images on the streets and phone or e-mail me to ask if I was all right and to try to find out what on earth was wrong with me.” In the end, he says, making the self-portraits “was empowering.”

Empowering for him, satisfying for us. The fact is that, lacerated with grief or not, these vivid pictures, painted with acrylics on antique maps (De Feo loves to paint on maps, of which he owns thousands) have a timeless quality and odd nobility that lie deeper than the hectic, hit-and-run painting techniques that power them. De Feo is a fine, inventive colourist, and his self-portraits glow with a richness that lends an art-historical stability to their convulsive immediacy. There are only five self-portraits here, but that's all it takes to represent the forcefulness of which De Feo's art is capable.