

## PREFACE

<sup>1</sup> Abby Leigh's new painting *Lipstick* hides its visceral qualities behind a layer of refinement. A restless experimenter with process and materials, Leigh never lets them take over, preferring to temper them with a strong sense of compositional purpose. Ultimately, qualities as basic (but crucial) as the way paint sits on a surface remain paramount. *Lipstick* is a rhythm of hot colors – reds, oranges



and pinks – which packs a remarkable visual punch from across a room. The amped-up colors are quickened through the vibration between edge and expanse in each horizontal passage; here the artist takes some of the tools of op art, but co-opts them. Because on close-up looking, we see her consistent painterly sensibility quieting down the movement into something more serene. It's a rather astonishing trick: to make colors this intense ultimately feel calm. Yet by anchoring them in two solid but open and wider parallels of pale yellow, and, even more significantly, by giving an extraordinarily subtle blur to her edges, she pulls it off.

Leigh's finely honed sense of materiality drives much of what she does. By using harder surfaces in this body of work – wood and aluminum panels – there is a propensity towards thinness in the layering effects she achieves. That is not to say that these effects seem in any way insubstantial; rather she achieves a hovering, floating, ethereality that almost seems surprising given the often rigid geometry that structures this series on the whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lipstick* (detail), 2012-13

<sup>2</sup>This can lead to some enticing and seductive optical sensations – in *Bridge 1* for example,



a harder universe of blues creates a rupture between gauzy disintegrating veils of yellow. The tension along the edges between the two is musical enough that your eyes convey to your body a physical sensation about the way this movement works.

The artist explores other types of ruptures in her new drawing series. Again, thin layering is a great interest, here among gray washes and harder spiraling lines of graphite and charcoal. In some, red spills forth as if from gashes and breaks in the careful forms, providing an almost sinister edge. Leigh continues to push abstraction forward, proving that the most traditional materials can still advance formal vocabularies. Her recent work is not about breaking fully out of older approaches, but rather about refining and personalizing them out of a clear desire to keep finding more and more nuance.

Carter Foster

---

<sup>2</sup> *Bridge 1*, 2013

## THE RISK IS PART OF THE RHYTHM

*delight and process in recent works by Abby Leigh*

*In dancing one keeps taking a step and recovering one's balance. The risk is part of the rhythm. One steps out of and into balance; one keeps on doing it, and step by step the mass of the body moves about. But the action is more fun and the risk increases when the dancers step to a rhythmic beat of music – Edwin Denby*

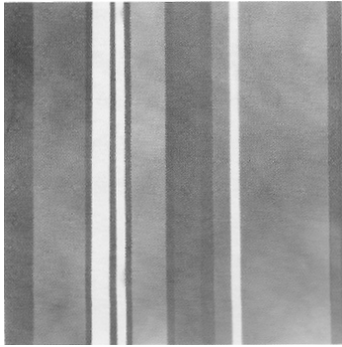
Abby Leigh is an artist with a particularly analytic mind. The problems she puts to herself as a painter comes from attempting to find a fresh balance between presumed opposites – romantic/scientific, gestural/geometric, visible/invisible. What poet Bill Berkson said of Hans Hoffmann could be said of Leigh, that she finds “an active happiness in the material life of painting,” which is to say, she enjoys every aspect of the process of being a painter. This is important for understanding why the paintings and drawings look the way they do, and how they delight us in the experience of sustained looking.

...

*If all things were turned to smoke, the nostrils would distinguish them.*

--Heraclitus

<sup>3</sup>For Abby Leigh, one of the few contemporary artists who chooses to mix her own



paint from raw pigments, the act of painting begins long before ever putting brush to canvas. It starts with making the paint, an extensive and exacting process she does herself with no assistants. What she calls “the sensuality of mixing oil with pigments and watching it become paint” is where the artist plays both scientist and alchemist.

Pigments are tiny, at times dust-like traces, that are highly variable – altering slightly in color and consistency according to the time of year and location the matter is gathered. Her studio looks like a nineteenth-century laboratory filled with hundreds of jars of ground earth from around the world.

The visible combustion particles suspended in rising smoke are not dissimilar in essence from pigments held in oil. Leigh’s series of drawings made with smoke are one of the clearest statements of her sensibility and visual ingenuity. She wanted to use smoke as a material but to use it against itself, to evade all the easy formal and conceptual connotations, to create both a technical and aesthetic problem to solve. As she explained it: “I wanted to do something that diagnosed movement but tamed it. I wanted to isolate the smoke and to examine what seemed random but is actually the result of physical forces such as the density of the air.”

The pictorial function of smoke became more pronounced in the nineteenth century where it communicated increasingly acute optical perceptions in the changing atmosphere of industrialization – as in the works of J.M.W. Turner – while providing a smoldering element in the exotic dramas of Romanticism, as in Delacroix. In this lineage smoke was a vehicle for a heightened painterliness and self-reflexivity; the smoke allowed the artist to move toward abstraction. The inherent qualities of smoke – organic snaking lines and billows – were a visual corollary for uncontrollable forces and the unconscious. In the twentieth century artists began

---

<sup>3</sup> *Barcode, Series B* (detail), 2012

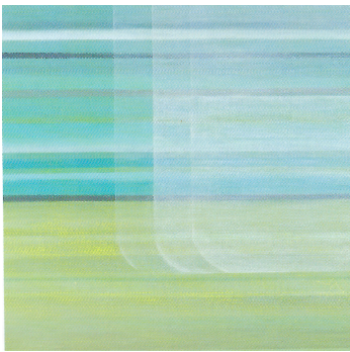
to use smoke itself as a material. From Wolfgang Paalen to Yves Klein to John Cage, smoke has been an operative of chance and an expression of freedom. Given this history, what is striking in Leigh's drawings is how smoke is used with precision. To create them, she developed a technique of moving a burning stick beneath a sheet of suspended paper. The darker areas have more soot while other places show only the lightest kiss. What first may appear as even washes of ink are in fact gentle modulations. There is a dynamism between the tightly controlled edges and the interior's inherent unruliness.

A target is an object with a purpose: improving accuracy. Implied in the target is an endless practice of aiming that echoes the discipline and time that went into making the drawings. The target is a pre-existing sign in the world famously brought into the fine art idiom by Jasper Johns, who said it was something "the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels." (Not coincidentally Johns is also a particularly analytic mind who merged seemingly opposed visual orders.) Leigh titled one of her exhibitions after a line from Emerson "The Eye Is the First Circle," which continues "the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end." Ambiguity is built into this image, which easily slides from cross sections of planets to models of atoms, from alchemical diagrams of the cosmos to concentric tree rings – almost always views of complete systems. The important role material processes play in Leigh's life as an artist cannot be overstated. Her engagement with every aspect of the selection and preparation of her materials never becomes programmatic. She is always looking for new ways to make her images, as the recent work with smoke shows. This deep engagement is a large part of what I mean when speaking of her "active happiness of the material life of painting".

...

*Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade;  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.*  
--Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

4



The potential for transparency is what unites oil paint's suspended pigments and the delicate smoke drawings. Similarly, earlier in her career, Leigh sought to bring the transparency of watercolor to oil pigments, and has said she is "not only concerned with transparency that is physical, but also philosophic." Oil painting as medium provided a new way to make images in the Renaissance,

with its conduciveness to constructing surfaces from thin veils, largely leaving brushwork invisible. Leonardo's oil painting technique, that greatest dissolver of the mark, is called *sfumato*, as though of smoke.

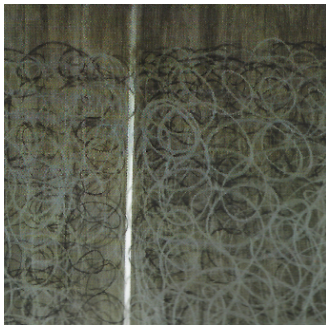
Removing nearly every trace of individual brush strokes, Leigh sets up seemingly separate layers that then subtly complicate their relationship. The paintings disclose themselves discretely, allowing you to follow the order they were applied, moving backward and forward in the depth of the paint. There are also invisible scrimms: the surfaces perceived as solid color built of dozens of coats of slightly alternating hues, layers we feel but do not follow. In earlier work, like those of her "Landscapes for the Myopic", there are straightforward levels: a base layer made of diaphanous gestures with an upper latticework on top, something between lace and cellular colonies that you look through. In her newest "Urban Landscapes" like *Central Park, June* (2013) there are slippages between these layers so that the

---

<sup>4</sup> *Subway* (detail), 2013

stripe skeleton peaks through gaps in the levels and shines through those colors underneath. Colors from some of the strips get picked up on the upper painted surfaces, and the chromatic blocks become activated in places by visible brushwork.

As important as the “performance” of making the paintings is to Leigh’s process as a painter is the performance she structures for the viewer, the viewing experience. For instance, you cannot help but imagine her, fire in hand, engaging the particular temporality of the smoke in making the smoke drawings – they cannot be made any faster than the smoke will rise or any slower either – and looking at the drawings communicates this exacting and fluid act of making. The smoke’s varied densities perform the same function as the layers in the painting: they structure a sense of time. This process of time elapsing reaches its most complex and integrated form in her recent series of charcoal and pencil drawings, where discernible layers of marks and scratches weave in and out of dense thickets.



<sup>5</sup>Leigh is quick to disavow any connection between her early career as an actress and what she does as a painter, though it is easy to see how the process of preparing and performing as an actress could relate to the way she creates objects that communicate a public face in the way that hers do. Importantly, this is a different type of mark

and painterly presence than the action painting theorized by Harold Rosenberg, who wrote that “at a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined.” Rosenberg’s spontaneous act was an existential outburst, a proof of life that cannot be planned ahead of time. Leigh’s painting, slow and steady, denies such fantasies of direct expression. They instead perform like a Shakespearean actor who speaks through the centuries-old text to some authentic experience.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Series C, #9* (detail) 2012

...

*However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life. – Frank O'Hara, Meditations in an Emergency*



<sup>6</sup>*Central Park, June* (detail), 2013 is a 36-inch square, a human size. Before you see any discrete parts of the surface you are hit with a jolt: the overall impression of color, which is both buttery and bright. All of these rectangles “add up” but at first there is a cantilevered asymmetry – you sense a grid you don’t see. What you

do see is a buried central axis, the division between the right and left side is engulfed in a band of fulsome yellow that keys the rest of the painting – sunny – and keeps both sides slightly rocking on the unclear center-line. This lemony “L” sticks out, and the vertical top seems to roll toward you, broadly dividing the other two sections of the painting, both dominated by muted green tones. A loud but happy sound pulls you to the upper left, where there is a modest rectangle of fiery orange crowing away. This is one of those colors that makes a sound, and once you fix on it you immediately start bouncing around the painting with its echoes: a wiggle coming from the top left corner of the painting, where the fresh yellow-green thins and parts for it to shine through. Two sharp ribbons of red on the left side running vertically, waving out from under the mint greens. Once you focus on any specific part of the surface you realize that what seemed like a solid block of color has areas of partial translucence – you are walking across a frozen lake. In fact

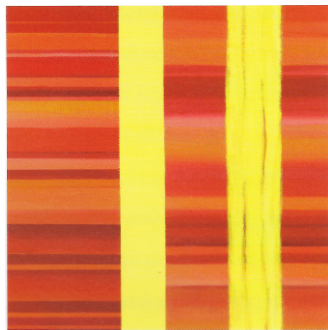
---

<sup>6</sup> *Central Park, June* (detail) 2013



the two large fields of sage greens, far from being opaque surfaces, are built of expressive brush work, a shimmer. Stepping back from the painting you see an underlying grid of vertical lines, revealed through shadow and tiny snatches of visibility. The stripes produce a base percussive rhythm that pervades the upper surfaces and energizes your eye moving around.

To think of Hans Hoffmann simply because of colorful squares is an oversimplification. However, to think of Hoffmann because both he and Leigh's paintings are about the sheer happiness of what paint can do – the process of painting and of looking at paintings – that comparison is indeed deeply true. In these "Urban Landscapes" she is trying to capture vivid bursts of city life by setting up formal relationships on a painted surface – in this case the sights and sounds of walking through Central Park in spring. Like all paintings they are vehicles for feeling through visual perception, calling to mind something that Cézanne said and



that Leigh quoted: "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  
<sup>7</sup>rise again from them in colors, be steeped in the light of them."

These recent "Urban Landscapes" are odes to Leigh's home in New York City. Most of them are about moving through the city – walking through Central Park or down Sixth Avenue; riding in taxis, elevators, and subways. She recreates the experience of motion through tight alternating stripes of color that make up the paintings, something recalling the staccato and aggregated lines of Futurism and stop-motion. Though they at first all appear geometrically straight, none of the lines are precisely parallel.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Lipstick* (detail), 2012-13

On this Leigh has said “I know there are external ways of making lines perfectly straight, but I like to try to make them straight myself, and I want them to be, but I know I can never do it completely.” This is what Richard Tuttle, speaking of Agnes Martin’s grids, describes as the “difference between the loved line and the unloved line.” There are degrees of waver in Leigh’s stripes just as there are degrees of love. In works like *Lipstick* (2013) we see the full spectrum: seeming distinct hard-edged horizontal bands on the outer field interrupted by three verticals of bright yellow zipping through, like a highway median. Between these bands of color the character changes, becoming more like smears or mouth sized kisses of the title, blurring into each other. The central yellow stripe is markedly different than the two that flank it – they are solid and rigid – where as this one is itself made of three long languorous brushstrokes. The effect enacts the pleasure of walking down the street in New York with red and rose lips dashing by.

Layers, transparencies, and stripes all exist simultaneously. Leigh also brings together different types of marks, geometric structures with the organic gesture, as well as marks you easily see and those you don’t. They are cosmopolitan paintings in a sense, balancing and finding room for all kinds, in the paradoxical way that her subject, New York City, incomparably does.

Jarrett Earnest