

Unpublished Interview with an "anonymous friend" in the arts (2006)

AF-How would one describe these new paintings?

LEA- How would they be described in art-speak? My work over the past year consists of a series of 12 paintings largely in the neo-symbolic style that examines ambiguous psycho-dramatic narratives. The work probes personal vulnerabilities in enigmatic interpretations of an array of scenarios which naturally elicit a range of divergent emotions.

AF-Why is the work so political?

LEA-I'd argue that it isn't particularly political at all. One wouldn't usually say that the imagery from traditional landscape painters is overtly environmental, would you?. It is all art, first and foremost and that is the point. Landscape painters interpret beautiful places into beautiful paintings. I create interpretations of influences that are often personally challenging, if not painful. Thematically the subject often is lacking innate beauty. I try to create a compelling aesthetic form out of something that often lacks it but I don't know if political is an apt description. Although, I must admit that a friend from Washington DC just saw the work and said that it was "devastating and frightening" and my I amused myself by answering that "it is a frightening time" so maybe the work is more political than I admit, even to myself.

AF-What is your stimulus?

LEA-This is over simplification but I've been thinking about stimulus lately and something occurred to me; having grown up on Great Cranberry Island and Mt. Desert Island, I'm fascinated with the number of artists with roots in big cities that find their way to live or work in a place like the coast of Maine. I assume some make the choice in order to more intimately observe and reflect the consequences of nature in their work. It makes perfect sense; the beauty of a place like Maine may be entirely foreign, new to an artist's life before coming here and accordingly, utterly stimulating. While growing up on a relatively isolated, beautiful island, I had a rather intimate observation of nature for many years just living here; as a result I don't seem to have much desire to observe OR reflect it in my work. The subject just isn't compelling enough to me anymore, at least at some level. Meanwhile, I found my way from the coast of Maine to New York as an adult and I am quite content and endlessly inspired to obsessively and intimately observe and reflect the consequences of human nature in my work. Maybe growing up in a place with less than 100 year-round residents but countless trees made it inevitable that I'd be more interested in commenting on human nature than on trees.

AF-Who/what influenced you to become an artist?

LEA-Beginning in the late 1940's and through the 1960's and beyond, Great Cranberry Island was a magnet for a significant community of well known artists from New York. Nearly every summer beginning in the 60's I remember these artists installing a group show of modern art in the school house. Almost none of the local residents attended the show and I understand why. In hindsight, I think the show was more of end of

summer, artist peer review than a public exhibition. Even though I was young, I was immediately hooked. I spent hours attempting to understand what was almost incomprehensibly sophisticated work (for me) to understand. Some of the same artists would occasionally come to the one-room school in early fall and give a lesson or two to the 10 of us in school. I remember John Lorence giving me an impromptu self portrait lesson at a community Thanksgiving celebration in about 1968. I was very happy to reconnect with John a year ago in Maine. I was able to show him the new work this summer and was pleased to have him refer to the paintings as "powerful". His comment meant (and means) a lot to me. Another year in the mid 60's there was an exhibit of our student art at the church on Great Cranberry. I remember doing an abstract watercolor of light from a church stained glass window and being singled out and complimented for my work by Jack Heliker. Little did I know that Jack had just enjoyed a major career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York and was a significant figure in American Art. In the succeeding decades, it seemed that I never saw Jack when he didn't ask about my of drawing and painting. Along the way, I studied at the University of Maine, the University of Alabama and the Art Students League on 57th St in NYC, where Jack Heliker had once been on faculty. Unfortunately I didn't manage to earn my MFA, at least not formally.

AF-How do you support yourself?

LEA-Over the years I pursued a variety of "day jobs", most notably in publishing, which ultimately led to an opportunity to join my vocation with my real passion when I went to work at MoMA. I spent 7 years at The Museum of Modern Art as a Director of the Publishing Office; where I was responsible for the work on over 170 major art catalogues in 20 languages documenting the entire MoMA exhibition program, as we often said in public, the most extensive collection of modern art in the world! Interestingly, including work by some of the artists that once lived and worked on Great Cranberry. I'd argue that there isn't an MFA program in the world that could provide an equivalent experience. I had the opportunity to work very closely with many of the leading scholars in the art world. Ironically, during my time at MoMA, several of the Great Cranberry Island artists from my youth, including Jack Heliker, passed away. I like to think he would have been pleased that I'd been gradually working on and exhibiting my art more often while at MoMA. Eventually I made the decision to leave and paint full-time. I now split my time between an apartment in Manhattan, a studio in Connecticut and my ancestral home -my family was among the original settlers over 200 years ago) on Great Cranberry Island. Five of the 12 paintings being shown at Shaw this summer were painted on the island last year and the balance in New York/Connecticut over this past winter/spring. I've shown my work in NY in the past and with connections in the art world, I had an opportunities to show this new work in NYC or here, given the influence of this place on my life and the generosity and open mindedness of Sam Shaw it was an easy decision to show this group of 12 paintings in Maine first.

AF-What do these paintings mean?

LEA-It is my job to paint them; it is the job of the observer to interpret their meaning. As I worked, I found and made comments about

a lot of things including; striving vs. overreaching, karma vs. fascism, the question of divine retribution, wealth vs. mass deception, the shrinking world in which we live, lack of tolerance, blinding strength in personal beliefs, selective morality, the power of nostalgia, loss, fear, longing for simplicity, life and death as a market commodity and and and.... Beyond that, I will leave it to anyone that looks at the individual or collective work to find meaning, mine or their own.

Unpublished interview with Alex Abuza, July 2006

Alex- I noted the nods to pop art and Dadaism when I looked at your work and wondered if you would talk a little about the tongue-in-cheekiness - the satirical nature of some of your work, and your incorporation of language. Is it easier to convey irony through the use of words than it is to do the same using images?

LEA- I don't think of most of the work as particularly tongue in cheek or satirical, maybe 1 or 2 of the newest pieces, yes, but not most of it. Words in paint on canvas are just brush strokes and the quality of the paint on the canvas is more important than any words I might have chosen. In this work like any other, the painted surface is the thing; the words just form part of the composition. Thematically the words might be related and certainly help in exploring the narrative of the piece but there isn't anything particularly satirical or ironic intended, at least consciously, in most of the work. As I said earlier, I am simply taking a look at the landscape of our current human experience and interpreting what it feels like to me. I am exploring the vulnerabilities we all face in our every day life and that certainly include those inherent in the absurdities of our time. I am trying to find and make something satisfying and aesthetically successful, if not pleasing, from the consequences of (not-always-so-pretty) human nature vs. more conventional subject matter.

Alex- You say your work is not political, and yet it seems to play on the repetition of media images, words, slogans, and icons in a such a way as to offer a critique of the current socio-political climate. Could you discuss your use of repetition - particularly of words - in some cases sentences with shadows - and explain what you are aiming to do?

LEA-I am aiming to make a picture □ □. There is no attempt at literary expression, whether words are repeated, shadowed or simply substituted to refer to an object that isn't painted but suggested. There isn't more to it than that. It isn't so much a critique as it is a mirror I am holding up to our socio-political world. In the 1st part of your question you asked about the imagery that might find their way into the narrative in a given painting. Whenever I look at old magazines or newspapers, I am amazed at how much more I learn about a specific time from the advertising than from reading old editorial copy. The same is

true with the old advertising images painted on buildings in NYC that are occasionally unearthed on a wall when an adjacent building is taken down, looking at them is a bit like being transported back in time for a split second. I think artists, at best, reflect the time in which they live and perhaps unintentionally. I am simply interpreting and yes, injecting sometimes iconic imagery into a painting in order to explore a specific scenario and the natural vulnerabilities we face in our respective lives. If successful, it might reflect our time and say something about us and what it felt like here and now. Yes, differently than say, a painting of a Hudson Valley sunrise or sunset tells us something about life in upstate NY in the late 19th century, but no less sincerely. I am not suggesting one form is more or less beautiful than the other (although I could and do acknowledge classic virtue). Meanwhile, I do think my work captures certain aspects of the early 21st century reasonably accurately and I am told, quite beautifully, but check back in 125 years.

Alex- Could you speak a little about your creative/artistic process? How you go from concept (I am assuming that you begin with concepts) to images?

LEA-Hmmm....I work in bursts and in a particularly intense fashion. Life sometimes permits me to escape into my studio for complete immersion and uninterrupted work for a few months. Depending on the length of time, I generally know how many pieces I'll be able to finish and order supplies. I always keep a sketch book and a folder of ideas and things I want to work on in a group of paintings, a bit of a broad outline of what I want to do. I think work on the individual paintings is a bit like a good cook in a kitchen being able to make a successful meal from the pantry, rather spontaneously. If I have supplies on-hand and have been accumulating thoughts, I can usually compose the bones of a painting (or 6) in the studio. There is a lot of work beyond that on a particular piece but work in the studio is the culmination of a lot of thought and quiet work in the weeks and months prior.

I generally work on 3-4 paintings simultaneously and paint 7-8 hours a day, 7 days a week when I am in the studio. Evenings and early mornings while I'm working are important too, some of the composition is developed and evolves organically from momentary impulses in daily quiet time- sometimes as problem solving on a specific piece-rather than anything I've planned or thought about for very long. The exploration of the narrative evolves with the composition over weeks and months, even years on pieces that I've worked on, set aside and come back to work on later.

When I finish a particular group of paintings, I generally need a little break for a few weeks from the intensity and spend time trying to reacquaint myself with family and friends and reading before going back to work. I am taking a little break now and will be back in the studio in September.

I always have a series of paintings, or sometimes two, in the back of my mind. I know what I am going to work on for the fall (something very different) and even next spring-yet again, even more different!