

June Leaf

ORTUZAR PROJECTS

This was June Leaf's first show in her adopted hometown since the artist's 2016 exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, "Thought Is Infinite," which focused mainly on her drawings. And while the presentation at Ortuzar Projects included several pieces dating as far back as the 1970s, the accent was firmly on work created since the Whitney show. As ever, Leaf has been equally active in sculpture and painting, with drawing as the inevitable fount of inspiration. Her art seamlessly and beguilingly stitches together naturalistic detail and abstract structure with elusive symbolism and allegory. The results are resonant images whose meaning floated almost intangibly through the viewer's mind.

One of Leaf's recurrent themes is movement. And, like Zeno of Elea, she finds that motion leads to the paradox of an endless series of half-way points. Her paradoxes are not logical, like those of the pre-Socratic philosopher, but existential; they lead to quandaries about living: Does one ever really get anywhere? Is there an actual destination?

Here, the drawings *Wheel*, 2021, and *Drawings in Movement*, 2020, showed existence as an endless circle, recalling that of the mythological Greek king Ixion—who was bound to a fiery, spinning wheel for all eternity—as did the wall-mounted relief sculpture *Figure in Landscape*, 2020–21. The freestanding sculpture *The Wheel*, 2022, featured a walking personage who, no matter how the circle turns, can never get any closer to the reclining figure across the form. *Man with Coattails Climbing a Staircase*, 2018, and the sculptures *Figure Descending a Staircase*, 2010, and *To the Sky*, 2022, seemed to promise a determinate goal—but the works' subjects are always stuck in the middle. One feels that the stairs and ladders depicted are endless, cut short only by the mortal artist's incapacity to continue them to infinity.

scrolls merely loop around them, so our effort to find a conclusion would have been frustrated. Such motion is really just another form of stasis. In a 2007 interview, Leaf questioned her own intentions in creating these works, saying, "We can't make much going around, because nothing goes around, except maybe people dancing in circles. Or nothing." This remark resonates with the strange Delphic inscription on *Drawings in Movement*: THE SECRET IS NOT DRAWING BUT DANCE.

Born in 1929, Leaf is part of the generation that, in the wake of World War II, embraced existentialism. Her Ixion is another avatar, perhaps, of Albert Camus's Sisyphus, and as the philosopher wrote, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." All of Leaf's work, but especially her sculpture, appears as a form of play, but of the most serious sort. And she seems to be an inveterate tinkerer, someone who can take a few random bits of tin, wire, and wood and construct something out of them by prestidigitation—even make them dance. Few artists have such a genius for, as it were, thinking directly with the hand. Her sculptures are essentially educational toys, and what they teach is how fantasy comes from and confronts reality.

—Barry Schwabsky

Joel-Peter Witkin

BRUCE SILVERSTEIN GALLERY

In an arresting black-and-white photograph, two figures in profile stand face-to-face before a dark screen, which is partially surrounded by a pale border. Their heads are tightly bound together, completely obscured by what appears to be white gauze—calling to mind the linen strips ancient Egyptians used to wrap their dead nobles—while their bodies are strapped to one another with what may be a pair of black leather belts. The towering model on the left appears to have no arms, yet the much smaller one on the right clearly does, and they're folded around the other's waist. Whether their intertwining is being enacted of their own volition, as in a consensual BDSM framework, or represents something much more sinister—a scene of subjugation and violence evocative of, say, the torture programs at Abu Ghraib—is ambiguous. The surface of the print bears a number of calculated scratches, accentuating that, overall, the image is a product of dextrous darkroom manipulation.

This profane fantasy, titled *Erotic Dream Series: Two Women Bound #4*, 1975, is by photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, who has been interrogating the more extreme aspects of difference and desire for fifty years. Disturbing yet curiously tender, it was but one of the twenty vintage prints, created between 1950 and 1978, that were on view at Bruce Silverstein Gallery. The benefit of focusing on the first chapters of an artist's oeuvre lies in the opportunity not only to shine a light on lesser-known pieces, but also to try and understand the art in a different or expanded context. Indeed, though we encountered familiar photographs such as the aforementioned, there were also a few surprises. *Puerto Rican Boy*, ca. 1956, is a hazy portrait of the titular subject in an arcade reminiscent of a Giorgio de Chirico painting, and *Star of David Dancer*, 1963, is an abstract whirl of merriment—or even agitation—enhanced by flickering scrawls of light. The latter was apparently Witkin's first foray into the abrading of negatives, which can produce an array of effects either jarring or joy-inducing.

Other prints—such as *Christ, Coney Island*, 1967, which shows a lifeless Jesus eerily laid out on a dark shroud, as if just detached from the crucifix, at a beach crowded with gawkers—demonstrated more clearly that religion, for its convoluted and ecstatic qualities alike, has always been central to the artist's work. It is important to note that Witkin, born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, is himself a



View of "June Leaf," 2022. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Several of the sculptures took a form resembling that of a fabric scroll, usually painted, on a pair of spools with a crank (*Scroll with Figures [Family on a Raft]*, 2008, and *Sleeping Man*, 2020) or a sewing-machine treadle (*Mechanical Table*, 2016) to produce movement. We gallerygoers could only imagine ourselves as the works' possessors, free to turn the cranks or pedal the treadles to our hearts' content. But we noticed that the fabric "pages" are not fixed to the spindles in such a way that they have a definitive beginning and end—rather, these false



Joel-Peter Witkin,
Erotic Dream Series:
Two Women Bound
 #4, 1975, gelatin
 silver print mounted
 on board, 11 × 10 5/8".

devout Catholic and positions his eccentric practice within an ethical rubric that impels his viewers to look upon and embrace those whom society ostracizes. Yet, like Diane Arbus, he has long been accused of exploiting people who exist on the so-called margins—especially those with “nonnormative” bodies, sexual identities, and sexual desires. For instance, his most recognizable and controversial photographs—executed with a palpably voyeuristic avidity and depicting transgender women, cisgender women of size, and disabled individuals—were strategically left out of this show.

However, despite the ineluctably valid critiques that surface when an able-bodied, straight, and cisgender man makes challenging representations of other communities—while providing only the merest scraps of context regarding his production methods—his work has been a major influence on countless artists, musicians, and fashion designers. They have found in Witkin a kindred spirit, as he illuminates, with an almost religious zeal, the types of subjects that most people would rather see relegated to the shadows. And his rapturous attention to the perverse and erotic, to the spiritual and the theatrically staged, has paved the way for a significant array of queer photographers, such as Tessa Boffin, Evergon, and Brian Weil. More than confirming his place in the history of photography, this exhibition demonstrated that, fifty years on, Witkin’s unforgettable art continues to provoke and prompt critical reflection.

—Jackson Davidow

Greer Lankton

COMPANY GALLERY

Everybody knows the best kind of party is a doll party. I mean the kind thrown by trans women, who at some point in the past decade began using the word *doll* to describe themselves. The term was not used that way during the 1980s and '90s, the period when Greer Lankton (1958–1996) produced her lifelike doll sculptures, even though the trans artist deeply identified with her works. But the coincidence made “Doll Party,” her show at Company—and her first New York outing in eight

years—all the more irresistible. As poet Kay Gabriel once wrote to me, “Dolls are pretty and pliable, something to play with.” In Lankton’s case, they were often better than the real thing: Supermodel Peggy Moffitt, in response to photographs of her portrait sculpture that Lankton sent her in 1990, replied, “Your doll is too beautiful and thin to look like me, but I take that as a great compliment. I would rather look like the doll than the other way around. And to be fully bendable—what a dream!”

Two of those pictures were on display here: *PEGGY MOFFITT IN RECLINE*, 1986, which shows the fashion icon in her trademark Vidal Sassoon bob and mod makeup, posed like a dolphin arching through dark waters. The other, *PEGGY ON RED*, 1988, imagines her as a glittering insect in a lacey gown. Many of Lankton’s dolls have not survived, so this documentation-heavy exhibition offered a glimpse of the cinematic precision she utilized to photograph each work, alternating color filters, backdrops, and shutter speeds. For instance, another print captured Diana Vreeland’s effigy in a tipsy blur, blowing smoke from her cigarette into the air. Her sallow, spotlighted flesh, which Lankton molded from painted plaster and canvas, perfectly recalls the heavy pancake foundation the late *Vogue* editor wore. Then we saw *JACKIE KENNEDY*, 1985, dressed in her famous pink pillbox hat and shot from three angles in close-up, recalling press photographs of her taken on the day of her husband’s assassination. The artist sculpted her face to appear as hard and smooth as a death mask.

Lankton paid homage to plenty of gender-bending icons, too. The show included *DIVINE*, 1986, immortalizing its inimitable subject in her famous pink dress and carrying a pistol (as she appeared in John Waters’s 1972 film *Pink Flamingos*), while *ETHYL EICHELBERGER*, 1985, rendered the drag performer and playwright ghoulish with bloodshot eyes and a high, pale forehead (though I imagine the artist’s subject might have been flattered by her friend’s portrayal, which hints at Eichelberger’s dark sense of humor). Also here were Lankton’s many depictions of Candy Darling, such as *CANDY DARLING with BOA*, 1987, a portrayal of the trans actress and model nude save for a pair of stilettos and a garland of ostrich feathers, and the remarkable *CANDY DARLING at home*, 1987, which shows her posed on a gold



Greer Lankton,
CANDY DARLING at home, 1987, digital
 C-print, 9 3/4 × 10".