

June Leaf: Life Out of Life

BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

One of June Leaf's images is, typically, a play within a play—a painted montage incorporating a drawing and Polaroid photographs. The drawing depicts a prehistoric-looking bird, wings spread, rising from a sketchily indicated machine run by a gleeful humanoid who is about to pull a spool-like "starting pedal." Above his head is written: "To create life out of life!! That's what I want to do!!"

This drawing, reconstructed in several overlaid sheets, is being pinned up on a wall by the artist's photographed hands. To the left is a painted window, beyond which lies a landscape and a small house. Before it, at a table, sits a painted man whose face from mustache up is a photograph and whose expression echoes that of the drawn "creator." The whole sheet is executed in the rapid and wickedly accurate strokes for which Leaf is known. The technique is "expressionist," more or less spontaneous, but the content is complex and carefully structured. The man at the left and the landscape behind him could be said to represent life as reality or realism. The escaping bird might be life as nature, or the natural machine, while below, the hands that tinker with the realism, with nature and with the machine-maker himself, are the artist as life-giver. The hands are closest to the viewer; they come from our space, while everything else is in the picture. They piece together all the torn bits of paper. But if Leaf is creating "life out life," where does the art come in?

Her highly successful first one-woman show in New York was "Street Dreams" at Allan Frumkin in 1968-69. It included a painted, stuffed life-size female figure standing next to a life-size upholstered circus horse, a *Tin Theatre* with clanking mechanized figures jerking to Dixieland tapes, and the centerpiece—*Ascension of Pig Lady*, a stage set featuring an almost mythical composite of all those blowsy biscuit-fleshed ladies that had squatted, paraded, danced and postured cheerfully and wistfully through Leaf's paintings for a decade. The Pig Lady first appeared to the artist in the persona of a waitress in "the dinkiest, most moving little" restaurant on Second Avenue: "she turned out to be a religious fanatic and said she was possessed by demons." One of the main characters in the drama of Leaf's work, she has appeared in numerous forms. "If there was going to be another Messiah," Leaf said in 1969, "it would appear in someone who would never suspect it, like a waitress. And she would turn into a pig, a big pink pig . . . maybe a pig is the image of our century. Everyone is in that picture."¹

Leaf enjoys the anecdotal aspect of her art and called her 1970 show "How the Storyteller Learned from her Characters." However, she is not a "narrative artist." She is trying to make myths from the commonplace. I wrote of "Street Dreams" that it represented a familiar segment of American literary fantasy but was harder to place as visual art;² it fused the great tradition of painterly satire with the harsh pathos of the penny arcade, the honkytonk carnival, the junk shops and joke stores Leaf had haunted in her native Chicago. In "Street Dreams" she exorcised the Pig Lady and her jive-dancing city



slicker partner and her pram-pushing, curler-headed, gum-chewing, sequin-bikined sisters and the cherubs and the tinsel that keep the asphalt jungle habitable. Leaf has always been a city girl, having lived in Chicago, Paris and New York. When in 1971 she moved to Mabou, a rural town in Nova Scotia, she was a mature artist who had been working over 20 years, and the kind of artist whom isolation could serve well.

The fantasies nourishing her work until then had always been, in a sense, public—more concerned with projection and performance than with introspection, more with how people acted than why. Without the instant stimulants offered by 42nd Street, her world now bounded by sea and sky and her relationship with a much-admired man, she turned to inner mechanisms. Leaf had always enjoyed building, tinkering. She became interested in microbiology, as though for protec-



June Leaf: *Albert*, 1973, collage and acrylic on paper, 15½ by 24 inches. Madison (Wisc.) Art Center.

tion against the vastness that lay beyond the windows. The images never literally found their way into her work, but they affected her philosophy. Years before, in the mid-'50s, she had abandoned the prevalent expressionism for a period to make "severely analytical naturalistic drawings" of "worlds peopled with snails, rabbits and ants."³ Now her search for a rational way in which to deal with the emotions she was experiencing in this drastic "change of life" appeared as the coils and wheels and gears and spools of curious machines, sometimes anatomically incorporated into figures, like visible incarnations of her ponderings.

"The Operation is Delicate" is the inscription on a drawing of the artist's hand holding between thumb and forefinger a tiny figure bending backwards into an arch. "Days like this are paradise," she wrote one sunny winter afternoon, "but they

are overbalanced by something else. It can be hellish here. SKY ICE ON WATER. But I stay anyway." In another letter she expanded on the contrast: "I long for the city. I miss it. My roots are there. I love the feel of the sidewalk—the shiny hard cosmetic packages in Woolworth's. The tacky clothes—I'm at a window: in a restaurant. . . . I have everything. But it is a *lust* which I can satisfy in one afternoon and then I go home to Mabou. There I have just an ordinary life—which I descend to—because—this emotion, here does not last if I live in the city all the time. I get on a bus when I need it and there's my STREET DREAM, world."

The immense nervous energy that goes into whatever Leaf does was at first somewhat dissipated by the "peace" of country living. The transitional work from the first year in Mabou, shown in 1973 at Terry Dintenfass, was a little tentative and



Far left *Red Top*, 1976, painted tin, 17½ inches high. Dintenfass Gallery.

Left Top *Maker*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 52 by 31 inches. Dintenfass Gallery.

lacked the flash of "Street Dreams." Yet it was her most autobiographical period, the subject of most of these small drawings, paintings and collages being the adaptation of her own flamboyant personality to rural life, new spaces, and this added another level to her work. Domestic detail appeared in Polaroid photos of places and people fragmented and reconstructed. (Leaf sees Polaroids as preferable in their immediacy to other photographs.) A repeated image was the old house she and her friend were rebuilding, almost always seen from the inside, interior vistas with windows shielding the occupant from the overwhelming magnificence of the land, sea and sky outside.

There is always something of a horror vacui in Leaf's work, especially noticeable in the landscapes. She seems to prefer to confront those bleak spaces with an intellectual instrument—her probing poles, machines, measuring devices, or just irony—or at some physical remove (her drawings often include a bare hill, a cliff over the sea, the sky, seen through a window frame). Nature has always interested her, especially in its evolutionary structure, but it figures in her art primarily as the background of the grand design against which her characters act out their hopeful and humorous dramas. Parallels might be drawn between looking through a microscope and the role of the figurative artist, who sees behind the masks and plots the little destinies, the thought processes, the reasoning energies that separate with dubious virtue humans from animals.

Leaf's characters are busy, busy—some of their own volition, some governed by strings and giant hands, some actually appearing as three-dimensional marionettes and finger puppets. A figure sewing itself up, the cat's cradle, the geodesic dome, the unraveling of a problem, the spinning woman, the ritual treadmill are other themes. "By making everything yourself, you find out basic principles. And the more you know about life the less befuddled you're apt to be."⁴ Thus common to many of her figures is that "aha!!" or "Eureka!!" look, or one of wicked craftiness, found most often when the figure is stirring a pot, fitting together rods, wheels, springs, strings—in other words, making something. "I can only believe what I touch," says Leaf. While she would hardly be categorized as a "process artist," the making process is of the greatest importance to her. She retains an industrial (as opposed to an electronic) mentality, preferring, so far, hardware to software. She is a carpenter, a builder, loves wiring, mo-

tors, popular science, and recalls a step-grandfather in Missouri who made birdhouses and showed her "people could make things with their hands."⁵ She also recalls the day when she was very small and knew that she too was to make things with her hands: "I was sitting under a table sewing a beautiful gauzy blue curtain and my mother's legs and feet were near me. I sewed gloves, a dress, a hat. I knew I would make everything one stitch at a time."⁶

Sometime in the early '70s, Leaf's highly expressive simian protagonists (by then usually sexless, bald, pot-bellied) were joined by another breed—expressionless, attenuated abstract silhouettes recalling Giacometti's striding loners. They exist as flat metal reliefs and movable hand sculptures as well as in two dimensions. If male, they often wield long poles, tilting at the landscape or at each other for lack of windmills; if female, they raise shorter wands in a commanding gesture. The fat-faced ones perform, tell stories, make fools of themselves, paint, dance, play, scheme and cheat. The lean, detached ones operate in a more rarefied atmosphere, gravely measuring or surveying their environments. For all their fragility, both breeds seem determined to conquer or at least fathom nature. One squat creature bemusedly draws his own frame, while another trails his giant brush in the dust and chews his hand in anguish, having failed to make his mark on the surroundings. In another series the top of a figure's head is sawed off and tilted back like the lid of a pot while he fiddles with the visceral contents of the cranium and announces: "I have discovered that thought is infinite."

Leaf's characters are no mere symbols. They are fleshly and feeling, if absurd, beings; their faces graphically express a full range of fear, incredulity, bafflement, awe, glee, rue, apprehension, mischief, malice—even evil. ("I have to see the evil. I confess it," she says, "and for me it evokes the beauty and passion I felt in those terrible joke stores in Chicago.") They try to figure it all out by themselves, but up there somewhere is the Top Maker, depicted in one drawing as a mad, perhaps evil genius pulling the twisted string to make a little flat figure spin, while others helplessly await their turns below. Leaf's people are either self-defined or exploited, victims or manipulators, though they exchange roles too. They feverishly feel their heads, clutch their bodies and try to reason with their incongruous environments. Sometimes they give up. Cross references abound in this world. The artist as *dea ex machina* delineates the real and the fantastic. The "flat" or more abstracted figures are "made" as toys or idols by the pudgy ones; they then reappear as objects in realistic self-portraits, as isolated totems on the wall, or autonomously confronting each other in their own habitats. An archetypal struggle often seems to be taking place between the real and the ideal.

When this work was shown at Dintenfuss in the fall of 1976, it was casually tacked up on the walls in tiers, as though still in the studio. Image after image flowed through the large space like a visual metaphor for the making process itself. Yet later Leaf wrote: "I didn't paint what I wanted to paint in that show. I wanted to show that there was a woman who was like a 'guru'—or toy maker and she was like a spider with many arms always trying to control 'life'—but around her was nature—free, everflowing, eternal. Always there would be conflict—to hold on or to let go.' I am happy to be part of this evolution; the primitive and grasping part of my mind submitting to the greater and more powerful and eternal forces around me. I am just learning. I am a crazy plant."

It is no coincidence that her recent work has pictured the head as chamber and container (and perhaps also stomach or womb, as the contents sometimes appear as tangled intestines). Leaf has always made rooms, boxes—the most extraordinary example being her 1965 *Vermeer Box*, in which a hag-like figure sits at a table telling fortunes in a glittering metal-and-mirror-quilted room where the meditative detail of Dutch 17th-century genre painting, which Leaf loves, has been nightmarishly recreated from tin cans and modern effluvia. "When I returned to Mabou," she wrote after a trip

to New York that included a visit to the Metropolitan Museum to see the Dutch paintings. "I understood more why I was drawn to these calm and peaceful scenes. The exterior is peaceful and somehow I could deposit my 'earthquake-feeling women' into rooms of order and calm."

Leaf herself is, of course, the earthquake-feeling woman par excellence. Her art has the sensitivity of a seismograph, and its content is the continuous upheaval humans make of the world. Because she sees life with a kind of megalomaniac humor, the absurdity of the human condition tends to overwhelm its grandeur, but her lovable figures, hopping and skipping and giggling and moaning their way through disaster, are also tragic. They fear nature—and they *are* nature, especially the women, who are often expanded to macrocosmic proportions to become stages (as in *Woman Theater*, 1968, where the abdomen is a framed proscenium on which dance marionettes controlled by the "mother") or landscapes (as in *Computer Woman as Landscape*, 1975, in which three versions of an armored, spread-legged figure with fragments of her internal structure turned into the walls of a fortress are accompanied by a map key designating various areas as "mountains," "lowlands," "water," "unexplored routes" or "under construction"). In the late '60s, Leaf made a float for a Freedom Day parade in New York which was a seductively reclining Statue of Liberty; she was destroyed by a band of neo-Nazis, who tore her apart and "literally raped her."⁸ A project for a feminist monument in the '70s centers around a goblet-shaped fountain which becomes a nude woman generously overflowing into the landscape; the same figure, holding a bow string, reappears in a conglomerate portrait with other women who are twirling tops and holding flat female figures aloft like wands to ward off evil.

While Leaf's men tend to be cautiously neutral or almost cartoon-like sheepish apes, her women are full of life and seem to epitomize both good and evil—witch-like hags who are, nevertheless, enjoying themselves immensely or good natured hedonists with aging, comfortable bodies, tormented by life but never losing their appetites for more of it. The direct image of the intelligent woman is restricted to self-portraits or an occasional "straight" portrait of a friend from New York or Mabou; such images represent "the reincarnation of Leonardo da Vinci, as all good liberated women are." In a letter Leaf fantasized, "I was drawing a locomotive and I was ecstatic and I thought of what would happen if all the men in the world would leave the earth to find another planet to populate and the woman would be left with all the machines and she would not be able to make them work. All of the systems of modern life support would break down unless she could maintain them. Maybe this is just part of evolution now. The human race must move outward (outer space) and women now must develop their cool-headed rational faculties." At the same time, she continues to think sensuously—for instance, "my insane desire to make machines by licking them first and thinking about them later." The synthesis of such polarities remains her major task.

Leaf has been called a "neurotic feminist,"⁹ and Leo Rubinien, perhaps preoccupied with stereotypes about women's art, reviewed her last show as "concerned with male-female antagonism and with the evisceration of both sexes . . . the idea of decay and estrangement of sensuality." He noted the elongated male figures with spears (I saw these poles as phalluses, but less as weapons than as measuring or distancing devices) and the "immobilized women" who "couldn't open their legs" as "prodded and goaded" by the big-footed and mobile men.¹⁰ Rather than the estrangement of sensuality, it seems to me that Leaf sometimes wallows in it and uses the stylized "thin" figures as foils or antidotes to the excesses of the shameless squat ones. Her mechanical brides are not opposed to sex so much as insisting on their right to *think* about it. And behind those "immobilized women"—Cycladically violin-shaped silhouettes towering majestically, sometimes within a ring, their arms raised in apparent incantation—is another image, that of the Great Goddess or the Ve-

nus of Willendorf, recalled as well by a 1949 collage—*Butterfly Lady*. Yet Rubinfien is more accurate when he says that Leaf's work is not "generically feminist" and "commutes easily between images specifically concerned with the condition of women and an idea of a uniformly human state." Her interest in "female" images such as interior spaces, mirrors, butterflies, windows, weavers and spinners is longstanding and not consciously attached to feminist ideology, to which she is generally indifferent.

June Leaf sees herself as a "simple soul who wakes up sometimes," a dreamer, a little girl buried in this lanky, unconventionally beautiful woman. Although sometimes as devious as a child, she does not hesitate to use her considerable intelligence. Her profound need to make her art more than pictures, to make of it a world-view, a revelation, is unfashionable these days. Like her virtuoso expressionist tech-



Butterfly Lady, 1949, paper collage and charcoal, 23 1/2 by 17 1/2 inches. Collection Joel Press, New York.

niques, her string-like line—languid, then tangled, then taut and sturdy—tempts excess.

She inspires hyperbole and escape tactics in critics who tackle her work. "Miss Leaf is an exception to everything, including every specific esthetic standard ever formulated," burred John Canaday, as he proceeded not to review her show.¹¹ When she is written about at all (this is the first monographic article on her work in an art magazine, and she has been showing for 25 years) she is usually treated as an immaculate conception or predictably Chicagoesque. In a 1974 *Artforum* Francis Naumann lumped her with those Chicago artists who have "ignored current art, preferring to make statements which in proud ignorance they take to be highly personalized and individualized—but which are really derivative."¹²

Fortunately, the view that "current art" is only what such magazines promote is no longer so widely held. Nor is Leaf's

work the isolated phenomenon others would like to think. She works out of the rich and sometimes macabre past of expressionist art as varied as that of Goya, José Guadalupe Posada, Ensor, Soutine or Rouault. In America, there are Philip Evergood (in his raw humanism and humor), Red Grooms (to whom she is all too often compared, despite basic dissimilarities), Claes Oldenburg (who was influenced in younger Chicago days by Leaf's exaltation of junk and jokes), Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, Irving Petlin and Ellen Lanyon (all originally from Chicago too). When in New York, Leaf knew well the obstinate milieu of new figuration that produced Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein, and as a teacher she was a powerful role model for younger artists unwilling to follow the avant garde into empty rooms. In 1969, Hilton Kramer called "Street Dreams" a historical event bringing Expressionism back into American art.¹³ Leaf has always been interested in what very different kinds of artists are doing and has recently become involved in video as a medium. Once married to a musician, living now with a photographer/filmmaker, even in Mabou, Nova Scotia she is less isolated from the other arts than most art-world artists. Yet she has always very clearly understood her own needs and has refused to compromise them to fill the needs of the readymade art audience. Her compulsive nature thrives on doing things the hard way.

The art world, with its emphasis on novelty, tends to dismiss as derivative images that look familiar in either style or content. Leaf's do look familiar, even in their freshness, and it is just this recognizability that makes them important. Surely the time has come when we are mature enough to go beneath the surface for innovation and cope with the familiar, even the universal, as well as with the "nouveau frisson" and the predictable reductions of modernism. Leaf's honesty ("embarrassing" and "vulnerable" are, significantly, words often used to describe it) offers a unique kind of visual wisdom. She has a world of her own; only artists who have this can live without the art world. She has written that she would work, "then I'd go out and live a little and more ideas would come. For a while I'd been thinking that I learned from painting. I'd forgotten that it was life I learned from. . . . I do not have great physical courage, but I have determination and endless hope and I AM A ROMANTIC."¹⁴ □

1. June Leaf, quoted by Grace Glueck in "Art Notes: 42nd Street Dreams," *New York Times*, Sunday, Dec. 22, 1968; also quoted in *Time*, Jan. 10, 1969, p. 44. All unattributed quotes in this article are from Leaf in letters to the author.

2. In the catalogue for "Street Dreams," Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York, Dec. 1968.

3. Franz Schulze in *The Chicago Daily News*, Oct. 17–18, 1970, and Herbert Lust in the catalogue for Leaf's show at the Gallery Bernard, Chicago, May 1972.

4. Leaf in Glueck, *op. cit.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Harmony Hammond has pointed out how much women's work today and in the past has been based on repeated marks or motions recalling stitches (*Heresies* No. 1, Jan. 1977); the looming figure is no longer mother but the artist, indicating Leaf's decision to retain some of the child-view in her art.

7. Leaf in Glueck, *op. cit.*

8. Leaf in *Time*, *op. cit.*

9. Quoted in a review of her 1974 Madison, Wisc., show.

10. Leo Rubinfien, *Artforum*, Dec. 1976, p. 63.

11. *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1973. A week later, however (Nov. 18, 1973), he did review it and, sounding a bit threatened, he praised her drawings by saying they had "all the immediacy of a freshly slaughtered lamb."

12. Francis Naumann, *Artforum*, Feb. 1974, p. 76.

13. Hilton Kramer quoted in *Thanks Sincerely, June Leaf*, Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisc., Dec. 21, 1973–Feb. 17, 1974.

14. Leaf in Glueck, *op. cit.* (and letter).

A retrospective exhibition of June Leaf's work, organized by Judith Russi Kirshner, was recently held [through Mar. 5] at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. The 28-page catalogue with an essay by Dennis Adrian is available for \$4 from the museum.



Left to right *Woman with Hoop*, *Woman Theater*, *Man with Top Hat*, *Fat Lady* and wall pieces from *Buster Brown* series, 1968, painted wood; installation at Madison Art Center, 1973–74.

Ascension of Pig Lady, 1969, stuffed canvas figures, painted wood, tin, 81 by 204 inches. Virginia Lust Gallery, Greenwich, Conn.





The New York Times

THREE-DIMENSIONAL TABLEAU: One of the stage sets by June Leaf now on display at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, 41 East 57th Street. The exhibition is called "Street Dreams."

Art: Robust Expressionism With Wit

June Leaf's Paintings at the Frumkin

By HILTON KRAMER

THE expressionist impulse, which dominated the American art scene during the nineteen-fifties, has so fallen out of favor among the artists of the sixties that one is more than a little shocked to discover a new and very gifted artist drawing upon the resources of expressionism with a tremendous energy, confidence and wit. Yet this is precisely what one finds in the exhibition called "Street Dreams" by June Leaf, currently on view at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, 41 East 57th Street.

This is Miss Leaf's first one-man show in New York, but there is nothing tentative or unformed about her work. It is remarkably forceful and robust—the product of an earthy imagination with a striking talent for projecting images that are at once ferocious and macabre, satirical and touching.

Miss Leaf is a figurative painter who works in the medium of three-dimensional pictorial construction. She makes cutout figures and entire tableaux of such figures, which are drawn with a good deal of graphic invention and painted with a dazzling virtuosity. These figures are figments of fantasy, actors in a dream that transforms common experience into harsh and comic allegories of the spirit.

As her work is installed at the Frumkin Gallery, it forms a total and highly theatrical environment. Indeed, "theater" is the keynote, for many of Miss Leaf's separate works are, in fact, either con-

structed as stage sets or consist of figures out of an imaginary performance. For Miss Leaf, the theater is a metaphor of the interior life—the life of the mind overcome by its own fantasies. And one of the pleasures her work affords is this audacious gift for significant spectacle. Miss Leaf has a very theatrical sensibility, but—what is equally important—she is also in command of a fund of ideas that keeps this sensibility constantly in touch with serious expressive tasks. She is that rare thing in painting today: a poet with a taste and a talent for complex images.

The particular forms her work takes—the cutout painted figures arranged in theatrical tableaux—are closest, perhaps, to the work of Red Grooms. Like Mr. Grooms, she can be very funny. But I think her imagery is more searching than Mr. Grooms's, and the emotional pressure of her best work—"Woman Theater," for example—makes Mr. Grooms's imagination seem boyish and innocent by comparison.

Her work will no doubt offend some tender souls, and those who look upon the art of painting as an enterprise restricted to the contemplation of pure form will find much here to irritate their sense of esthetic propriety. But for others—and particularly for those with an appetite for the kind of imaginative grasp of experience that has always been the special glory of the expressionist tradition—Miss Leaf's exhibition will be a welcome and pleasurable event.

Other exhibitions this week include the following:

Jane Freilicher (De Nagy, 29 West 57th Street): Land-

She Shows a Theatrical Sensibility in Work

scapes, figures, flower still lifes, portraits of friends—these are Miss Freilicher's abiding preoccupations. There is a fine delicacy of feeling in much of the work she devotes to these themes, but, as usual, she is rarely up to the challenge she sets for herself. In the current show, only one picture—the large landscape entitled "Late Summer"—seems to me completely successful. It is the best landscape painting by this artist I have seen. In the flower paintings, color is handled with more authority than in the past, but there are still problems in their pictorial architecture that Miss Freilicher seems incapable of overcoming. Still, the exhibition is an uncommonly pleasant one.

Calvert Coggershall (Parsons, 24 West 57th Street): These abstract paintings are divided into two groups: in the larger gallery, pictures that fairly burst with bright color and a dazzling luminosity; in the smaller gallery, dark close-valued works that are somber, delicate and meditative. There is a fine attention to chromatic detail in both groups of pictures, and an impressive reserve and compression. It cannot be said that Mr. Coggershall is original in his invention of form, but he takes hold of a well-established pictorial convention with real authority.

Reginald Neal (Sachs, 29 West 57th Street): To the tradition of geometric construction Mr. Neal adds some eye-teasing optical and chromatic variations. His works are constructed of plastics, and some are produced in editions. I find them quite boring.

JUNE LEAF

EDWARD THORP GALLERY

JOHN YAU, ARTFORUM, September 1988,
p.137-8.

In 1978, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago mounted a retrospective of June Leaf's art, which included works in various mediums (painting, gouache on paper, assemblages, and sculpture) that she had made since her teens. Now almost 60, Leaf seems to have been either overlooked or marginalized by the forces who author "official history." In many ways, and for many of the same reasons, her position in the art world parallels that of Nancy Spero and, until recently, of Louise Bourgeois. Not only have all three made their womanhood an integral part of their art, but they have also chosen to work with images, materials, and methods the art world has responded to reticently. Yet with their work, they have evolved an oeuvre that posits a subversive relationship to the dominant culture.

This exhibition, Leaf's first substantial show in New York in 12 years, consisted of 14 acrylic paintings. Except for *Stan Gilula*, 1987, and *Lou*, 1987, both imaginative portraits, the paintings are atmospheric, fantasy-filled landscapes which evoke affinities with the radiant worlds of Odilon Redon, J. M. W. Turner, and Louis Eilshemius. Leaf's world, however, is colder and bleaker. While the pale blues swirling through these paintings reflect a barren physical landscape (Leaf spends part of each year in Nova Scotia), they also embody the metaphysical weather suffusing her interiorized world.

Leaf initiates a dialogue between the process and a flexible vocabulary of invented images; between the loosely painted surfaces and the light diffusing through the various layers and shifts of paint; and between painterly scrawls and accents, and the figures and shapes these marks may suggest. It is out of this dialogue (both the working up of a cool wet atmosphere and the working back into it) that Leaf is able to discover as well as define the parameters of her fantasy world.

The process is intuitive. *The Pen on the Mountain*, 1986, for example, shows a turbulent cloud, or seascape, in which a mountain peak is visible. Balanced precariously but proudly on the summit is an abstract shape, the pen. The painting depicts an imaginary situation without telling the viewer either what led up to this event or what will happen next. Like

other works in the exhibition, the piece is emblematic. One of the recurring icons is that of an angel with long clumsy wings. The combination of grace and awkwardness, spiritual yearning and inescapable frustration, recalls Baudelaire's image of a poet in "Albatross." Like Baudelaire's doomed sea bird, Leaf's angels are alienated from both the earthly and spiritual realms. Vulnerable, isolated, and proud, these figures are survivors; they can be read as signs of a woman making her own way in an inhospitable world. One of the strengths of this work is that it doesn't ask for the viewer's sympathy. Like her angels, Leaf is too proud and self-contained to appeal to the viewer.

— John Yau

The New York Times

Art in Review
April 7, 1995

June Leaf

Edward Thorp Gallery 103 Prince Street SoHo Through April 22

Sometimes all an artist needs is touch, a distinctive yet ineffable way with materials, to get away with anything. June Leaf, an underrated member of the rich tradition of figurative art that came out of Abstract Expressionism, is such an artist. A feminist of the old school, she equates women's bodies with the frets of guitars, attaching them in both paintings and sculpture to swelling boatlike shapes that also cast them as figureheads. Her paintings are infused with a vague primordial narrative in which these figures and others inhabit abstract landscapes whose wavering, shifting surfaces are as much scratched into existence as painted.

She also makes small sculptures, mostly cut-out figures whose silhouettes evoke the figures on a Greek vase one minute and your next-door neighbor the next, and whose moving parts exude the simple mechanical wizardry of old toys. The everyday energy of the sculptures, more than one of which depicts a fighting couple, tone down the Amazonian intimations of the canvases, but ultimately it is the painting surfaces themselves, fluctuating fields of color and feeling, at once refined and raw, that do the convincing. ROBERTA SMITH

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; June Leaf -- 'Drawings: Past and Present'

By Ken Johnson

March 26, 2004

Edward Thorp

210 11th Avenue, near 24th Street

Chelsea

Through April 10

The estimable painter and sculptor June Leaf came of age in Chicago in the 1950's and has lived in New York since the early 60's. This extensive drawing retrospective says much about why she deserves to be better known and why she is not.

Though she draws with virtuoso skill, she has never committed to one readily recognizable style. And while she has persistently focused on humanist themes, and women in particular, her enigmatic ways with narrative and symbolism tend to discourage critical sound bites. Yet it is just that resistance to formal and thematic pigeonholing that makes a patient perusal of Ms. Leaf's exhibition worthwhile.

Already in her work from the 1940's and 50's, Ms. Leaf's versatility was evident in primitivistic images of totemic female figures, surrealist graphite drawings of women on operating tables and finely hatched ink drawings of mechanical structures that might have been found in Leonardo's notebooks.

Ms. Leaf would go on to produce haunting images of a huge grandmotherly figure, funky cartoons of suburban domestic life, autobiographical photographic collages with expressionistic painting added, sketches for absurdist machines (like a female figure with legs made from pencils) and, most recently, a painterly study for a nightmarish bird feeder made of wire bent in the shape of a human head with an elongated tongue for a perch. (That bizarre object is itself also on view.)

But whatever the style or form, Ms. Leaf's visionary ideas always emerge from a compellingly sensuous engagement with processes and materials. KEN JOHNSON

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ArtSeen

April 4th, 2008

June Leaf Paintings & Sculpture

by John Yau

Edward Thorp Gallery February 29 – April 5, 2008

Has anyone ever thought about the fact that June Leaf helped pave the way for a generation of women artists, including Kiki Smith and Daisy Youngblood, among others, and has never received an ounce of acknowledgment for it? These days you would think that the only woman artist over seventy-five is Louise Bourgeois. And yet, even if Leaf didn't pave anyone's way, and was in fact a completely isolated figure, as she has been called by some observers, her work—she paints, draws, and makes sculptures—demands far more attention than it has received. Perhaps the neglect is because she is a painter. Perhaps it is because her work doesn't fit into any the narratives routinely used to prop up far less interesting artists (like the ones that validate Jeff Koons instead of tagging him as a dumbed-down version of Claes Oldenburg and James Rosenquist). Perhaps it is because critics think her subject matter isn't hip enough, cool enough, obvious enough, or predigested enough. Or finally, perhaps it is because she is one of the only painters to take the sketchiness we associate with French painting, its roots in Impressionism and culmination in Pierre Bonnard, and make it gritty and undomesticated.

Only an artist of real imagination and verve could have done what she has done, which is synthesize the whimsy of Fragonard with the poignant bluntness of primitive art, and do so in a way that is neither nostalgic or a form of pastiche. In her recent exhibition, which consists of paintings of very different sizes as well as constructions involving a piece of fabric stretched between gears and handles, implying an endless, moving screen, and a number of figurative sculptures, including **Man as Gutter Spout** (2007), in which whimsy and wretchedness embrace as tightly as lovers spending their last night together. It is this embrace of opposites that animates her work, as well as elevates it to a realm far more worthy of poetry (connotation) than criticism (denotation). **Man as Gutter Spout** is a little more than a foot tall, made of hammered sections of tin, and with the gutter spout, his penis, sticking straight out. With arms pointing in opposite directions, and head tilted slightly up, he looks as if he is about to jump from his narrow perch (is he headed for water or for solid ground?).

For years, Leaf, who developed an allergic reaction to oil paint, has been using acrylic in ways that are nothing short of astonishing. She is able to imbue her paintings with an airy transparency, at once wet and full of light, that serves her purposes: to evoke an empty, primal landscape of grass, sand, and sky that is reminiscent of the Nova Scotia



"Man as Gutter Spout", 2007, Tin, 16.5h x 14.5w x 11d in.

countryside where she and her husband, Robert Frank, spend a considerable amount of time. Leaf's bleak but not necessarily abject landscape is the opposite of Fragonard's parks and gardens. Her paintings tend to be of a single, naked figure, who is often in a state that is simultaneously joyous and tormented. In the painting **Hanging Figure** (2006), a naked red man is hanging just above the ground, a rope tied around his wrist. There is no indication of who or what has put him in this predicament. This deliberate absence of information, of what preceded or what will follow, endows the situation with a feeling of permanence. At the same time, the pose suggests that the man isn't completely ill-at-ease, that in fact he may be dancing or trying to gambol across the field.

In **Landscape with Hanging Figure** (2006-2007), a naked man is seen from a distance, the rope seemingly draped around his chest. Is he being hoisted in the air, about to be received by the elements? Or is he being lowered to the ground? The man is turned away from us, and one leg is in front of the other, as if he is running. Is he running from us? And if so, what threat do we represent? Again, the artist offers no clue to the outcome of what we are looking at.

It is extremely difficult to work in an allegorical vein and not descend into obviousness. The whimsy that Leaf is able to meld with her otherwise disturbing predicaments give her work an emotional edge and poignancy that is exceedingly rare in contemporary art. The most ordinary event—**Man Turning Out a Light** (1989), a mixed media construction—becomes painful in its evocation of finality. In **Green Scroll with Figures** (2008), Leaf depicts figures on or near a tightrope, which she stretches between two cylindrical posts via gears and handles, suggesting that they will stay suspended forever. Time's winged chariot isn't hurrying near; it's carrying us toward our destination.

One senses that Leaf recognizes that fancifulness is a necessary and even practical antidote to the worry that routinely envelops us. At the same time, I had the nagging feeling that the hanging figures might have had their origins in something all too real and now largely unspoken of, what happened at Abu Ghraib. One of the strengths of Leaf's work is her ability to lead us to such a disturbing place without following any of the proscribed or institutionalized routes. This is not an artist who finds contentment in pointing the finger at others, because that's too easy and self-satisfied. Leaf isn't trying to prove herself exemplary, which is a posture after all. She knows that we are all hanging by our wrists, and that the lucky ones will be let down gently.

CONTRIBUTOR**John Yau**

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百虫洽
纯洁
宁静
尊敬

TOM
SACHS

JUNE
LEAF

VERA
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Drawing the Dance of the Unfinished Story

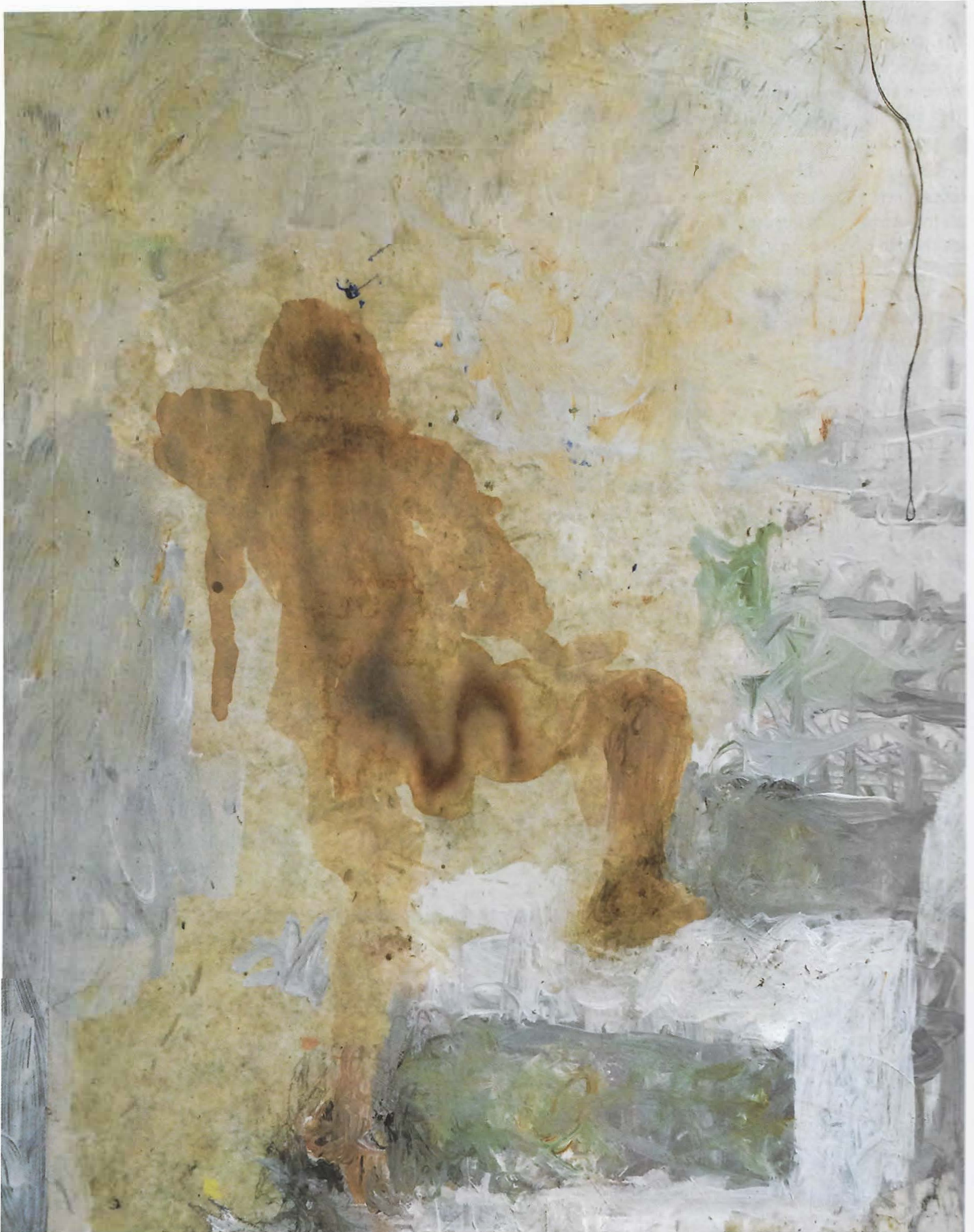
An interview with June Leaf

By Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh
Introduction by Meeka Walsh

June Leaf is the artful dodger, weaving in and out of the world, moving like a dancer, skirting fixed endings, always lifting and pointing toward the light. In the conversation which follows she talked about her always knowing she would be an artist, having achieved two particular things at the age of seven—a wonderful classroom drawing of the story of Joseph and his brothers and the recognition that while her life was full of light and wonderment, the world would not necessarily receive her in that way. Eager to share this favourite story of Joseph and its remarkable appearance on her drawing paper she raised her hand and moved to the front of the class where the teacher gave her permission to leave the room and use the toilet. June Leaf told us, “I stood there—I felt I was holding a light—and I looked at her and I looked at the drawing and I thought, ‘Oh that’s how it is.’ You see something and then you spend your life getting other people to see it. I wasn’t discouraged at all. I just saw how it works.”

June Leaf has made many fine small sculptures in tin and wire, some set on treadle sewing machines. They have a wonderful sense of play and implementation and a determination in their resolute occupation of space. These hand-operated mechanical sculptures are oddly coiled to action even when their activation results in nothing more aggressive than the issuing of a soap bubble or the rotation of a small, off-figured wheel. Like a Calder circus without the animals or Jean Tinguely’s fantastical, jerry-rigged and explosive machines, June Leaf’s small sculptures are themselves generatively explosive, without the immolation. Like plucked lyres, the tin and wire pieces virtually hum with energy. They are poignant metal devices set to capture and then break your heart. (In Mabou, Nova Scotia where she and her husband Robert Frank spend many months each year, she has constructed a large mended heart of 14 metal pieces which hangs by two hooks from an iron rod frame and swings and quietly sounds in the wind.)

There is a painting—a work in acrylic on paper on tinplate titled *Woman Carrying Infant Upstairs*, from 2011. At only 11 by 12.5 inches it is at the same time capacious enough to represent Leaf’s sustained topic of seeking an ascension toward the light. A figure mounts a staircase. She carries a loosely rendered baby, its arm falling limply behind it in the unguarded gesture of complete surrender exclusive to sleeping children. Consistent with Leaf’s open-ended narratives, the stairway is safe against a wall or out in open space but in either setting the palette is celestial: sky blue and golden light. The figures could be read as sepia, a pigment of iron oxide or Joseph Beuys’s hare’s blood. Whatever their metaphoric source, her colours are air and light. With infinite care and stealth the woman climbs the deep steps, placing her feet with the grace and precision of a dancer. The artist does describe herself so, saying she thinks like a dancer and that dancing and drawing are movements in space, both a choreography. When you look at the work *Woman Carrying Infant* you note the deep arch and high instep of the woman’s left foot and Leaf says, “That’s how it is to draw. Foot down, foot drop.”



June Leal, *Woman Carrying Infant Upstairs*, 2011, acrylic on paper on tinplate, 11 x 12.5 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

Horses are a frequent subject in Leaf's work—rendered in three dimensions or two because, she says, for a woman and the little girl who precedes her, the horse is “the prophecy of her power.” There is a sheet which the artist has identified as *Studies for Rider* and I think of 16th and 17th century Italian drawings by Carracci and Cantarini, for example, showing both the loose idea of gesture and form and the telling credible detail that gives conviction to a later, fully worked piece. It's a quality of latency and immanence that June Leaf's drawings also have.

The newest work, *Woman Drawing Man*, 2014, is sculpture, painting and drawing, as designated in the title. The slightly concave sheet of tinplate resting on a floor of the same material creates a stage set or a room or an enclosed world. It is sufficient. The man has been brought into being in acrylic—the brush marks at once gestural and deliberate. Both figures are naked. He stands with his arms lifted outward away from his body, looking down as the woman, a three-dimensional tin sculpture—a drawing in space—holds the pencil that is his maker. She kneels on the floor in front of him level with his thighs, her pencil lifted to the area of his groin. The work contains light. It's there in his quiet containment and interest as he looks down at the figure in front of him. It's in the transparency of the acrylic painted on the silvery tin surface; it's there in her concentrated application to the task of artist creator. June Leaf has always been a storyteller. She says she waits for the time in a day when the hand and the heart work together. This is evident in *Woman Drawing Man* which is also a story—a love story telling the connectedness of these two figures who are here a unity and a globe.

The interview which follows was conducted, not inappropriately, on February 14, 2014 in June Leaf's New York studio. We began the conversation with her recent work.

BORDER CROSSINGS: What is this new theme you're talking about?

JUNE LEAF: It came from a drawing of a woman washing a man. That's the origin of all this work. In this case she's drawing him. It took me eight months to make that figure and once I did it, everything broke. She really goes with him. What I was waiting for was to know the character and then I could draw. It was so hard technically because I'm working with very resistant material. But I'm very happy because finally I was able to give life to her and then I was free to draw her story. That's what it's all about. I only made a few drawings. I just made her head yesterday. I don't know if you can see the profile but she is like a seamstress making the man. You see the brush is like a dart; it shoots from the mind. In other words, I don't entirely know yet what she is doing. She is either sending the dart out of her mind, or she is drawing, or she is washing. I like the little penis. It is beyond sex.

There's also a child on the back of the centauress.

I had never made a child before and it was a big shock to make one.

1. *Woman Washing Man*, 2013 pencil on paper, 15 x 9 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

2. & 3. June Leaf's studio, 2014 New York. Photographs: Meeka Wabick.

4. *Woman Drawing Man*, 2014 acrylic on tinplate, 20 x 21 x 27 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.





The child came unbidden?

It was an immaculate conception. I had the man and the woman and all of a sudden there was a baby. It changed the whole view of what I'm doing because before that there was just the two of them and now with the baby, it's the world. I'm very happy about that.

There is something you are able to get in the gesture that is unique.

It's wonderment. It's all about being alive.

I want to pick up for a minute on this question of working with material. Did you really study auto mechanics?

I took a course on how an engine works. I did it because I had to learn to fix my car in Mabou in case we were stuck. Robert had a job in California and they had a course in how to take care of a car, so I took it but I didn't understand anything. It just made me love machinery more. Actually, that was when I was making the "Women Monument" series and I decided they were too big, so I made little ones. I decided I was going to do simple mechanics, one movement, either pushing or turning or pumping. Those are the three things I know how to do. It's a very simple repertoire.



1. & 2. *Man Cranking Machine* and detail, *Man Cranking Machine*, 2010–11, wood, wires and gears on treadle sewing machine, 29 x 26 x 19 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

3. *Scroll with Figures*, 2008, mixed media, 15 x 19 x 9 inches. Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York.

How do you make decisions about scale?

Well, the women were the size of buildings and I was going back to Mabou and I couldn't see any reason to make them that big. It was a practical decision and not an aesthetic one. Unless I had an army of people to help me, I couldn't make these women monument works. So I thought I would make them small because if they can work small, they can also work big.

Your small pieces punch way above their weight. Because it is all about proportion. I understood that's what Renaissance artists had; their proportions are exactly right. So no matter how big or small, the figure could fly; it could die; it could do anything. Regardless of the scale, the proportions will be the same from the navel to the eye. I went

out of my area of expertise and decided to figure out what makes a good figure drawing. I spent two years on that, I gave up all the imagery, and it was very hard. This was when I got my Fulbright and lived in Paris. I copied Vermeer, I copied Goya, I did life drawing from a model. I spent all my time coming to terms with that. I just recently came across a trunk full of sketchbooks—I was looking for something that I had lost—and I could see how I improved in my study of the figure. When I first came to Paris I was amateurish but then after six months there was evidence of a kind of knowledge. You could have respect for that person. I remember I was copying a Goya in the Louvre and I was coming down with very bad bronchitis. I used to get pneumonia very easily. It was a cold place and I was copying this Goya and I had to get the eyes and all





of a sudden, the eyes locked. There was a hair difference between that and the next stroke, but I could see it. I threw my brush on the ground and I heard this little voice, my voice, of course, saying, "Go home, go home. This is Goya's dream. You'll never get centuries to kneel before you the way you kneel before him." I dropped the brush, went home and collapsed. It was a very hard period because I was alone and I thought, if I can get through this night, I can get through any night. It was in 1959. I waited for the dawn to come. I knew what the voice meant when it said "go home." It was saying, "You're just a girl from Chicago." So I went back to my first inspiration, which was my mother and riding with her in a baby carriage, and I made these drawings. From that point on I reconstructed my shapes and my own images. I know that it sounds funny, but it felt like I was making radiators; that's how opposite it was from my nature. I was someone who had wound herself so tight that I just unwound, but that took many months to happen. I made two drawings that were good. One was a drawing of a circus horse whose head explodes. That was what was happening to me.

Why has the horse been such a consistent subject for you?

I think women like horses because it is an intimation of the power in their stomach to make life. Women like horses because they equal that power in their capacity to make a human being. There is no being that has more force than a horse or a dragon.

I mean, a little girl is not going to say herself, "I'm going to make a baby." She says, "I'm going to ride a horse." It is the prophecy of her power.

And is the little girl in a crinoline skirt and black shoes riding the dragon a self-portrait?

I wouldn't say that. But I love this painting because it is done in one shot. When they're done in one shot, they are my best work.

Do you remember why it became a dragon?

What you're asking me about is the mysterious process that me and my brush go through. How do I know? I only know that I am instructed by whatever it is, the muse or something, to learn certain things. So when that event comes, I can produce it. Other than that, I don't know anything else.

You have said that you don't invent things, but you discover the truth that is already there. So is it something you find, rather than what you make?

The more important thing is the aim. My job is to be a great archer. All the other stuff I have no control over. In a way, I'm not even interested in what the arrow is going to do and what the arrow wants to say. When I come into the studio my head is like anyone's head; it is without any nonsense, or any fantasy. But I sit here with my brush or my pencil and wait for that

moment when a door opens and all these kingdoms come. I found the first painting I ever made. I was 15 years old and I remember that is exactly what had happened. My grandmother had died and she lived in a room in the back of our house and I thought, today is the day that I would begin, because I knew I would live this life. No one would believe how young I was when I knew it. I remember this blue cloth that my mother gave me, a blue cloth with little white dots on it, like stars, and I took it and I wrapped it all over my body in tribute to her and to life, and I said, "I will make everything for her, for her." So I made this thing when I was 15. But I postponed my time to be an artist because I wanted to have a childhood.

So from the age of 4 to 15 you put off becoming an artist?

Yes, I played with dolls. I was a real dumb kid. But when my grandmother died I went out and bought two little canvasses and a box of paint (everybody knew I would be an artist because I drew so well) and I came back and put the brush on the canvas and I heard this little sound—thunk—and out came the painting. I don't know where it came from but it's not so dissimilar to what I'm doing now. Actually, it's very similar. You can't explain these things. Thunk. It was waiting. I also remember my first work of art when I was seven. I was very quick in grade school. I learned to read way ahead of the class and the teacher let me go to the back of the room where I would draw, waiting for the class to catch up. All of a sudden out it came—it was the story of Joseph and his brothers. I love that story so much, how he greets his brothers and how good he is and the wonderment they have. So I took my pencil and I drew it and I was so excited. I raised my hand and I went up to the front of the class and my teacher said, "Okay, you can go to the bathroom." I stood there—I felt I was holding a light—and I looked at her and I looked at the drawing and I thought, "Oh, that's how it is. You see something and then you spend your life getting other people to see it." I wasn't discouraged at all. I just saw how it works.

So the death of your grandmother meant there was a space where you could make art?

Yes, but then I had to get through life: I had to get through human relations, boyfriends; I had to get through my mother, through school, sex. I had to get through all that. I had pneumonia all the time so they sent me to a school in Arizona where they boarded children who have asthma and things like that. I was 16 and I was doing drawings. I had fallen in love with my friend's brother, he was probably 20, Marvin, and I thought about him all the time. At that age you're senseless with longings, and he wasn't interested in me at all but I didn't care. So I showed him my drawings. He was like a god and he went to the Bauhaus School in Chicago, and he said, you're a good artist and then he told me about that school. It was very hard to get in because it was after the war and they had the GI Bill and I was a token Chicago student. There were two other women and me. I was the youngest, and when I taught there later on I found my application in the files and it is a riot. It was written in pencil on bumpy airmail stationery. You couldn't resist that application because it was completely childlike. So I got to that school through much tension between me and my mother, who saw me as this

gorgeous potential debutante. She had married my sister off to a wealthy guy from Texas and she had bigger plans for me because I was choice cut. My mother wouldn't give me the tuition, so I had to go for a term to the University of Illinois. But I did eventually get into the Bauhaus School and Marvin, who didn't go to the school anymore but was visiting his girlfriend, took a chair in the aisle of the lecture hall I'm sitting in, and he stares at me and says, "It's all your fault." It didn't take me long to figure out that he was nuts. He ended up being institutionalized. I remember thinking I must have funny taste in men. I have good taste but sometimes I have funny taste. I was an unusual girl and strange things always happened to me.

How did you finally persuade your mother to let you go to the Bauhaus School?

I looked at her when she told me that she would only give me the tuition to go to Illinois, I said, "Okay, I'll go and then you'll never have anything to do with my life after that," and that was the truth. She was sensitive and good enough to recognize that. She accepted that I was never going to be a dancer or a debutante. One of the things that influenced her was Leon Golub. I met him when I was 18 and he loved my work and wanted to meet me. He asked if there was anything he could do and I said, "There is, come with me to my mother and tell her about me." So we went on the bus, 70 blocks to Sherwin Avenue at the end of Chicago, and he walked into the room, sat down and said to my mother, "Your daughter is a great artist," and she believed him. Wasn't that nice of him to do that? I only went to that school for three months before I went to Paris, where I had another extraordinary adventure. One of the other women at the school was going to Europe and she asked me if I wanted to go. By this time I had quit school and was working in a candy store. So I went home and told my mother that I wanted to go to Paris and I could see her eyes light up—I could read her so well. She thought, my daughter's an artist; she'll wear a little beret and I can tell all my friends about it. So she gave me \$200 and I went to Paris. After leaving school my first images were what I saw on the sidewalk—cracks and things like that. I remember the day I looked at the sidewalk and I said, there is Paul Klee. It was like a language. I kept my head down until I got to Paris and I kept my head down in Paris. I made little cobblestones. What did I take with me? My watercolour pad and my bicycle. Can you imagine, I went on the boat to Paris and I took my bicycle. I was like a child. I had my bicycle and I didn't have to fend off French men. Well, there was one. He was a thief and he would meet American girls, seduce them and then steal from them. I wasn't interested in sex, but it seemed easier to go to bed with him than to have to deal with him. I remember after it was over he got out of bed and he looked at me and said, "You're different from the other American women," and he didn't steal from me. He was very sweet. I never saw him again. But in this hotel where I was staying there was an art historian, an ex GI and an expatriate. I had gotten pneumonia again and the concierge and her husband took me from the sixth floor to the second floor, so they could bring me soup. She was a Canadian woman named Margie and she had a big room and she let me stay there. She saw my work and she asked me to put it up in her room. Then she invited an



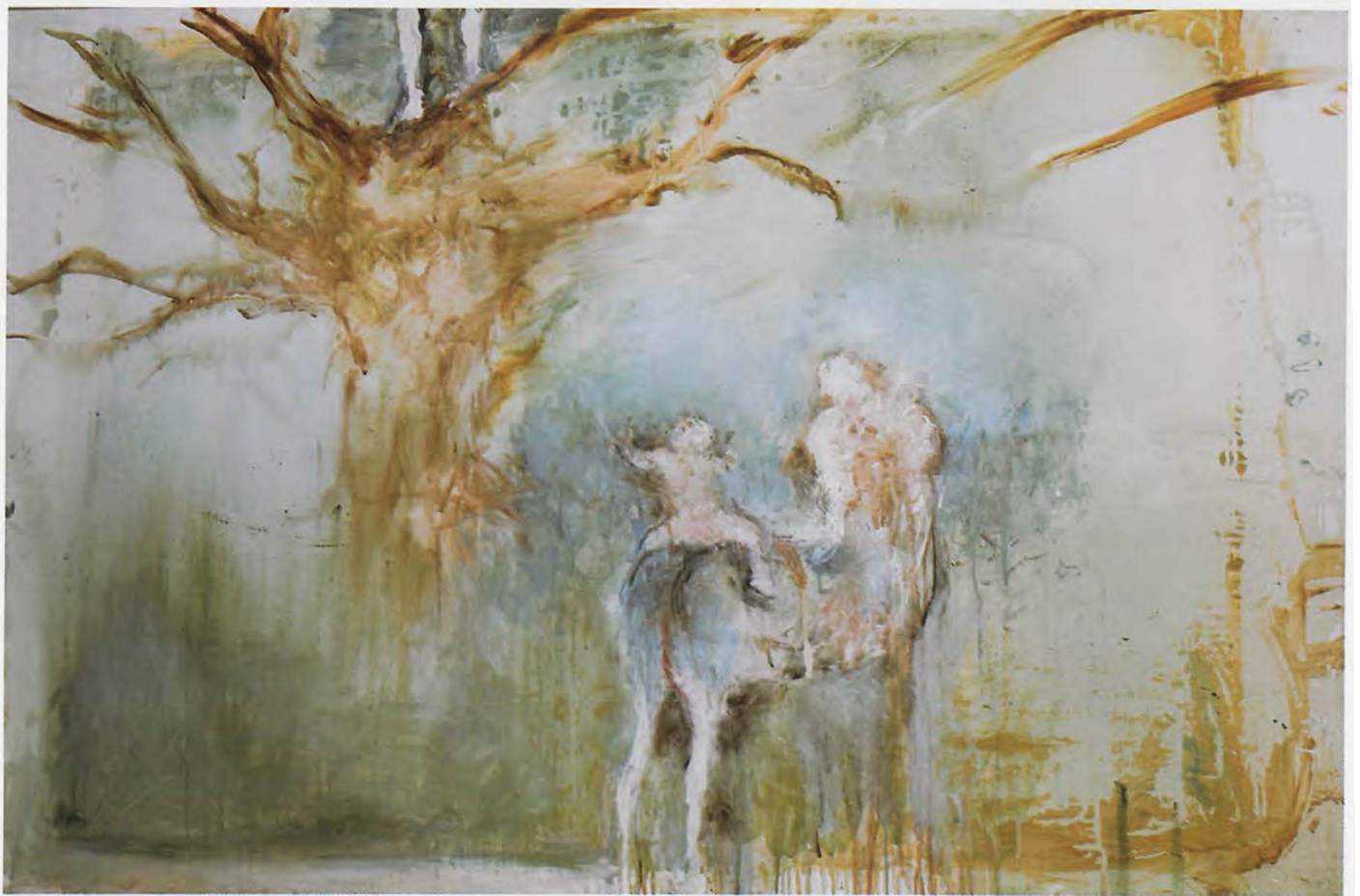
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1. *Girl Riding Dragon*, 2006, paper on tin, 31 x 34 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

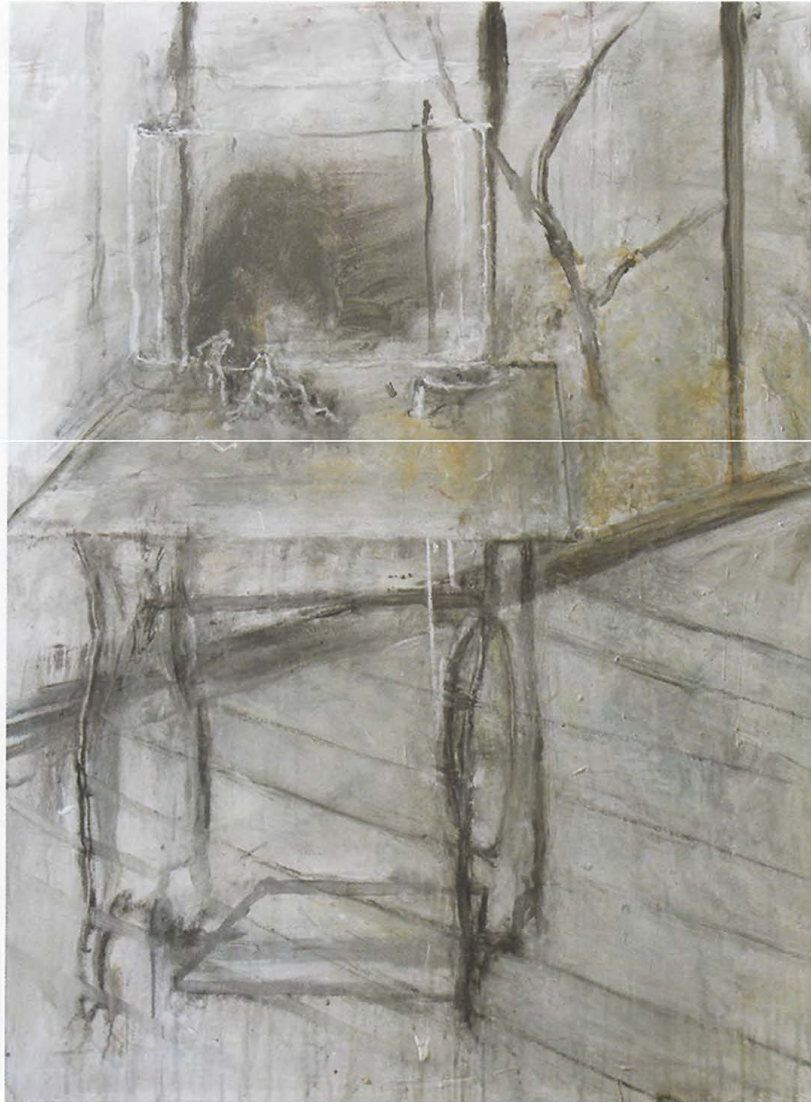
2. *Studies for Rider*, 2003, pastel on paper, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

2



Indian woman, I had never seen a woman wearing a sari, who kept saying, "How do you do that, you're so young, how do you do that?" I thought this didn't have anything to do with being young, I had just started early. So the concierge told this art historian to bring me the soup. He came into the big room and my little watercolours were all around. He sat down next to me and said, "Tell me about your work," and I remember repeating something that a poet from San Francisco that I had met, had said. She was a friend of Kenneth Rexroth and she talked about Jung and I thought she was wonderful. She would look at my work and say, "It's very anal," so when this art historian asked me about my work I said, "Well, it's very anal." I remember he looked at me and this little smile came on his face. He recognized that I didn't know what I was talking about. But he liked me. His name was Ben. The next day he called me on the hotel phone and he said, "Could you please bring all your watercolours and your paintings to my room. I have some people here and I want them to see it." I remember the darkness was in me. I knew that something was going to happen; that something was going to take away the blessing that I had. I used to cry when I worked, I remember thinking I'm blessed, I'm blessed. It was the most beautiful feeling that I'd ever had in my whole life. But

then Ben came; he was a nice man but he represented the world, and I knew that. All my work fit into a suitcase, which I handed to them, and ran away. I had another obsession: those sandals that children wore. I have very big feet; I wear an 11 and a half. All I wanted was a pair of these shoes. I would buy the biggest children's shoes you could buy but my feet would still hurt all the time. I would paint and walk in them and look at the sidewalk. I remember knowing that something was going to happen that will change everything, so I ran away for days. But Ben finally got me on the telephone and he said, "I want to take you to dinner; I have something to tell you." And my feet hurt. You see, I was very simple. I didn't have many things on my mind. I had my work and my shoes. I worked just as hard then as I do now. It was my birthday. So he took me to dinner and all the time I am thinking, something is going to happen. He takes a sip of wine and he says, "You've got it." Now you would think I would be happy but I wasn't. I felt like he was an invader. Then he said, "We're going to help you. Would you like to study with Severini; would you like to study with Braque?" I remember thinking, he doesn't understand, I'm not an art student. But I didn't know how to talk then. So they gave me a gigantic studio, a very famous one, I found out. It used to be Picasso's studio on Bis Rue Schoelcher



1. *Landscape With Figures and Tree*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

2. *Portrait of Scroll Sculpture* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 49 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

3. *Work in Progress*, 2014, scrolls with treadle sewing machine, 29 x 26 x 19 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.





across from a cemetery. They also gave me a little dog to take care of and they said, "It's yours, do whatever you want. We're going to help you." So every other day they would come and see what I had done. I worked, but the darkness was there. What happened, actually, was I sat in the middle of the room and cried. I was so sad all the time because they took the blessing away. Then one day I went to the Musée de l'Homme by myself, and I saw these beautiful ivory tusks on which the Inuit had scratched images. I almost fainted and I knew that I had to find something white, something really white. I was ready to paint again. So I ran back to my atelier and I looked at the white bathtub and I said, "That's it." I took a big Chinese brush and dipped it in this real strong India ink and I drew a child in the bathtub. I had done graffiti things in my paintings and I thought, it has come back. I couldn't wait for them to see it, and I took them into the bathroom and they saw what I had done and they went, "Ah, she's crazy." So I thought, "Good, now they'll get rid of me." I was so clear in my head what was right and what was wrong and, true enough, the neighbour said I was painting on her dishes and throwing them in the garbage. It was a sublet and they were very expensive dishes but I was a child. I was 18 but I was more like a child. So they sent me to a psychiatrist, a French woman, and I hated her. She didn't speak English very well but I had started to understand

French, and I remember going down the stairs hearing her say, "You don't want to sleep with men, c'est vrai." So I went to these people and said, "I'll go to a psychiatrist but I want one who speaks English." They sent me to this wonderful man who had been educated in England and I liked him so much. I finally had someone I could talk to, and out came all my observations about how pretentious my patrons were, how I wasn't a genius, I wasn't precocious, I just liked to paint, I see things I want to do, and they gave me this little dog and it pisses all over the atelier. He laughed and laughed and laughed and said, "There is nothing wrong with you. You should just go home." I did go back home, but I never told anyone what happened because no one would believe the story. How could I explain it? They kicked me out and they made me pay for damages. So I got a job to pay them back because they wouldn't give me my work until I paid, and I really grieved. I've never grieved the way I grieved that year.

You were grieving because of your unreturned work?

Those works were really my babies. The grief was actually physical. But a year later my marvelous father came to my place and handed me my paintings. Everybody thought he was crazy, which he wasn't; he was just a gambler who never earned a living. He had gone on a bus to New York, by that time they were in a



1. *Studies for Sculpture*, 2013, blackboard. 36 x 39 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Alice Attie.

2. *Woman with Mirror*, 2010, tin and mirror, 17 x 7 x 9 inches. Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York.

warehouse in New York, and somehow he managed to get them. My sister told me that he took them around to galleries and said, "My daughter wants to be an artist, is she any good?" The only thing they told him was, it's a hard life to be an artist. When he gave me back my paintings people said, "Why did you do that? Look at them, there's nothing there." He said, because if she cries like that, it must mean something.

Was it necessary for you to maintain some kind of innocence?

I'll give it to you in one story. Katharine Kuh, the Chicago gallery owner and curator, believed in me. It was because of her that I got a Fulbright. When I came back from Paris she would visit me. I was married to a musician and she bought some pieces of mine. It was before I made the *Vermeer Box* and I was still struggling with how to show my interpretation of what I was getting from Vermeer. I remember Katharine said, "Oh my God, don't touch it," and I went, "I will." And I thought, how am I ever going to get rid of that attitude I have? I've lost

many wonderful things, and that's why now when I make something fast, I put it away immediately and forget about it.

Because if you keep it around you'll change it?

I learned to stop that. It took me years. There would be beautiful stages but I didn't have the mastery, so I have to take a risk. I have to say, "No it's not right, take it away, tear it apart." While I'm doing that it's like I'm a gambler. I say to myself, "Higher stakes. Higher stakes."

You are half your father.

I am a gambler. All artists are. I got an honorary doctorate from DePaul University and one went to a scientist, one went to an educator and one went to an artist. They said, "You have to make a little speech," so I got up there, I closed my eyes and I said, "To be an artist is to be a gambler and today we won." I just whispered it.

That must have been what you meant when someone asked if your father was an artist and you said, "No but we're working on it."

When I went to Lippincott workshops and they had invited me to make whatever I wanted, and I would sit on the train and talk to my father. He was dead by then, and I'd say, "We're going to the factory." He was so simple. He would say to me, "Someday you're going to be in The Smithsonian." He didn't know what it was but he believed in me. He would say, I used to talk to you when you were in your crib and you had a lot of brain cells. He was like that. He could be a bit of a menace for everybody, but he was the most marvelous man and one of my big regrets is that Robert didn't meet him. He was so sorry he didn't have a son. Robert would have been his dream come true. He would have loved Robert and it would have been mutual. Because my father was the epitome of Robert's love of America and its eccentricity and madness. My father's eyes were always sparkling and he was always in wonderment and he would say, "I have all the answers to all the world's problems, and I'm going to make a movie and Bing Crosby is going to star in it." Then he bought a wire recorder, this would have been in the late '40s, and he brought it home and he said, "I'm going to start taping my thoughts." I remember the next day all the wires got lost and it got all screwed up and the machine broke. I often think of it because I use wires a lot and I'm often caught in my wires.

As I look at the cast of characters around the studio, I realize they all fit everywhere.

I know. I'm just beginning this new work and the whole thing is going to change. Where they are

and who they're with will change. I mean, who are they? I'm at a stage where I was able to make one character alive, so now I can breathe. Now I'm not interested in the darkness. I want to go to light and there's no light here.

But it seems that drawing the man becomes the movement towards light.

Maybe. Now I have to make the setting. Where does this take place? It probably takes place where there is light. Wouldn't it be a shame, such a lucky girl like me, that I shouldn't show the light? It wouldn't be right because I have a very lucky life and I'm healthy.

I've always assumed that these characters, the man and the woman, are you and Robert.

Well, it's love.

So love is obviously the light and that has been implicit all along. That's good.

When you come in to the studio do you talk to yourself about what is happening?

Robert tells me I'm talking all the time but I don't notice it.

I have a sense that because these are unfolding narratives, you don't know where they're going. You're talking to your making as you do it.

No, they are talking. I often think that I'm more like a novelist. I absolutely understand that. It takes me so long because I have to make the novel and it's a theme.

So the characters are telling the story?

Absolutely, and not only that, they are trying to help me live a better life. That's really what I'm after. They're talking to my soul, they're trying to improve me. I need a lot of improvement. One of the things they tell me is, "Don't draw so much, pay more attention to your husband." They're always telling me that. In fact, the first thing they tell me when I get down here is don't forget what is important.

Let me stay inside your trope of love. My view is that the love of your husband and the love that is exemplified and embodied in paintings and drawings are not different worlds.

I like that phrase, where love is exemplified.

I'm trying to figure out the relationship between drawing, painting and sculpture. Are they all one thing? You have said your drawings are sculptures.

It's all drawing. Because it is like music. It is the greatest visual art.

Do you have to find new stories? You used the word myth earlier when we were talking.

I just know that I'm very lucky and I try to keep up my practice. Each day I have to start all over again and I don't rest on anything from the day before. So the first thing I did today was to put the tin behind that drawing so that I could attach the string. I'm

running low on tin and I hope I don't ruin this one. Sometimes I do not try to take too many risks. But I love this little person.

So you come in every day and you can rely on nothing you have done before. Is it that you don't know anything from before? Isn't that anxiety-provoking?

I can see that you're being too literal about it. I have to put it differently. I can describe it in terms of a dancer. If you think of a dancer, you have your warm-up period. You have to make sure your body is in good enough shape to execute the ideas you have in your head. The best drawings are Chinese drawings. That is to say, they spend all their time training their hand to connect to their heart and there is a certain moment in the day when the heart and the hand work together. That's what I look for. The drawing is my performance. Really good drawing is a performance and what it is a performance of, is a good question. In this case we don't know what the woman is going to do: is she going to draw; is she going to wash him; is she going to send an arrow; is she going to kill him? I had to make the woman and that is all I know. I don't know why it ended when it ended. Because it took seven or eight months. A poet understands that. You have something and it is ready to be born. You try this and you try that and all of a sudden it comes together and it is born. It almost doesn't even have anything to do with you.

At some point it takes over and produces itself?

A good drawing, when it happens, is like a sigh. I know there are people who draw differently, but I prefer that the drawing not be laboured.

When you try to describe what a drawing is, you turn to dance and movement. It has been so critical to you.

Well, I could have been a dancer. I think like a dancer, and I'm obsessed with little details. It's the body in space. It so happens that I like space, so my figure is in a space, which means she can move, because that is just one moment. So when I draw it, I am dancing. When I'm drawing I'm thinking, "Oh, the leg is this way; the shoulder this way; oh no, the stomach goes this way." That's how it is to draw. Foot down, foot drop.

When you draw are you remembering movement from inside your own body, or are you relying on what you've seen? Is what you're rendering what your eyes tell you rather than what your body tells you from inside?

It's just me dancing. It's very simple. It's a drama and I know when I have made the drama so that others can see it. That's my job. I'm the choreographer and there's no in between. And what is the drama? That's why you write a whole novel to find out. I don't know what the drama is. I'm still living it. ■



June Leaf: *Head*, 1975, pen and ink and colored pencil on paper, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.

All images this article courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Precision Drawing and Useless Categories

by Dan Nadel

THERE WAS A provisional quality to June Leaf's remarkable solo exhibition on view this summer at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In a small gallery off the lobby, more than 130 of Leaf's expressive figurative drawings were affixed to the walls with magnets. The individual works on paper, hung together in dense clusters, showed signs of rough handling, as if they had been stored in piles for years. The groupings were chronological, with a sweep around the room covering seven decades. Yet because motifs and forms repeat from drawing to drawing, it was easy to imagine how the entire installation could have been reordered to highlight recurring imagery, or to underscore the sense of kinetic energy that pulses through her oeuvre, animating her loosely rendered impressions of urban envi-

ronments from the 1960s and bringing to life her machine-like figures of the late '70s.

"June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite" showcased the work of a skilled draftsman who has been relentlessly tinkering with ideas for decades, turning over concepts, testing hypotheses. The apt title, borrowed from that of a 1975 drawing, evokes Leaf's inventive visual metaphors for the mind. These are most explicit in a group of drawings from the mid-1970s in which a human head, sometimes appearing with the top of the skull flipped open like a car hood, is portrayed as a vessel for various kinds of speculative activities. A geodesic dome rises above a tranquil face (*Head*, 1975); tiny humanoids dance around a face exploding with bright abstract forms (*Figures Coming Out of Hand and Head*, 1976); a figure sews

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View of the exhibition "June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite," 2016, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Bill Orcutt.



Leaf remained true to her own project no matter what was happening in the broader art world.

or knits her own head together (*Findings*, 1975); a wide-eyed face appears to be in motion, spinning on a bizarre mechanical device (*Mother/Ballroom*, ca. 1978).

Many of the works are adorned with marginalia, stray marks, and the occasional inscription, and none could be characterized as an individual "masterpiece." There's a searching, probing quality to the selection, as if Leaf were constantly testing the parameters of her own practice. Early on she was trained in technical drawing, and her precise lines can delineate complex machine parts. Some of the drawings on view can be read as schematic diagrams for the metal kinetic sculptures she has been constructing since the 1980s, a small group of which were arranged on a table in the center of the gallery. But Leaf also can go to another extreme with equal confidence, as she does in numerous drawn vignettes, such as *If You Take Too Much You Will Be*

Punished! (ca. 1962–63), which employs the loosest of crayon lines to give life to a cranky taskmaster figure.

In this sense, Leaf's modest but ambitious work exemplifies what critic Manny Farber called Termite Art, in which artists convey idiosyncratic visions seemingly without concern for dominant aesthetic trends. As Farber wrote, such work "feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement."¹ Termite Art doesn't strive for grand statements—or at least not ones that are legible in terms of fixed art historical categories—and that may be one reason why it doesn't often appear as the subject of a museum exhibition.

Leaf's Whitney retrospective arrived at a time when her work, and that of her termite peers, is being rediscovered, though there are reasons to be wary of such a narrative. Many of these "rediscoveries" are female artists who received little recognition, much less financial support, during the most active periods in their careers. It's a dubious claim to make about Leaf (b. 1929), an artist who never went away. In the late 1940s, and again in the 1950s, she studied at Chicago's Institute of Design, formerly the New Bauhaus. The work she produced during this period, such as the ink drawing *Woman Machines* (1949–50), in which bulbous forms balloon outward



Figures Coming Out of Hand and Head, 1976, acrylic, pen and ink, and graphite on paper, 18 by 24 inches.



Study for Woman Monument, 1975, pen and ink, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 17 by 14 inches.

from sharp, spindly legs, contain the aesthetic kernels she would develop for the next sixty-five years in drawings that meld mechanical precision with expressive, and sometimes grotesque, figures. Leaf began showing publicly in 1948, and she participated in Chicago's famed Exhibition Momentum, a series of juried shows in the 1950s organized to counter the Art Institute of Chicago's stuffy regional surveys. Her colleagues in Chicago included figurative artists such as Seymour Rosofsky, Leon Golub, and Nancy Spero. As their careers developed in the Chicago art world they were dubbed the "Monster Roster," a term propagated by critic Franz Schulze in 1959 to describe artists working with expressive, surface-heavy, Surrealist-inflected figuration.

Most of the artists under this umbrella have long chafed at the term—which is really more like a marketing slogan—and Whitney curator Carter E. Foster studiously avoids it in his thoughtful essay accompanying the Leaf retrospective. But Schulze's label persists, providing the intellectual framework for this past winter's "Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago," at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art. Schulze's label had a pop appeal, equating the bodily distortions envisioned by certain painters heavily inspired by Dubuffet with horror films and the Chicago Bears, who were known as the Monsters of the Midway. To this vernacular mix, Schulze added a dubious grab bag of philosophical ideas, blending tenets of Surreal-

Robert Enters the Room, 1973, acrylic, collage, gelatin silver prints, and pen and ink on paper, 22 by 28 inches.



ism and Existentialism. In an area of art history that has generated little scholarship, the Monster Roster moniker continues to dominate.

Foster's decision to marginalize the term also makes sense because, in any case, Leaf's affiliation with the Chicago group accounts for a very brief portion of her career. After a stay in Paris, she settled in New York, where she later married photographer Robert Frank. It was in New York in the 1960s that she started to define the range of her work, the boundaries of her art that she would constantly chew up, as it were. The city itself proved to be a rich subject. In *Coney Island* (1968), she corralled a tense, active line into a scene of calm and repose: a realistic depiction of spectators watching a carousel at the amusement park. Art historical references also became more explicit in Leaf's work of the '60s, with Vermeer providing a model for a psychedelic interior scene, *After Vermeer* (ca. 1965).

One subject that remained consistent throughout her career, spanning the 1940s through the present, is the female body. As the inscription on one 1975 drawing exhorts: WOMEN SHOULD BUILD A MONUMENT FOR THEMSELVES. Leaf produced dozens of works on this theme in the mid-1970s. These ambiguous images, which might be interpreted as speculative sketches for public sculptures, offer nuanced and sometimes contradictory depictions of femininity and

gender. *Woman Monument* (1975), rendered in hot yellows and reds, depicts a seated humanoid, apparently genderless, reaching out to the viewer. *Study for Woman Monument* (1975) portrays a metal torsolike form with broken stovepipe legs. Another study envisions jets of water pouring out of a female figure's head. Here, as in most of her drawings, machine imagery has a double valence. It suggests a sharp criticism of fixed social roles—the woman as automaton—while simultaneously demonstrating the artist's own detailed draftsmanship.

Leaf's drawings refuse an easy summation, and they can't be located in a single passing moment in which Surrealism, Pop, or Minimalism defined what art can be. Her oeuvre embodies a certain kind of grit, and Leaf undoubtedly remained true to her own project no matter what was happening in the broader art world. This quality is likely what makes Leaf's body of work attractive today. It suggests an art historical counter-narrative in which personal, idiosyncratic, maximalist aesthetics thrived during the cool 1960s and Conceptual '70s. Here we have work that was made on its own terms, developing, changing, expanding, and thriving in a way that seems potentially endless. ○

1. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, New York, Praeger, 1971, p. 135.

HYPERALLERGIC

Interview: June Leaf

Jennifer Samet
April 23, 2016



June Leaf, “Second Skeleton” (2009-10), mixed media and paper on canvas on tin, 36 x 47 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York, unless noted otherwise) (click to enlarge)

Walking through the green door into June Leaf’s old-school New York studio — a street-level space downtown — is a bit like entering a Willy Wonka world. Whimsical sculptural inventions, fragments, and materials of metal, wood, and wire are everywhere: on a long table by the front windows, strewn about the rough, wide-plank wood floor, leaning against a pressed-tin wall, and resting on easels. Leaf, at age 86, deftly moves through it all.

She sits on a workbench that she designed and made. It can be straddled so that she can easily hammer and tinker with objects on its well-worn work surface. She adjusts a figural relief element

on a painting, and one limb falls off. “Never mind,” she says, “I always lose and find things.” Then she takes a blowtorch to bend a metal sculpture.

Later we both try on her eyeglass sculptures. “How beautiful you look, Jennifer!” she exclaims, while I laugh at how weird the world looks. With one pair, I only see what’s in front of me; with the other, I only see what’s behind. She enjoys how much fun I’m having, so we test out another piece. We take turns blowing soap through a woman-shaped pipe, bubbles landing on the torso to form, temporarily, her full abdomen.

Leaf’s narrative — of family, childhood, and true love — is inseparable from her work. Across the mediums of drawing, painting, and sculpture, a cast of characters and dramas weave and return. The scenes depicted are equal parts fantastical and existentialist: a woman carries a heavy child up stairs; a couple gazes at invisible forces in the distance; a man and woman are mobilized by mechanical gears; skeletons and skulls join the feast. Her touch is somehow both muscular and nimble, so that images have a solid footing, but are also laced with mystery. People, and forms, are on the verge of becoming.

Leaf and her husband, the photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank, divide their time between New York and Mabou, Nova Scotia. Leaf was born in Chicago in 1929, and studied briefly at the Institute of Design (formerly the New Bauhaus), Chicago, in 1947-48. She returned to the school for her M.A. in Art Education in 1954. Her first solo exhibition was held in 1948 at the Sam Bordelon Gallery, Chicago. In the 1960s and 1970, she showed at Allan Frumkin Gallery, in both its New York and Chicago locations. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, held a retrospective of her work in 1978. Since 1985, she has been represented by Edward Thorp Gallery, where she has had regular solo exhibitions. In 1991, an exhibition of sculpture and works on paper was organized by the Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C., and traveled to the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. She has also been the subject of exhibitions at the Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania; Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the Tinguely Museum, Basel, Switzerland.

A survey exhibition of Leaf’s drawings, *June Leaf: Thought is Infinite*, opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art, on April 27, 2016.

* * *

Jennifer Samet: *I know you have memories from your early childhood, which informed how you think about art. Can you share some of these experiences?*

June Leaf: I have a memory from when I was about 3½ years old. My mother was sewing and I was under the table. She handed me some fabric to play with; it was transparent blue with little white dots. I wrapped it around my face and my hands and I thought, “Someday, I’m going to make everything with my hands.” I looked at my mother’s beautiful shoes. Finally, I cautiously asked her, “Will you draw me a high heeled shoe?” She took a pencil and made me the drawing, which I remember to this day.

I looked and I thought, “Oh! That is wrong.” She didn’t put the toe on the ground. The toe was up in the air. To me, that was very important. How could anybody not know that about the foot and the shoe? I took the paper and I thought I’m never going to ask my mother ever about these things. I could perceive she was different from me.



June Leaf, “Untitled” (1951), ink on Paper, 7 x 9.5 inches (click to enlarge)

I loved to draw, and in the third grade, I drew just as I do now, which is that I rub and erase and suddenly I see entire scenes. So, one day, I looked at my drawing and could see a Biblical scene, of Joseph and his brothers. I loved that story as a child: when Joseph has become a leader of Egypt and

his brothers come to ask for help. I saw the story in my drawing as if it had dropped from the skies. That was probably my first experience with imagination. I was ecstatic.

I raised my hand to show it to the teacher. I approached her desk, carrying the drawing in the palms of my hands. Ms. Anderson had her head down. I said, “Miss Anderson...” And she gestured at me and said, “Yes, you can go to the bathroom. I looked at her, and I looked in my hands, and I thought, “Oh. That’s how it is. You can make something and you see it. But then you have to spend your life to get the world to see it.”

JS: *Where did you study?*

JL: When I was 18, I went to the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology (originally founded by Moholy-Nagy in 1937 as the New Bauhaus). I was the youngest person in the school, and I think there was only one other girl. It was during the GI Bill years, so it was hard to get into schools. I was a token Chicago high school student.

Hugo Weber, a wonderful man, taught “Visual Fundamentals.” He had recently arrived in the United States from Switzerland and hardly spoke English. He said, “Tomorrow I want you to bring in the biggest sheet of paper you can find.” Well, my parents had a liquor store, and they had rolls of brown paper, so I came in with the biggest sheet of brown paper that they’d ever seen.



June Leaf, "Robert Enters the Room" (1973), acrylic, collage, gelatin silver prints, and pen and ink on paper, 22 x 28 inches. Collection of the artist (Photo by Alice Attie. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art) (click to enlarge)

Weber said, "What I want everyone to do is take a big piece of chalk and just run it, up and back, along the paper." That was called motor control drawing. It was based on the ideas of Moholy-Nagy, who had students start like there was no art training. It was about making a line with one's body instead of anything else – without knowledge, without history. When we were done, Weber pointed to my thing and said, "This is good." It was the most wonderful way to begin.

I sometimes still work with brown paper, which I love, because it has a beautiful glow, and more space and air than white paper. In my later years, I put tin behind the paper or canvas, which allows me to attach metal elements to the front with magnets.

JS: *What did you do after leaving school?*

JL: I was in school for three months and then I thought, I don't want to go to art school. I admired the "visiting artists" who came to school, and I wanted to be one of them. I went to Paris in 1948. I spent my time with my head down, looking at textures, and patterns in the sidewalks. I was thinking about Mark Tobey and Paul Klee. I was still rooted in the abstract tradition. I made a small painting of cobblestones.

I returned to Paris ten years later, in 1958, on a Fulbright Grant. By then, I wanted to really learn how to draw. I saw that I had to put things in space. I wanted to learn how to make space, vapor, and atmosphere.



June Leaf, "Head" (1975), pen and ink and colored pencil on paper, 13 7/8 × 19 7/8 inches. Collection of the artist (Photo by Alice Attie. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art) (click to enlarge)

In Paris, I went to life classes, and I went to the Louvre to copy artists like Goya or Chardin. I gave up my volatile imagery in that period. One day, I was in the Louvre, copying a beautiful Goya painting. I would go to quiet rooms so that I wasn't disturbed. The room was very cold. I got the eyes just right, and the drawing locked in. Then, all of a sudden, I felt like someone had slapped my hand. I heard my voice say, "Go home. This is Goya's dream. You'll never reach across centuries like Goya. You're just a girl from Chicago."

I was exhausted. I stayed at a friend's house, because I felt so ill. I didn't sleep the whole night. I thought, "If I can get through this night, I can get through any night in my life." I woke up in the morning and I took a sketchbook, and I made drawings that were just waiting to be made. I made a horse whose head explodes. And then I started to draw these things from my childhood, drawings of women that are a child's point of view, carousels, merry-go-rounds.

JS: *How would you describe your relationship to the Chicago Imagists?*

JL: I was never fully part of the Chicago circle because I didn't go to the Art Institute. But, my work was in a big exhibition called *Exhibition Momentum* (an artist group founded in Chicago in 1948). Leon Golub saw my work there and wanted to meet me. He asked me, "Is there anything I can do for you?" I said, "Yes, there is something. You can come with me to my mother's and tell her that I am a good artist."



June Leaf, "Northern Bird" (1985), mixed media on canvas, 50 x 70 inches (click to enlarge)

So we took a long bus ride — seventy-six blocks through Chicago — and he sat down with my mother. He said, "Mrs. Leaf, I came to tell you that your daughter is a great artist." That was the language that worked to reassure her about my path as an artist, a path totally unknown to her. He

was about ten years older than I, so he had authority, and he soon was successful. So my mother would often say, “Leon Golub told me my daughter’s a great artist.”

Seymour Rosofsky seemed to be the only one who wanted to do master drawing. Once he said, “I’m not interested in contemporary art. I want to wrestle with the angels.” I thought that was wonderful. I also loved the work of Cosmo Campoli.



June Leaf, “Astonished” (1997), acrylic and paper on canvas, 54 x 64 inches (click to enlarge)

When I went to Paris in the 1950s, Leon and Nancy Spero were living there. Nancy was raising her sons in that period, and did not have her own studio space. Then, in the 1960s, she made these incredible drawings – penises with heads on them and tongues coming out of them, and helicopters, and people killing people in Vietnam. She was amazing – way up there. Looking back, I see that work as masterpieces. She and I talked about drawings that make themselves – how the artist who is making them is just as surprised as anybody else, in terms of what comes out.

JS: *There is a recurring cast of characters in your work. Can you tell me about them, and why you think they recur in your drawings, sculptures, and paintings?*



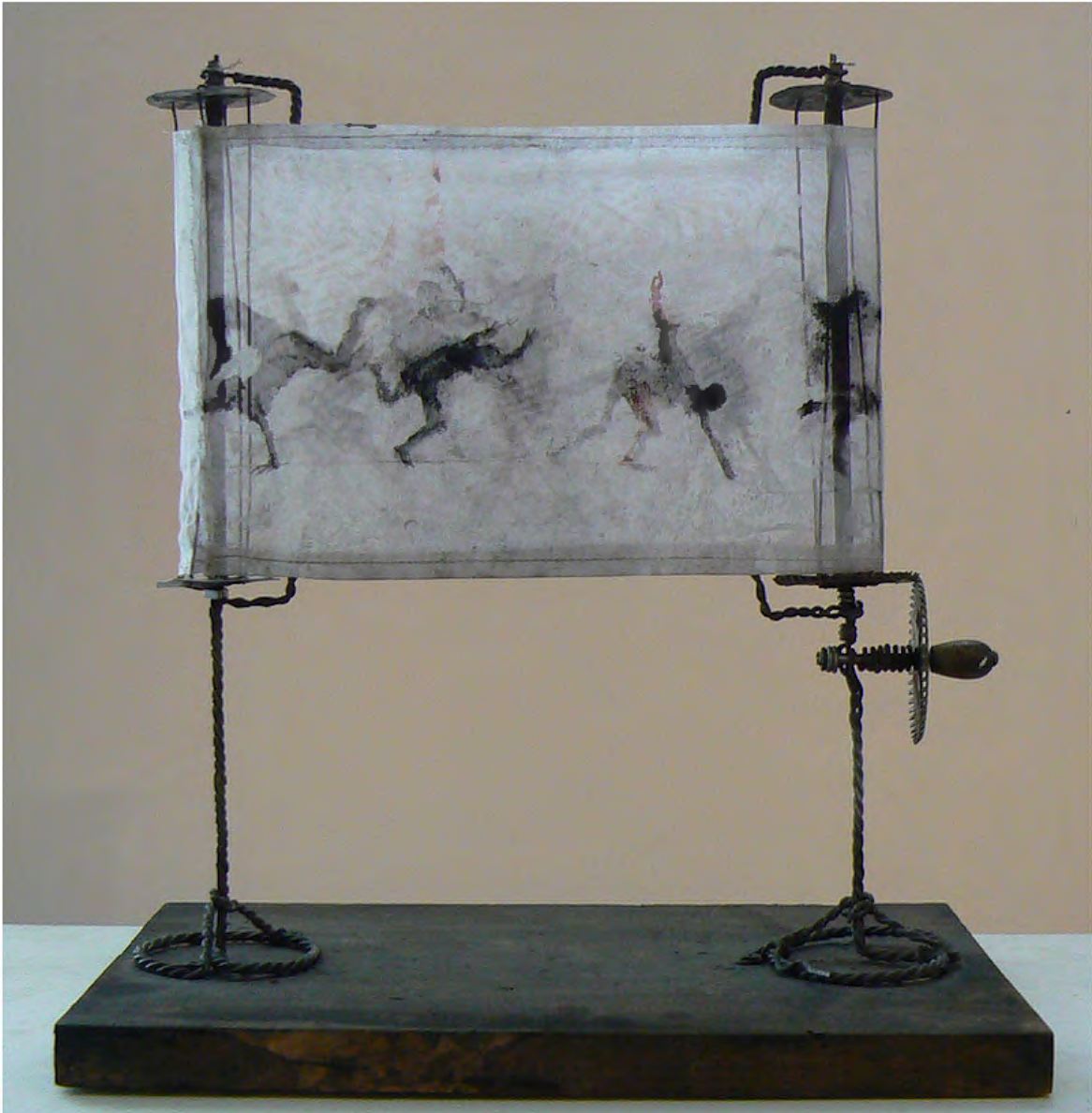
June Leaf, "The Ball" (1984), mixed media on canvas, 70 x 56 inches (click to enlarge)

JL: My cast of characters started to emerge in the mid-1950s. I've worked on the ballroom motif for a long time. Sometimes I worked for ten years on a ballroom painting, and then I'd throw it out. I couldn't figure it out. I still don't understand what goes on in the head that makes that happen to you.

I work with these figures until I am released from them. At least, I think that is how it goes. I've been making art since 1948, and I haven't got a smooth theory. I am just grateful when I can be liberated from these creatures that come and stop me dead in my tracks.

There is a figure of a woman on a hobbyhorse, which has been a terrible obsession. I feel that I have finally been released from her. Just recently I added a male figure to the painting of the woman – who evolved into being seated on a barrel, rather than a hobbyhorse. He is engaging and relating to her, and it changes the dynamic. She is released from being completely indolent. It could be titled, "At Last She is Conversant."

Although she is a woman in that painting, I have also thought of the figure on the horse or barrel as my father. It is a person who never woke up, and my father was a man who never woke up. He was a gambler and very charming, but he was always in a dream. He said he was going to make a movie about a man that could solve all the world's problems. He would have Bing Crosby play the lead, but there would be a man behind Bing Crosby who knew all the answers and would tell people what to do. Now what are you going to do with a father like that?



June Leaf, "White Scroll with Dancing Figures" (2008), mixed media, 17 x 17 x 11.25 inches (click to enlarge)

My mother was the one who had to make a living. My father's example of self-indulgence was important to me. Whenever I had any illusions that I could do something, I would think about my

father's failed dreams. I realized that dreams and imagination are just the start, and then your life's work begins.

I had to be careful to not be lazy. For instance, there is a painting I made while teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago. When I think back on it now, my mentality was that I was going to stand there until the wall fell down. I wanted something to come out that was undeniable. It turned out that the block-like forms in the painting evolved into the image of a man's chest; it was a surprise when that happened.

JS: *Is this "release" related to feeling like a work is finished, or is it something else?*

JL: When a piece is ready, it says, "Okay. It's not as good as you thought, but just go." I don't know what it is. That would be a really good thing to try to figure out: what releases the artist. What is that click that says, "We are through with you"? I think the secret is honesty. The image has to hit you back, for all of your gesticulating and fighting and stabbing and jabbing, being courageous or weak, or soft or hard. Something tells you when you've told the truth.



June Leaf, “Woman Carrying Child Up the Stairs” (2011), acrylic on paper on tinplate, 13 x 11 inches (click to enlarge)

It is a little like falling in love, not that it is equal to that. But, it is a similar moment, where you can't argue with it; you can't fake being in love. There is a beautiful story by James Joyce in *The Dubliners* — “The Dead” — in which the character Gabriel finds out by accident that his wife had loved someone when she was 17. There is a long section at the end of the story where he ruminates about that. The thing that surprised me most was when he said, “I never loved like that.” I find that chilling; I can't imagine living without that.

JS: *In addition to painting, you make sculptural objects, some quite large and complex, with multiple elements and characters, mechanical elements and moving parts. How did this become part of your work?*

JL: When I was very young, somebody came to visit and gave me a miniature grass cutter, with wheels that turned. I saw it and I got so excited. When the people left the room, I took it and threw

it out the third floor window. I wanted it to fall apart, so that I could see inside it, and how it worked. The next morning I went downstairs to see it and of course it was gone, it had been cleaned up. I still have that instinct; I will break anything in order to figure out how it works.

I use the mechanics of eggbeaters in some of the objects I make. I can look at the movement and mechanics of an eggbeater all day long. I have learned how to reverse the mechanism, so that I can make it move slowly, instead of fast.

I have made eyeglasses. There is one pair with cone-shaped lenses, which block everything in the periphery, so that you only see out of the small opening in the front. They are about the pleasures of focusing, and not being distracted. Another pair of glasses has a mirror attached, like a rear-view mirror, so that you only see what is behind you. It is just the most wonderful thing. Who needs to paint? Who needs to take photographs? You can just go around loving everything.



June Leaf, "Making #1" (2013-2014), acrylic on paper on canvas, 43.75 x 40 inches (click to enlarge)

JS: *Do you think of yourself as a painter or a sculptor?*

JL: I think of myself as an inventor. Even though I've never really invented anything, except maybe the glasses. And I can make figures work on a treadle.

It was always impossible for me to ignore the real world, of people, in my work. Drawing was not just about developing draughtsman skills, but also about building muscles to deal with life, and relationships. I don't think anything I've done in my life equals winning the love of my husband. And I think women have to work double time to maintain relationships and their work.

I understood Cubism to be about the reflections of the inside of a human. I feel this way about Cézanne too – his watercolors are about something more than what you see.

In the early 1960s I made many interpretations of Vermeer's rooms. I was gripped by Dutch interiors. I liked the window, the glass held by the woman, the gentleman behind her, the painting on the wall and the tiles. But I kept trying to paint the woman.



June Leaf, “The Tin Barrel” (2015), acrylic, charcoal, and collage on paper, 30 × 22 inches. Collection of the artist (Photo by Alice Attie. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art) (click to enlarge)

I couldn't paint her. I thought, I can't paint what I imagine, so, I am going to make her instead. That led to the “Vermeer Box” (1965). I made the woman out of mirrors. I wanted to show how she did exist, but she didn't exist. She sits on a wooden chair, and I made her hips out of mirrors.

I put a little dime on her chair so you see a dime going around her hips. That brought me back to seeing penny arcades as a child. I am sure many painters have been influenced by that experience — the claw that comes down, which you hold to try to get a prize — and then you don't.

I couldn't make that in painting, so I had to try to use some other dimension. That defines why I work with materials. I am a painter who had to have a tactile experience with the world. I had to go a circuitous route to get to what I am — a painter.