

**Art In Conversation**

**Abby Leigh WITH THOMAS MICCHELLI**

*OCT 2009*

On the occasion of the painter's new exhibition, on view at Betty Cunningham Gallery from October 15th to November 14th, 2009, Managing Art Editor Thomas Micchelli paid a visit to Abby Leigh's New York studio to talk about her life and recent work.

**Thomas Micchelli (Rail):** So, how long were you legally blind?

**Abby Leigh:** Actually, I didn't know I was legally blind, which was quite fortuitous. My eyes were healthy, but I was profoundly myopic, to the point where I was classified legally blind until I had my Lasik surgery eight years ago. I think that my spatial orientation was formed early on when I was making close-ups of fruits and vegetables in my early watercolors—I had the orientation of a profoundly myopic person. I used to say that I worked with fruits and vegetables because the models didn't talk, but it was that I was immersed in looking at their skins, textures, the way they decayed, what the source of their decay was, and the bruising on them. It was very interesting to me.

**Rail:** So you would stand inches away from your subject?

**Leigh:** Yes. It took me a long time to do these watercolors so, by the time I finished a painting of a bunch of radishes, I would have cycled through many bunches—the radish greens would wilt within a few hours, so that they had to be replaced constantly. This made me less slavish to the actual models, and I began to understand how radish greens react to placement, how they fall—the Platonic sense of radish greens. Looking back at those paintings, I see that I'd found a very simple solution to my problem, because I could see the vegetable models before me in a way that I wouldn't have been able to see, say, a landscape. And having painted with watercolors affects my work still—to this day I'm interested in transparency and in the application of colors in terms of layers. Not only transparency that is physical, but philosophical transparency.

**Rail:** At your previous show at Betty Cuninghame, which was titled *The Eye is the First Circle*, you joked that you had wanted to call it *Landscapes for the Profoundly Myopic*.

**Leigh:** Yes, that is what it sort of was.

**Rail:** The surgery, that must have completely altered your imagination.

**Leigh:** Oh, it was completely miraculous. Nonetheless I still see things as somewhat flat, which I don't mind, because it has given me a natural appreciation for what we would think of as a more Eastern portrayal of distance.

**Rail:** I read about a scientist who noticed that with certain artists like Rembrandt or De Kooning, one eye is sort of looking in one direction and the other eye is looking in another direction, and neurologically that would create a more flattened perspective, which aided their composition of the two-dimensional plane.



"EMERGING THOUGHT" (2008). Dry pigment, oil and wax on canvas. 50 x 50 inches. 127 x 127 cm.

**Leigh:** There are similar theories about El Greco's vision, and that of various other artists.

**Rail:** But I often think that myopic people, like you and me, wouldn't have had the ability to be artists at all back in the 1400s, because they couldn't see. Were you doing watercolors of vegetables and fruit up until you had the surgery?

**Leigh:** Oh no. I had three shows during the 80s, but I put my work aside for some time—I really had no idea what I was doing as an artist. I never went to formal graduate school in art, which was both good and bad. It was good because it made me find my own way and not just follow in the teachings of the time, but it was bad because I really didn't have a network of colleagues. I eventually found a friend and mentor, Louis Cane, a painter/sculptor and a member of the group *Supports/Surfaces*, who showed me how to set up a studio, and what it meant to work every day. He gave me the courage that I had lacked. I set aside still-life and did a watercolor series of my children underwater in the pool.

**Rail:** From photographs or from your imagination?

**Leigh:** From photographs that I took underwater, so they were disembodied creatures that could have been bobbing eggplants. After the pool series, I had the Lasik done, which revealed another problem—I realized that I knew what direction my work was going, but didn't understand some of the logistics of getting there.

**Rail:** So the subject was fairly self-evident to you at that time—is this when you started to make paper?



"DEEP SLEEP 1" (2009). Dry pigment, oil and wax on canvas. 50 x 50 inches. 127 x 127 cm.

**Leigh:** No. What astounded me when I discovered Dieu Donn  Papermill was that it was the only place in the world where artists can actually make paper to suit their needs. The first project that I did there was really a translation of a watercolor and in retrospect it was much too literal; it didn't take advantage of the uniqueness of the medium. Then I gradually began working with pulp painting and definitions that were watermarked within the paper, and that became very engaging for me. I was fascinated by abaca, which is a plant whose pulp can be made into a transparent, skin-like paper, and I began to insert sliced reindeer horn that I had bought a few years before in Chinatown without knowing why.

**Rail:** Going from painting watercolors of vegetables to embedding actual objects in the paper was a radical break—did you think of it that way at the time?

**Leigh:** Absolutely. I saw that paper could be twisted in endless ways to present a multitude of possibilities. And the idea of combining language with paper appealed to me. I loved the unpredictability of the natural processes involved in papermaking. It seemed like a logical extension of dealing with growth variation within nature, like the differences between one radish and another.

**Rail:** When did you develop your attraction to circular forms?

**Leigh:** I think it evolved gradually. First by inserting the reindeer horn slices, which were irregular circular forms. From there I began to make a series of works using Oxford English Dictionary definitions: "walnut" was the first time, and "oyster" came later.

**Rail:** So you take a typographical element, the text from the dictionary, which traces the evolution of a word through various linguistic influences, and you superimpose an image of that particular thing over it. Are you making a metaphysical or philosophical comment on the constancy of the image and the shifting of language?



"TARGET" (2009). Smoke on paper. 18 1/4 x 18 1/4 inches. 46.36 x 46.36 cm.

**Leigh:** Yes, enjoy the process of making both the larger gesture and the minute marks.

**Rail:** I understand that your mother was a mathematician.

**Leigh:** Yes, and one of my aunts is a mathematician who is working on the Genome Project at Columbia University. And another aunt was a botanist.

**Rail:** So there's this scientific aspect to your background. Do you feel that it informs your investigation of the basics of your art?

**Leigh:** In some ways, yes, because I'm analytical as a person, and I tend to think more empirically, so the work is an outcome of an empirical nature.

**Rail:** In your smoke drawings there are two motifs—the concentric circles and the vertical bands, which recall Barnett Newman's zips, about which there's been quite a lot of controversy over their spiritual dimension. I think Newman denied it, but some historians have tried to impose their own views on the subject. The fact that you're affixing smoke, which has this implicit spiritual aspect to it—candle smoke rising to the heavens, disappearing, something between the material and the immaterial—and that you are creating these highly geometric patterns. I'm just curious whether the impetus for this imagery came out of some kind of metaphysical meditation, or was it an attraction to the material and what could be done with it visually?

**Leigh:** I feel that my drawings are created intuitively, with one insight leading to another. I think Newman was being honest when he denied a "spiritual" dimension in his work—and I must honestly say that I am attracted to smoke's physical beauty, its twisting forms and dense color, rather than anything spiritual.

**Rail:** In a sense, it's sort of a hands-free charcoal drawing.

**Leigh:** Definitely. But I like the sensual element of materials—in these new paintings I'm working with a wax medium I make myself. It makes the paint really viscous and gooey.

**Rail:** Do you mix the pigment directly into the wax?

**Leigh:** No, I first take the pigment and add a little oil to it and then grind them until they reach the consistency I want. Then I add the wax medium to the mix in order to achieve a certain texture.

**Rail:** But the wax does not have to be heated at all?

**Leigh:** I heat the wax when I begin a batch of medium but then I don't have to reheat it again. After the wax is blended with stand oil and a little turpentine, it never hardens.

**Rail:** Your surfaces look as if you've rubbed the pigment into them with your hand or a rag.

**Leigh:** I work mostly with a brush, applying many thin layers, which takes away the visibility of the brush strokes. You're right, the surface looks as though it's pushed into the canvas, in effect. As a whole these paintings are about the state where you're not quite asleep and not quite awake, when you're in the intermediate state between the two. Cézanne, in a conversation with Joachim Gasquet, said, "When you look at a painting, shut your eyes, wait, think of nothing. Now open them. One sees nothing but a great colored undulation. What then? An irradiation and glory of color. This is what a picture should give us an —abyss in which the eye is lost, a secret germination, a colored state of grace. Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colors, be steeped in the light of them."

**Rail:** Your paintings appear monochromatic, especially from a distance, but you can see vibrant colors coming through as you get closer. One might seem entirely green, but there are at least five different tones of green beneath, from yellow to blue.

**Leigh:** In some cases, I used oxidized copper, then worked over it with a slate gray, then green gray, while other paintings have at least five different tones of green beneath a yellow. Painting isn't really a verbal process, especially abstract painting, and so sometimes what you're doing is only apparent after the fact. Most of the time you start with an idea in your mind, but your idea is elusive, and immediately slips away once you make a mark on the canvas. Make another mark, and your original vision slips still farther away. This goes on, with one image slipping and another ascending, until you've reached a state of total and complete failure, and then the canvas is finished. And you begin the next one. [*Laughs.*]

**Rail:** Taking your evolution from there: each show that you've had has been very different, one from the other, but there are consistent concerns throughout: transparency, the collision of natural forces.

**Leigh:** I think that there are lots of things that painters go back and revisit. But if I feel that I have gone as far as I can go, and that my work has become repetitive, then I begin to search for something else. You can't impose a new direction on your work, but you can remain aware and open to the new problems that choose you.

**Rail:** You have certain distinct ideas that you've been concerned with, but there is an historical growth within you over time. I was thinking of someone like Bill Jensen—to see where he started, with those very exacting, not hard-edge, but gnarly, organic abstractions, into his recent, wild, poured gestures. Brice Marden is another excellent example. That both artists are completely involved with the materiality of their work, and the work leads them into unforeseen territory.

**Leigh:** The same is true for me. Certain materials fire you up. I remember walking into Dieu Donné, seeing the wetness of making paper, and finding it profoundly appealing. I find a similar thrill in the sensuality of mixing oil with pigment and watching them become paint.

**Rail:** You have these incredible astronomical prints and natural history specimens in the back of your studio. They seem to provide inspiration for your forms as well as connect you to the natural world in a way that you may not be able to in the city.

**Leigh:** Well, you're right. I began to collect these prints and specimens before I knew why I was doing it. One of my prize collections are porcelain eyeballs I bought without any thought of them being useful. At one point, maybe about ten years ago, I thought maybe I'd do an installation with them, but in fact they're too beautiful to alter and all I wanted to do was look at them.

**Rail:** They also trace the common history we have with the animal kingdom—the bats' wings are analogs to our hands and fingers, the skins of stingrays seem to reflect the circles that you were painting for your last show, and at that time we talked about how much they looked like bubbles on the surface of the water. So there was this analogy between the environment it swam in and the skin of the fish itself.

**Leigh:** Well, I think you internalize the objects you live with without knowing it, and then years later you begin to see those connections, those visual influences.

**Rail:** You mentioned that you didn't make the association between the Descartes astronomical map and the circular smoke drawings.

**Leigh:** No, I didn't make the association until a friend pointed it out recently.

**Rail:** How do you manipulate the smoke used in your work?

**Leigh:** Various artists have worked with smoke before, including Tony Oursler, who used smoke as a surface or projection screen, and John Cage, who made smoked imprints on the paper before making the print itself. I wanted to do something that both analyzed the smoke's shape and yet tamed it, controlling what seems random to the human eye, but is actually subject to physical forces such as the density of the air, etc. etc.

**Rail:** From a distance they look like very beautiful ink wash drawings, but to know that they are smoke adds a contemplative element.

**Leigh:** Yes, I'm glad you used the word "contemplative".

**Rail:** What did you study in college, since you didn't receive any formal training in art?

**Leigh:** Theater. I started out as an actress. I did the national company of *Butterflies Are Free* and some television commercials. I went to study at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, but then discovered that I really didn't want to be an actress.

**Rail:** What was it that turned you off?

**Leigh:** I remember auditioning for the role of Miranda, in *The Tempest* for Stratford, Conn., which would have suited my abilities very well at the time. I was called back twice but then they said that I was too tall and they wanted someone smaller than the actor playing Prospero. I thought that I could either let my life go by like that, or I could begin to determine my own projects.

**Rail:** So what did you do?

**Leigh:** Between auditions, I began to draw at the Arts Students League, which was right across the street from Carnegie Hall, where I was taking dance classes. After I learned to draw, I took painting classes with Will Barnet, and one day he said, "You should be a painter." And I said, "Please, I don't want to be a laughing stock at 40. Don't tell me that if you're just being nice." And he said, "No, no, I think you should be a painter." So I thought, well okay, I'll give it a shot.

**Rail:** Do you think your theatrical experience informed your painting or did you take a step away from theater and leave it all behind?

**Leigh:** Well, my husband is a composer and I love the theatre but I don't think that it had anything to do with it. We are a theatre-oriented family. My daughter is a director and playwright and my son is a composer. I won a Scholastic Art Award in high school but I never took any art classes in college. My family would have been delighted if I became an art historian, but I never considered it. However, as a child, I looked at a lot of art. My parents often took my two siblings and me to museums and I remember the thrill of seeing paintings.

**Rail:** Are there artists with whom you've felt a particular affinity over time?

**Leigh:** There are artists like Carpaccio, Francis Bacon, whose works I always love, and others come and go, artists who speak to you at different times. Of course lately I've been thinking of Rothko, Gorky, and Turner. I particularly like what Turner said about trying to paint the sun as if the inside of his eyeballs had been burned.



**Rail:** How about contemporary artists?

**Leigh:** I love Rachel Howard's work with its combination of seductive beauty and menace. William Kentridge's imagination blows me away, and I love his fusion of poetry and politics. Maurizio Cattelan's dark humor and morbidity appeals to my sensibilities and I admire Maya Lin's elegant, wistful constructions.

**Rail:** I don't think we've ever discussed how you felt when you finally could see. Did you feel as if you could never paint the same way again?

**Leigh:** No, the irony is that it didn't really change the way that I painted because my orientation was set. It was both tremendously liberating and disconcerting in that I didn't know how much my glasses had protected me, and even though I wore contacts, there was always a feeling that when I wore them that I was not the person that I appeared to be.

**Rail:** Yeah, you can hide behind them.

**Leigh:** Right, hide behind your glasses. But that's more truthful than hiding the glasses in your content.

---