

Playing the Fool

Francesco Clemente takes on the Tarot card, using friends Brice Marden, Philip Glass, Diane von Furstenberg--and himself--- as models



The Fool, a self-portrait by Francesco Clemente.

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Francesco Clemente has decapitated playwright **Edward Albee**, strung up fellow artist **Brice Marden** by one foot, and covered his own studio assistant, **Ricardo Kugelman**, with giant bees. This is no crime spree, but part of Clemente's take on tarot cards, the centu-

ries-old game of divining the future. And it isn't always pretty.

Clemente tried his hand at reading cards and delved into ancient writings about the practice before embarking on a series of works depicting each of the 78 tarots. "I never imagined how similar the activities of reading the tarots and painting a picture are," he says. "In both cases, there is the effort to be completely present, and at the same time, to remove completely oneself from the picture." Exhibited at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence last fall, the images are now collected in a book, *Francesco Clemente: The Tarots*, published by Hirmer.

The artist's major arcana consist of 22 recognizable trumps: watercolor portraits of Clemente intimates such as **Terence Koh** (as the Devil), **Philip Glass** (the Judgment), **Fran Lebowitz** (Justice), and **Diane von Furstenberg** (the Force), who is shown calmly prying open the jaws of a lion. The minor arcana, divided into four suits (wands, cups, disks, and swords), encompass both portraiture and more abstract symbols.

According to curator **Max Seidel**, Clemente is the first major artist to represent the tarots as a group portrait of his friends and family. "The portraits painted by Clemente harmonize so well with the tarot figures that the combination appears natural and almost obvious," he notes in an essay in the book. Seidel himself makes a cameo as the Chariot, a cross-legged figure tethered to a pyramid and peeking out from behind violet curtains.

So how did Clemente decide to depict **Jasper Johns** as the Pope or have **Kiki Smith** proffer an hourglass as the Queen of Disks? "The choice is a result of a reading I made of myself and of the person. I have imagined the connection of every person with a card," he explains. "It is not hard to portray artists, as artists portray themselves, and their mystery is in the clarity of their intention."

Clemente begins and ends the series with self-portraits. He's on the book's cover, in the role of the Fool, holding a knapsack on a stick. "The Fool is the zero, pure potential, someone standing at the gate, on the eve of a great journey. I spend my time on that gate, waiting to make that journey," Clemente says. "The tarots allow me to hope that this wait is not just a foolish game." Traditionally, the rascally Fool carries the suits away in a bag at the end of the

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game, but Clemente himself wants to create more access to his tarots. He plans to have his drawings produced into actual sets of cards.

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