MARIETTA PATRICIA LEIS

EARTHLY PLEASURES

Walsh Gallery
Seton Hall University

March 11 - April 5, 2013
Opening Reception March 14, 5-8pm
BLUE

spare paintings
sensuousness and formal order
nonobjective, reductive

mirroring, translucent

intense blueness, saturation
vast, unfathomable
hydration
quiet, pure, infinite, placid

whisper

lush lapping edges
ooze, melt
edginess
slices

pulsating

impacted edges
more beyond-continuum

oil paint-many layers, skins
nuances
descending deeply into the soul,
the core

peaceful, serene
repose
empty space-possibilities

stillness

e.e., Emerson
Cage

the fluid nature of our lives
inhaling, exhaling
between musical notes
pausing

now

— M.P. Leis
MARIETTA PATRICIA LEIS: GALLERY OF EARTHLY PLEASURES

Marietta Patricia Leis’ markedly minimal artwork - and minimalist sensibility - belies, but at the same time subtly conveys, its richness of source. However self-referential Leis’ emphatically reductive paintings, objects, and painted objects may seem, they begin in response to stimuli in the observed world. This in itself does not define, much less explain, their existence; if they act diagnostically for Leis, emerging from her travels and her feelings, they do not - and should not - act prosaically for us. Rather, they function as distillations of experience, related to places and sensations inspiring them much as perfumes do to the scent sources comprising them. They are not about Leis’ life, but are conjured from it. They themselves provoke sensation, ineffable and yet profound.

To be sure, it is important to Leis that her panels, invariably sensuous in their intimate scale and luminous palette, infer a certain sense of place. The specificity of a place - certain qualities that signal such particularity - motivates her, and has ever since her “revelation of place” a dozen years ago at Oregon’s Crater Lake (whose bottomless blueness shook Leis to her core). But that specificity remains the engine of rather than the reason for her thought and production, its cause rather than its purpose. In her paintings - and even in her seemingly more “specific” three-dimensional objects - Leis pushes past the anecdotal and incidental and reaches for a fundamental perceptual unity, one that bespeaks tone, texture, and atmosphere with the most nuanced presentation of little else but color or, in the case of the sculptures, heft.

The late William Zimmer noted that Leis’ paintings follow in the “abstract sublime” tradition of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. They do indeed, but gain so much of their strength of presence precisely by negating, even inverting, those painters’ yawning scale. Leis, too, invites us into an abyss of formless color, carefully modulating coloristic transition - a little bit, when at all - to ease and yet complicate our gentle descent (or, if you would, ascent) into the void. But by encapsulating her voids and limiting them to what seems - deceptively - a (literally) manageable size, Leis induces a very different vertigo than did her abstract expressionist predecessors. Her panels, the size of windows at their largest and pocket mirrors or pages at their smallest, refuse to engulf us visually, but they still suck us in optically: their deep monochromatic expanses may seem microcosmic in the wake of Newman’s and Rothko’s macrosoms, but that is precisely what cleaves us to them - they pull us into their tiny yet yawning infinites as if we were falling through a Wonderlandish rabbit hole into the sub-atomic universe.

“Earthly Pleasures” must in this light seem an ironic title for an exhibit full of eerily unearthly vortices. But, as mentioned, these richly-hued little fields - and the sculptures that serve to remind us all that artworks have a finite shape and surface, their power of transport notwithstanding - originate in Marietta Patricia Leis’ encounters with diverse, but invariably resonant, spaces and surroundings. As ethereal as they might seem, they issue from the troposphere and embody a human being’s reactions to the world’s manifold phenomena. In effect, Leis has translated the essences of places into non-objective icons that extol and focus the divine magic of such places. These are more than mere delights; they are quietly ecstatic revelations.

— Peter Frank, Art Critic, Huffington Post

Cover image: Breathless 1-5, oil/paper/wood, 8x8x3.5”

Middle panel images (clockwise from upper right): Barrier Riffi I, oil/canvas, 36x36”; Pixel 13, oil/wood, 5x5x2.5”; Luminizer 13, Japanese inks/washi paper, 8x8”; Pixel 2, oil/wood, 5x5x2.5”; Luminizer 7, Japanese inks/washi paper, 8x8”; Pixel 4, oil/wood, 5x5x2.5”; Seed 7, oil/paper/wood/gold leaf, 7.75x7.75x1.5”; Luminizer 4, Japanese inks/washi paper, 8x8”

Right panel image: Molten Reflections 1-6, oil/wood, 10x10x2.5” each
CURATOR’S COMMENTS

Marietta Patricia Leis’ lush, saturated color field paintings function as fenestrations into an unconfined world of natural forms. The oil paintings are, in part, evocative of landscapes, seascapes, plant forms, weather patterns or micro-organisms and can be concomitantly seen as many of these phenomena. Nuances of color and light palpably depict a range of imagery that encapsulates a life of experience, serving as complex memory portraits that tap into emotions and feelings. For Leis, the paintings are meditations on specific places and times in her life.

The earliest of these memories date to the time she spent with her maternal grandmother, Ermelinda Fiore. Ermelinda’s world was one of scents and colors, a lasting impression on Leis’ young mind. Leis recalls accompanying her grandmother to the garden, spending hours listening to her as she described the flowers and their various attributes. Making their way back to the house, they would then arrange the flowers into bouquets, an art form in her grandmother’s home. The kitchen was similarly filled with indulgences of taste, smell and creativity. Cooking was also a form of creative expression for her grandmother and provided another realm of aromas and colors amid a backdrop of floral arrangements from the garden.

Leis’ more recent influences are derived from her extensive travels, one of the most seminal being a trip to Italy in 1979. There she tapped deeper into her Italian heritage and absorbed a new range of colors and influences. After an artist residency in Crater Lake, Oregon, Leis’ painting took on new resonance. She began to travel more widely to such exotic locations as Thailand, Greece, the Antarctic, Finland, Spain and Portugal. Having experienced a variety of locales, each with their own particular light and color conditions, her paintings took on the task of expressing the bounty of nature and its variety of nuances.

The multiplicity of blue shades encompassed in the sky and water became one of her favorite muses. This can be seen most clearly in works like Barrier Rif, Breathless 1 –6 and Quietness. Depictions of atmospheric conditions are expressed in Pixels, which indicate a variety of tones and colors as well as the formless structures of fog and light. But Leis’ work always draws upon her early years back in New Jersey with her grandmother. The Seed paintings offer us a variety of green, brown and golden hues culled from her “nonna’s” garden. The sheer variety of colors, light conditions, hues, tones and saturations attributed to Leis’ work reveals an artist that is concerned with looking at, meditating on and luxuriating in the bounty of nature and all its endless permutations. In Earthly Pleasures we enter a world that Leis constructs for us from memory. It is the absence of a very specific, figurative language that leaves us with occasion to assemble memories borne of our own experiences. Leis’ ability to reference her own past and present, while bridging that of her audience makes her painting resonate so profoundly. In every work we sense the artist’s gratitude and awe in the bounty of nature and we, too, can feel it intensely.

— Jeann Brasile