



LESLIE WAYNE – THE INTERVIEW

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Interview by Frédéric Caillard, February 2019

Can you tell us about your last body of work, that you are about to show in a solo presentation at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City?

Yes, the show is called *What's Inside*. In terms of the subject matter it is divided in two different but related groups of paintings. One is a series of windows with broken glass. Some of them are boarded up so you cannot see in. It speaks to



many climate issues, social issues... Broken or boarded windows and flooded buildings represent neighborhoods that have been abandoned or have had some sort of climate disaster. The other group represents containers: bookshelves, closets, armoires or chests of drawers. These are pieces of domestic furniture that contain items which sometimes you can see and sometimes you cannot see. Closets and drawers contain personal things, perhaps even secrets. In all of these paintings of containers are my own personal items, things that reflect my life as an artist. I think this is – more than at any other time in my career – a very personal body of work in that way.

If I backtrack for a minute, I think the thread that goes through all my work over time is the idea of the threshold. Even when the work was small and very abstract, you always felt that you were on the threshold of seeing what was on the surface and what was behind, something that you could not see. I was always folding the paint over or lifting the paint up or covering it over so you never quite saw every layer of the painting. With this work the idea of the threshold is just made more manifest in terms of pictorial imagery: windows, doorways, and closets are all thresholds that you can or cannot cross, they provide a more personal approach to the idea.

Also, this is the first time that I've reflected so directly on the world around me through my painting. As an abstract painter most of my career, my work has been focused conceptually on process and material, and on the open-endedness of abstraction, which I love. But we are living in a time now that is very difficult to ignore. The political discourse, the climate crisis, are things that affect our lives in a very real way, and I just find it difficult to express my feelings about those issues through purely formal abstraction. I have been looking for a way to bring representation into the work for many years, but without negating the very particular and peculiar way I work with paint. And with these paintings I finally found a way to do that.

I would like to talk about the different pictorial means that you use in these works to generate illusions. One is paint on the flat surface, in a trompe l'oeil manner, and the other one is the use of the paint matter to actually create the forms of the represented objects.

Yes that's right. With this work, I am playing with abstraction and representation so that there is a real tension between trompe l'oeil, verisimilitude and abstraction. You don't really quite know whether you are looking at something that is a real object in the room or a painted illusion of the object. This is something I am having a lot of fun with. It is a way to make the viewer look more carefully because they don't quite understand what they are looking at until they get up close. I think that all artists, in spite of the conceptual blah blah they may have about their work, desire most to have their viewers *want* to look at their work. The question is how to keep the viewer engaged. So yes I am using trompe l'oeil, the most realistic type of illusion, and then as you say the actual material of the paint and also the structure of the panel to create a kind of seduction. The panels are constructed of wood and their shapes are determined by the subject of the painting: if it is a painting of an armoire, the shape of the panel is like an armoire. And with the exception of maybe one painting in this series, all of them are cut flat at the bottom. So you don't see the full contour of the object, because I like in the end to remind you that you are just looking at a painting.

In one of your previous series called *Paint/Rags*, there are wooden supports but they are not directly visible by the viewer. The visible parts of the paintings look like actual rags. They are made only of paint, with no underlying fabric nor cloth, you do not have any substrate for your paint.

Yes. They originated from my **One Big Love** series, which started out as an exercise. I had been looking for something to do while I was working on very large paintings for a traveling show, something small and intimate that had a little more immediate satisfaction. So I thought I would give myself an exercise with a few rules: the paintings had to be no larger than 10 by 13 inches and they had to be on organically shaped panels. I wanted something that would allow me to just play. So one of the shapes that ended up being in this series was this kind of half a doughnut, as if it was hanging on a nail on the wall, and I liked that idea of the paint just being draped on to this support. This is how it started, but it was about making the *paint* look like it was hanging on a nail rather than fabric. But somebody referred to it as that “rag” painting and I didn’t know what they were talking about. At the beginning I was like “I don’t know if I want to make paintings that look like rags, who cares?”. But the more I thought about it, the more I felt it was pretty interesting. Apart from the fact that I know how to make paint look like fabric, I liked the idea of a rag – being a very humble object that you just throw away – that makes you want to come up and look closely and perhaps reconsider its value. And in a way it is kind of a play on Duchamp. It looks like a ready-made but in fact it is very meticulously made by hand.

Did you get inspired by Sam Gilliam in some way, or was it a reference to Jasper John’s Savarin cans brush pots, which are also “trompe l’oeil ready-mades”, done with painted bronze?

I wasn’t thinking of Sam Gilliam even though he is somebody I am familiar with. Gilliam’s work is about freeing the painting from its support, whereas I was thinking more about painting as a stand in for the object of representation, in this case a rag. And as for Johns, not really, although that’s the same idea, yes.

You have two series of paintings where the paint is an extension of the support. In the *What Goes Up* series, the paint creates a bulge that is in continuity with the support, like a morphing between the support and the paint. It redefines the concept of supports and media, it intertwines the two ideas.



Because of the small scale of those paintings, objectness of them, you don't know what is inherent in the actual structure and what is just applied on top, yes.

You also did that in some of your landscape paintings, where you have paint that extends below the support. Is it a way to say that a landscape is too big to be painted in an enclosed frame?

That's a very interesting way of looking at it. It is not untrue... maybe you're right. I had some early pieces too, one in particular where it is hanging so low below what should be the surface, almost like it's dragging the actual structure of the painting with it because it's so heavy.

That's something I have always wanted to create the feeling of with my work. That the material is so

overwhelmingly abundant that it just takes over. In the

more recent works, like the *Free Experience*, I was looking at these images of third world countries where somebody is carrying a huge stack of material, all you see are his feet on the bicycle pedals, and you just can't believe that the whole thing is not collapsing or falling over. So that was the feeling I was trying to create in that work, that overabundance of material.



I wanted to discuss the three main formal elements that are found throughout your work. The first one is the geological folds. They look very natural, you can see the compression effect. Where do they originate and what is your process?

I grew up in Southern California. I was a landscape painter as a young artist. Since I moved to New York, on the East Coast, I found that my relationship to the West, the light, the color, the landscape and the geography became much more important to me, and I am always conscious of those geological formations and the power of nature. Pushing the paint around is very geological to me. So I am thinking about the shifting of the tectonics plates, the layers of geological strata, this has always been a major part of my thinking.

As for my process, what I do is I trowel very thin layers of oil paint onto a flat surface. When that thin layer dries, it forms a skin, then I can trowel the next layer on. So I build these layers of paint, and my color sense is very intuitive, I don't generally have a plan. They have to be colors that have a kind of relationship to one another or have some sort of "frisson". To create these big folds, I scrape it off the support with the same knife from underneath and then lift it up. Then you can see the underside, all the different layers are revealed and it is very fragile because the oil paint is still wet underneath, which is why I work with oil because I need it to be soft and malleable. With acrylic it just dries immediately and with a very consistent kind of plastic quality, and it does not have the fragility of oil paint which I prefer.

So you don't build your layering directly on the painting?

No, not as much anymore. In the earlier works, everything was done directly on the support that was the support for the painting.

The second formal element that defines your work are the strips or the ribbons. Process wise, they are close to the folds but look different visually because they are neatly cut, in a very systematic and organised way. It is like if you had a scalpel and if you were dissecting or performing an autopsy of your own painting.

Yes. The process is exactly the same as I just described, only before I lift it up I score it, so when I do put the knife under it and start to push, instead of lifting it up from underneath, I am forcing the material to fold on itself. And because I scored it, all of those strips come up differently. When I was doing that directly on the surface of the painting rather than making them in advance to collage later, I was really thinking that I was peeling away the skin of the body of the painting, exposing its underlayers. And that's how I came to the next group of paintings called *Breaking and Entering*, because I thought: "I have been peeling the skin away, what would it be like if I could dig directly into the body of the painting".



And this is precisely the third major formal element of your practice: the scrapping, revealing, exposing... You seem to always want to see what's behind and then what's deeper and even deeper...

Yes, I went from folding back the surface of the skin of the painting to digging into the body of the painting, and now I am exploring a lot of the same ideas, but with trompe l'oeil.

Yes, you were investigating paintings, and now you are investigating objects, using painting as an instrument... I also wanted to hear your own thoughts about your choices of formats, as you are using a lot of small formats in your practice.

Early on in my career I had been working on a series of paintings which I was not happy with. I was a very newly developed abstract painter and the paintings felt very derivative and sort of formulaic. I wanted to replicate the excitement I felt when I had been making sculpture in school. So I decided to cut up some very small panels, 8 by 6 inches, so that I could just experiment and play. At the time it was just a way to innovate, to challenge myself. But as the work started to develop, I came to realise that what I was doing came directly out of the trajectory of Abstract Expressionism, and that as a woman painter, I could make a very bold statement, an heroic gesture, on a very small format. It did not have to be physically big to say something big. And so I took it on as a real commitment to the power of intimacy.

Another type of unusual format that you use are the very elongated vertical formats.

That began when I was working on a series of landscape or geology inspired paintings, I was thinking very deliberately about core samples and I layered my paint like you would see layers of geology, millions and millions of years of sedimentation. I was looking at a Barnett Newman at MoMA and I remember thinking how fantastic it was that it was just



the zip, without anything, just the single zip, and I was like “that’s it, he went right to the source of the inspiration”. And so I thought I didn’t need all the supporting environment around these layers and that I could go straight to the core.

In one of these core paintings, *Slice of life*, the thickness of the panel changes along the height of the painting.

Yes, here again I wanted to accentuate the weight of the material, I wanted it to look and feel heavier at the bottom than it was at the top. So that slight angling, that you may not see right away but that you can feel.

Can you tell us about your work *Velocity*, which features 3 vertical elongated panels next to each other?

I was thinking about the experience of riding in a train, and watching the landscape go by if you are not focused.

Do you know in what direction you are going to work after this show?

I have no idea. This move to my current work came unintentionally. I think most artists Don’t really know what they are doing until they’ve done it. This series started with a painting I did three years ago. I had seen a work by Mamma Anderson, a fantastic Swedish painter. It was a detail of an armoire, the door slightly open with all the linens stacked inside, a very beautiful painting. And at that time I just didn’t want to make one more Rag painting! So I thought I could just put the rags away in this closet. It was a way to transition away from the Rags and the closet gave me that vehicle, a vehicle to continue my trajectory but in a different way, and it just opened the door new possibilities. It was completely unexpected! So I have no idea what’s next.

