

“Fall to Grace”

2012. Mixed media, and collage on canvas. 29.25”w x 35.5”.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Franz and Hilda Neumann’s children: Mike Newman, Claus Newman, and Nancy Newman, and from artists Rowan Pope, and Emily Weber.

Franz Robert Neumann was born in 1916 in a small German town to parents who openly opposed the Nazi party. During World War II, he was drafted into the German Air Force where he performed acts of sabotage to protest Hitler’s regime. For these acts, Neumann was court marshaled, and sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted, and he was transferred to a concentration camp where he remained until the Ally liberation. The piece entitled, “Franz Neumann, Saboteur” captures his ordeal.

Hilda Neumann grew up in a show business family. Her great-grandparents, her grandparents and her parents performed in a world-class bicycle act that travelled all over the world, including Russia and the United States. They often performed in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and travelled with that show as well. Before the war, the family was well off, living in a spacious villa in the mountains. As a girl, Hilda wanted for nothing, and her wardrobe included several fine dresses. All of that changed in a flash when the family learned that Russian soldiers were approaching and planned to commandeer their villa as a base. The family fled during the night, packing only what they could carry on their backs. Hilda was told that she could only bring one of her beautiful dresses with her. Despite losing her home and all her possessions (the fall), she and her family persevered. “The show must go on!”

After the war, Neumann was the leader in a “Big Band” style orchestra that was part of a variety show put on to entertain American troops. In the upper left hand corner, the canvas contains a picture of Franz leading his band. The show also included a world-class bicycling act in which Franz’s future wife, Hilda, performed along with her family. Hilda’s role was to balance upside down on her father’s head while he sat on her uncle’s shoulders as the uncle rode around on a bicycle. Many years before, in the late 1800s, Hilda’s great aunt had acted in this role during a command performance for Queen Victoria. Sadly, the great aunt fell to her death during the show. To honor the tragedy,

Queen Victoria ordered that a glass coffin be built for the great aunt, and she was placed in that coffin before her body was shipped back to Germany.

When Franz and Hilda were not on stage, the two would go out with other members of the troupe, including Hilda's family and visiting American celebrities who guest starred in the show. One evening, Louis Armstrong joined the after-show party at a restaurant, and bought Hilda some ice cream. Hilda's father jokingly admonished Armstrong to "knock it off," reminding Louis that he had to lift his daughter during the show, and more ice cream meant more to lift. After dating for two years, the couple married, and had two sons, Claus and Mike. A third son was born after the couple immigrated to Minnesota.