



Fred Tomaselli in his garden in East Williamsburg. Mr. Tomaselli began gardening in California, where he planted vegetables to camouflage his marijuana plants.

THE two fig trees, the artist Fred Tomaselli said, had begun their lives as cuttings. The previous owner of the property, Vincent Pietromatire, brought the cuttings in the 1930's from Naples, Italy, to East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where they eventually took root among the fruits and vegetables in his garden. When Mr. Pietromatire died in 1997, Mr. Tomaselli — still in the process of buying the property — found himself in a local funeral parlor, among a tightly knit group of his soon-to-be, he hoped, neighbors.

"Whatever you do," Mr. Tomaselli recalled a woman telling him, "you better keep those fig trees alive." During the cold months, she suggested, he should wrap the trunks and branches with burlap. Another mourner shook his head. Roofing insulation worked much better, he said, especially with a plastic tarp cover. Someone else insisted on a five-gallon bucket placed over the tops of the trees, like roofing.

"Suddenly," Mr. Tomaselli said, "there was this big discussion at the funeral home, with all of these hilarious, gesticulating Italian families going on about figs."

Mr. Tomaselli, whose father is Italian, laughed that day, but he felt a certain pressure, he said. By then all that was left of the garden "was a dirt lot, with these vestigial fig trees."

Nine years later the fig trees, happily, are thriving. And Mr. Tomaselli, 50, has coaxed a fragrant array of irises, columbine, orange poppies, lavender, arugula, red currants, plums and two kinds of strawberries from the neglected landscape.

# The New York Times



“Migrant Fruit Thugs” (2006) depicts two birds of an imagined species. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.

Evidence of his green thumb can be seen in a show of new works at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea. All of the major pieces include pressed leaves from his garden.

Of the 12 paintings in the show, one in particular, “Migrant Fruit Thugs” (2006), has a storybook quality. It presents two birds of an imagined species perched regally on a tree branch, surrounded by leaves from Mr. Pietromatire’s fabled fig trees. The stars in the night sky appear like psychedelic explosions. The fig leaves, ranging from olive to gold, appear to flutter in the wind, even as they sit trapped, unmoving, in resin.

“I think that’s when the work started getting good,” Mr. Tomaselli said, “when I started acknowledging the importance of endeavors like gardening. You need to be open to the way your life works and not deny it. It makes the work better.”

For him gardening, like painting, instills a sense of profound wonder. The pressing of leaves (this process takes three weeks) is followed by the slow buildup of his surfaces, in which leaves, photo collage elements and paint are suspended in layer upon layer of poured resin; the last stage is careful sanding and polishing.

It requires a combination of concentration and enchantment, he said, and inevitably he gets lost in the process.

“That’s the key,” he said. “The things that I love are the things I get lost in. With gardening it’s the same thing.”

“Avian Flower Serpent” (2006) depicts an oversize eagle clutching a

snake in its talons amid pressed rose leaves. In “Hang Over” (2005), leafless tree branches are draped with garlands of pills and photo-collaged hands, eyes, mouths and butterflies. Darwinian struggles appear in the painted grass below, which includes a variety of pressed weeds with chrysanthemum and rose leaves.

IN life and in art Mr. Tomaselli presents a mass of contradictions. In 1989, when many of his friends were treating their AIDS with prescription pharmaceuticals, he began what became a signature motif: collaging pharmaceuticals into his paintings. In 1990 organic narcotics like hemp began appearing alongside meticulous, kaleidoscopic arrangements of birds, flowers, insects, lips and eyeballs, painstakingly cut from plant catalogs, magazines and field guides. Although Mr. Tomaselli says he hasn’t used LSD since 1980, he was quoted several years ago as saying, “LSD has colonized part of my DNA.” In 1994 his paintings were temporarily detained at customs in Paris — Mr. Tomaselli said he suspected they were considered contraband, maybe because of the embedded drugs — and the Galerie Anne de Villepoix held his show’s opening with no art on display (much to the titillation of French Conceptualists). More recently the curator Paul Schimmel included five large Tomaselli paintings in his high-profile group show “Ecstasy: In and About Altered States,” at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles, as Mr. Tomaselli’s major solo survey, “Monsters of Paradise,” completed its European tour. (The show’s only United States appearance was at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, last September.) Though he gained notoriety for his use of drugs, recreationally and in his artwork, Mr. Tomaselli has remained relatively mum on the subject of his long-term obsession with gardening.

Born in Santa Monica, Calif., he grew up in Santa Ana, where his father, a former draftsman and Fuller brush salesman, struggled to provide for his wife and their six children. In the late 1970’s, when Mr. Tomaselli was a self-described “drugged-up punk rocker” attending [California State University](#) in Fullerton, he lived in a house with a small backyard, where he began his first garden.

“First I started growing pot,” he said. “Then I started growing tomatoes to hide the pot. Then I started getting into all of these cool vegetables camouflaging the pot. Then I started growing flowers.”

After graduating in 1982 with a degree in painting and drawing, he moved to downtown Los Angeles, where, he said, he found solace gardening on his rooftop, several flights above his skid row neighborhood. In 1987, on another rooftop, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, he continued cultivating plants. Ten years later he moved to his current home, returning to “real dirt, real ground and real trees.”

James  
Cohan

# The New York Times



Fred Tomaselli, *Hang Over*, 2005, Leaves, pills, acrylic, resin on wood panel, 84 x 120 inches

Having substituted the creation of what he has called “eye-candy” for actual drug use, Mr. Tomaselli continues to view painting as a window to alternative realities.

“The way I arrange nature in my work mimics the way I arrange nature in my garden,” he said. “Scraping away and subtracting is like pulling up a plant. There’s this constant give and take. You’re arranging imagery, making aesthetic choices. Gardens, like paintings, evolve over time.”

HIS garden, like his art, has required nonstop attention.

“Sometimes I find him out here at 5 in the morning, gardening away,” said his wife, Laura Miller, a writer and graphic designer. Once, she said, he filled their car with old computer monitors, printers, cellphone batteries — so-called e-waste — and drove to the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. After unloading his garbage, he filled the car with fresh compost. Composed of old Christmas trees and leaf litter from city parks, the compost aerates his garden’s dense clayish soil, he explained, and provides nutrients.

The Tomaselli garden is 25 feet wide and flanked on three sides by adjacent gardens. The lack of tall shade trees gives the landscape the sunny, expansiveness of a farm. Most of Mr. Tomaselli’s neighbors, in keeping with European agricultural tradition, grow their own fruits and vegetables.

“If I didn’t grow tomatoes, I’d be run out of town,” Mr. Tomaselli said. “It’s all about food back here. There are no ornamental trees. They don’t allow them.”

With his garden’s progress has come the emergence of birds.

“The mockingbirds and cardinals are back here big time,” he said. “But still less than I’d like.” A year ago he spotted a red-bellied woodpecker. Hummingbird sightings are common.



Fred Tomaselli's *Avian Flower Serpent*. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.

A trellis of red and white roses runs along the garden's north border, and there's a small lawn for his 8-year-old son, Desi. ("I can't wait till it's all wild and crazy again," he said, "but my son needs a spot to run around with his buddies.") The patio has a grape arbor, providing shade for outdoor dining.

"I'm doing everything I can to make a southwest Mediterranean-style garden, like the one from my childhood," Mr. Tomaselli said.

In spite of all of his good intentions — and the advice from his neighbors — his fig trees suffered a setback two winters ago, when they died down to their roots. Reports suggested that the fig trees throughout Brooklyn had also been afflicted, which led to speculation by some neighbors that the cause was fallout from 9/11.

"Ridiculous," Mr. Tomaselli said. "It was clearly caused by the cold."

Although his fig trees' recovery has been steady, they aren't yet producing what they once had: about 100 figs a season. Referring to the five-gallon buckets his neighbor had recommended as protection from the cold, Mr. Tomaselli said: "The big one used to be a two-bucket tree. Now it's only one bucket."

Still, he said, "they've had a very good year."