

# Friction Between the Inside and the Outside: The Visionary Work of Fred Tomaselli

*“These chemical cocktails [embedded in the paintings] can no longer reach the brain through the bloodstream and must take a different route to altering perception. In my work, they travel to the brain through the eyes.” —Fred Tomaselli*

What happens when Eastern and Western decorative traditions meet psychotropic substances, organic matter, and found objects? The result is a portal into the mind and process of artist Fred Tomaselli.

Tomaselli builds his intricate compositions by layering fragments of the world—both natural and manufactured—onto wooden panels. He might begin by arranging prescription pharmaceuticals, street drugs, and over-the-counter medications alongside clipped images from field guides and magazines. Leaves from his garden and even insects attracted by bright studio lights are incorporated into imagery that hovers between figurative representation and abstraction. Each layer of material is sealed beneath clear, polished resin. The result is a hybrid of collage, painting, and sculpture.

Tomaselli describes his work as a sort of “chemical cocktail” that combines actual controlled and nonprescription substances with the “buzz” of newspaper headlines and other culturally charged artifacts. Through his process, he creates art that acts both as a lens, focusing

our attention on the strangeness of social and cultural realities, and as a mirror, inviting viewers to recognize their connection to the wider world. Tomaselli’s work often reflects his concerns around issues such as climate change, forest fires in his home state of California, the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on society, and systemic racism.

Tomaselli credits his experiences with LSD as a formative influence on how he perceived the world, opening new pathways for imagining and creating his art. He stopped using LSD in the 1980s but started embedding physical drugs into the artwork in 1989. As he recounts, “I started originally with aspirin, Sudafed, stuff like that—then I needed to throw some subcultural drugs in there because I think it’s all about the same thing; relief from pain, pleasure, desire, altered consciousness.”

Fred Tomaselli’s work exists in a space of generative tension between visual extravagance, cultural observation, and altered perception. Through his process, he creates work that functions as both window and mirror, navigating the friction between inner experience and external reality.









FRED TOMASELLI *Untitled*, 2020. Leaves, photo collage, acrylic and resin on wood pane, 72 x 72 in. (JCG11322) © Fred Tomaselli 2023. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York. (previous spread) *Untitled*, 2020, detail.



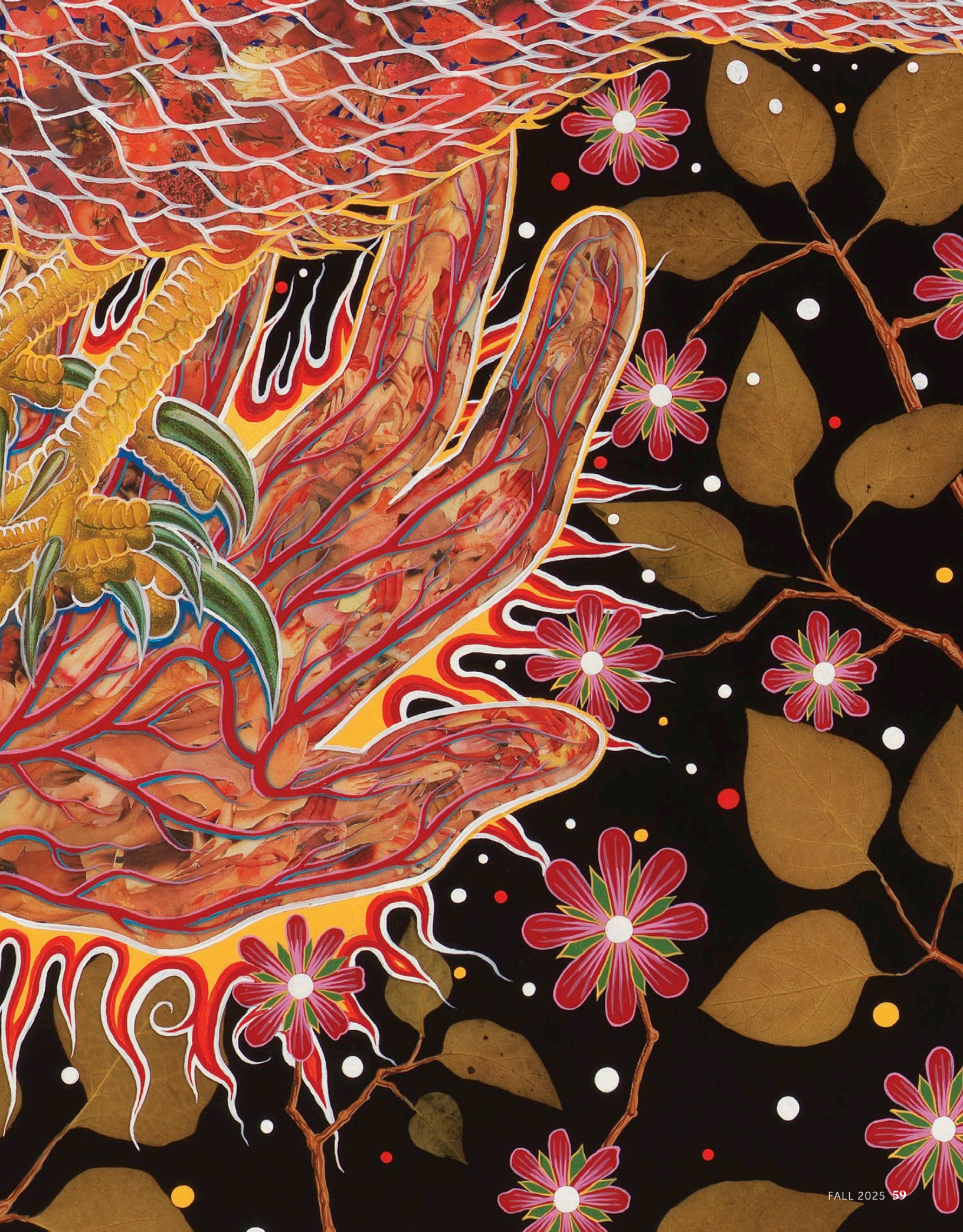


FRED TOMASELLI *Vermilion Flycatcher*, 2023. Leaves, acrylic, photo-collage, and resin on wood panel, 72 x 72 in. (JCG15757) © Fred Tomaselli 2023. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica. (following spread) *Vermilion Flycatcher*, 2023, detail.













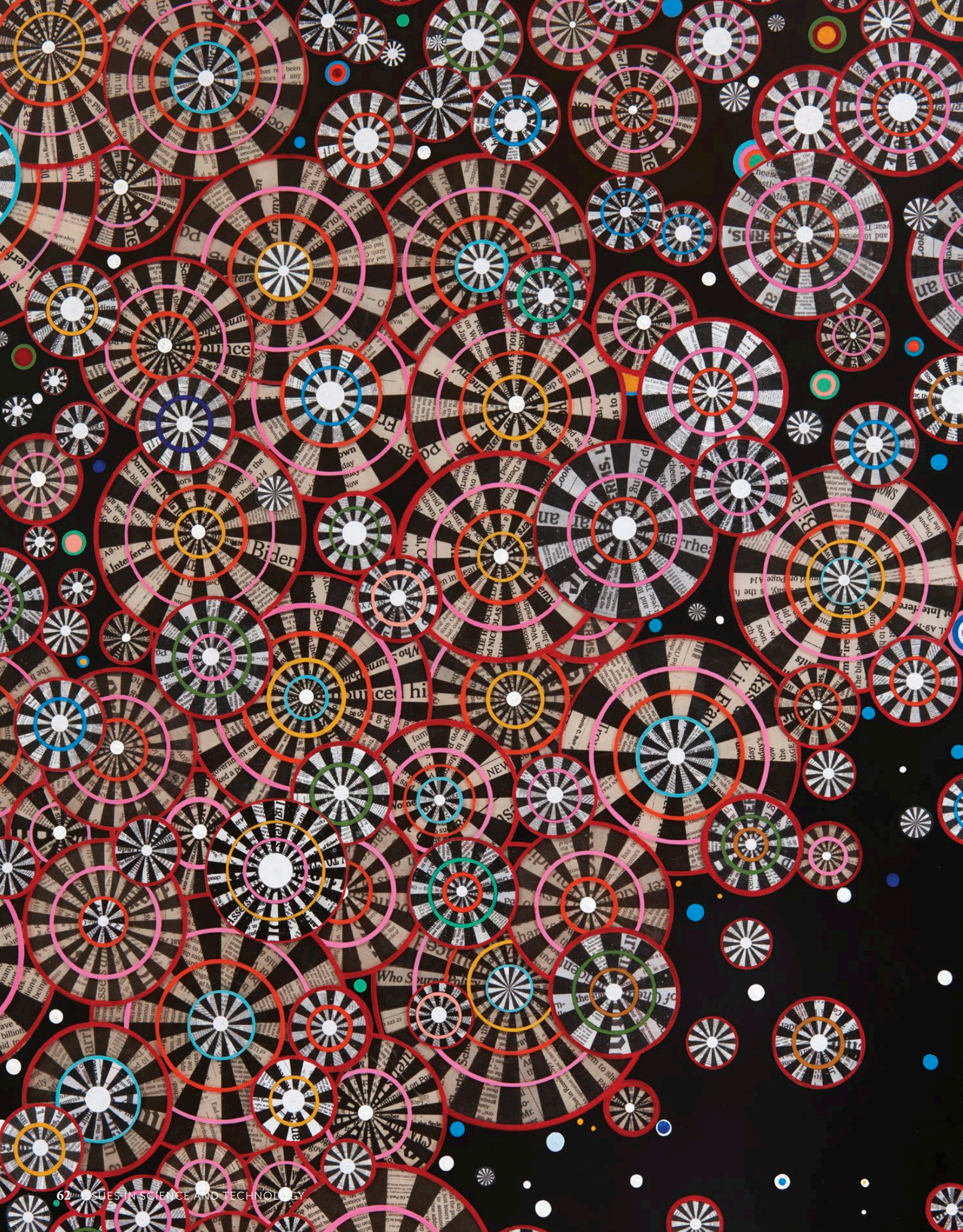
FRED TOMASELLI *Breathing Head*. 2022. Leaves, photocollage, acrylic, gouache, resin on wood panel, 60 x 60 in. (JCG1437). © Fred Tomaselli 2022. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.





FRED TOMASELLI *Gyre*, 2014. Photo-collage, leaves, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 84 x 60 in. (JCG7000)  
© Fred Tomaselli 2022. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.









FRED TOMASELLI *Honeycreeper*, 2022. Leaves, photo collage, acrylic and resin on wood panel, 84 x 60 in. (JCG13723) © Fred Tomaselli 2022. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle. (right) *Honeycreeper*, 2022, detail.



