

ACCIDENTAL BEAUTY- THE ART OF TED LEIGH

“They can begin with a found object; they can begin with no object; they can begin sometimes when I’m sweeping the floor and I stumble and kick a few parts that happen to be thrown into an alignment that sets me off on thinking. It sets off a vision of how it would finish if it all had that kind of accidental beauty to it.”

David Smith, from an interview by David Sylvester

Ted Leigh is an abstract artist in the largest sense- that of reducing things seen, and things felt, to their purest essentials. His work is sometimes nonobjective, but that is beside the point. All of his pictures begin as a response to the visual world.

Leigh’s earliest paintings are direct, painterly observations of ordinary things lying about the studio. He observes these random objects closely, with passionate attention. It seems, in fact, that for Leigh (even in this early work) that nothing is random, everything is connected, and nothing is unimportant. The staple gun lies on its side, its arm flung out, in odalisque- like abandon, over the pink cloth. In another small painting of an empty paint box, the box stretches vainly, as though trying to regain its lost contents. And yet Leigh isn’t overly concerned with depiction- rather he seems to want to go to the essence of things, as though they contain a mystery to be solved by close observation.

So far, so good; we are in the realm of good, solid painterly realism, ready to develop along the lines of an Edward Hopper, or of a Fairfield Porter. In a painting like the ‘Barn Door Entrance’ or a figure drawing for example, you can sense Hopper. In the early painting ‘Dish Drainer’, the paint handling and lyrical color (and domestic subject) evoke Porter. But then something happens, Leigh goes in a completely different direction.

Hopper’s early work begins in much the same way, with a painterly and sensual- maybe a european- approach, which he gradually and relentlessly represses. Hopper represses the fluid brush stroke, the happy accident, the Beautiful, in order to reveal what he senses beneath. And what Hopper senses beneath, is not pretty.

Leigh at first seems to be headed this way too, he senses something else underneath appearances, all right- look at his “nudes”, for instance- headless, and not actually nude, they would do for covers of pulp novels. But instead of this, his love of paint takes over. You might say his love of the world takes over. And Leigh has a love for the visceral joy of applying paint, texture over texture, color over color, that takes him away from the object- it’s as though he’s extracting joy from the object. It’s just about as far from Hopper as you can get- also, surprisingly, from Leigh’s teacher Fairfield Porter. There is a coolness in Porter that Leigh is incapable of. On the contrary, Leigh seems to identify completely with what he is painting so that it becomes part of himself.

Maria Montessori said that a child is in love with its environment. You could say that a painter of this kind has remained that way. Ted Leigh certainly gives the impression, in all his work, of having fallen in love with the way things appear. And it’s anything he sees- he doesn’t usually leave the studio in search of a motif. It’s all here: a paint rag thrown across a meal tray, an old shoe that happens for some reason to be sitting on a piece of farm equipment. Everywhere Leigh looks, he sees beauty, and abstraction is a kind of shorthand for how he feels about it all- the way he has found of showing it to you. He’s a different kind of abstract expressionist, because of what he’s expressing: instead of a towering look- at-me ego, he’s seeking to express the beauty he sees and feels in the smallest, most

unnoticed things.

So, sometime in the 1990's, no longer constrained by naturalism, Leigh pours, drips, throws paint; or applies it with a housepainting brush or a spatula- all in the same painting. The color is inspired by reality but no longer tethered by it. Thick, creamy blues and blacks let a salmon pink ground peep through, dark blues and greys are smeared on top of black in a night- like way. A giant crimson glob devours a sweet spring- green area. Huge brush strokes (sometimes in a tiny painting) writhe and twist the space with the motion of the body, evoking the human figure. Sometimes, white paint, poured onto the painting like a spill, forms a curiously lace- like effect. You feel that Leigh has painted so much, observed so closely, that he is empathizing with his subjects, painting them from the inside- that he has pierced their mystery: the beauty of the visual world, and its mysterious energy.

The other painter working this way now is Howard Hodgkin. But Leigh is much earthier than Hodgkin, less precious, and hardly decorative. Instead he is willing (even eager) to push the paint further, manipulate it more, and he is not afraid to risk being awkward if necessary.

Ted Leigh's abstract photographs are the logical extension of his hyper- noticing of random objects and unexpected combinations. Leigh moves in close on his objects, so that you see the form and texture and color before you know what they are. (Sometimes you never do know) He's finding the elements he created in paint, for instance an iron bar bent at a right angle and lumpy with old repainting, provides the same human- gestural element familiar from the paintings. At the same time, it's doing something a painting can't do- it's making a sort of 'in' joke about structure (it's an iron bar) while actually providing the photo with structure. The photographs have the tactility of the paintings, too, a lot of the pleasure of looking at them comes from the interplay of textures. You can almost feel them. In one lovely photo, bits of discarded stencils have been sprayed so often they look like enamelled cast iron, sitting where they have been left by the process of making something else. Next to them, dark crimson spray- paint- stains and torn paper edges of swampy green, and the veined texture of a silvery green leaf. It's a kind of valentine to the world; to work; to the byproducts of artistic work.

Other logical extensions of this vision are Leigh's assemblages, and his collages. Here his inspiration may be Rauschenberg, however Leigh is able to move his ego aside, to let you see things for themselves, though the combinations are personal. Schwitters' collages and Cornell's boxes, have more in common with Leigh's subtle approach.

This love of the everyday humble visual, of old or worn objects, is obvious from the very first picture I've seen by Ted Leigh, a black and white photo from high school. It's an old doorway on a shingled house that could use some repairs. His eye for composition, texture, the interplay of shapes, all that is there, but feeling is there as well. With a careworn farm wife in the doorway it would be akin to a Walker Evans. But you don't need her in Leigh's photograph. It says all it needs to say.

Ted Leigh has said that his interest in art began in high school, with the Baroque and Impressionist painters the usual suspects. But his influences begin much earlier, with his love of the farm country where he grew up, with his grandmother's appreciation of old or primitive antique objects. He developed an empathy for people who work the land, and who make simple and useful things.

So, accidental beauty: not because this work happens by accident, on the contrary. I think that Ted Leigh wants to illuminate the seemingly random visual events of life, to show, by all sorts of means and materials, that nothing is accidental, that everything is connected. That everything, properly seen, can be revealed to be beautiful.

Ruth Channing