

ALFRED LESLIE: LARGER THAN LIFE

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*Hyperbole! Can't you arise
From memory, and triumph, grow
Today a form of conjuration
Robed in an iron folio?*
- Stéphane Mallarmé "Prose pour des Esseintes"

Any attempt to define painter, draftsman, sculptor, print maker, photographer, filmmaker, composer, writer, set designer, animator Alfred Leslie is doomed to failure because like his work, he is larger than life. Leslie fits no category, which may be intentional or simply the result of a personality driven by sheer energy and rebelliousness to push the limits of any art form. In some respects, Leslie's career resembles that of nineteenth century French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, who shocked the literary establishment when he rejected the dominant naturalistic style to become the leader of the new Symbolist movement.

Like the hero of Huysmans' 1884 novel, *Against the Grain*, Alfred Leslie is a singular figure who rejects bourgeois values to create an entirely individualistic world of his own. However, in contrast to the eccentric decadence of Huysmans' hero Des Esseintes, Leslie does not embrace but attacks the isolation of the Ivory Tower, demanding a social role for art that embraces humanism and the varieties of human condition in images of the marginal and displaced workers that Huysmans rejected. Just as Huysmans abruptly changed his style when he decided that Naturalism was a dead end, in 1962 Leslie, whose abstract paintings of the Fifties were widely praised, shocked the art world rejecting abstraction for figuration. However, just as Huysmans preserved the viable elements in Naturalism in his new literary style, Leslie painted and drew portraits and figures that maintained the formal rigor of abstraction.

A member of the fearless "greatest generation", Alfred Leslie was born in 1927 in the Bronx and at seventeen enlisted in the US Coast Guard. When the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, he was in boot camp at the end of World War II. After the war, with the aid of the G.I. Bill, he was able to study art at New York University and the Art Students League. A body builder and gymnast, he earned a living cleaning offices, waxing floors and posing as an artist's model in classes as varied as those taught by Reginald Marsh and Hans Hofmann. While studying drawing and painting, he continued making films, which he had begun as a teen. His 1946 film *Walking* was based on texts by American Transcendentalist philosopher Thoreau. In 1949, in *Magic Thinking* he combined black-and-white cartoons, home movies, GI training films, industrial commercials, and footage from old feature films.

By 1951, Leslie was well enough known in avant-garde circles as a painter to have his painterly abstractions included in the historic Ninth Street Show of the leading artists who came to be known as The New York School. *He was twenty-four* at the time of his first one-man exhibition with Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1952. Included in the show was the gigantic *12 by 16-foot Bed-Sheet Painting*, an unsized canvas with a black, scumbled surface, a leaning white bar painted in the lower left corner. Casually hung from the ceiling with nails poking through grommets, the painting was purposely left to sag to emphasize its physical presence. This sense of gravity, physicality and obdurate presence came to be characteristic of Leslie's work.

Hailed as a *wunderkind*, in the 1950's Leslie had five solo shows at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, the incubator for original new talent. He was a whirlwind of activity; his studio the arena for a nearly continuous series of art happenings, performances, musical improvisations, not to mention parties. With

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friends in both the jazz and experimental theater world, Leslie was a central figure of the Beat Generation. In 1959 with photographer Robert Frank he made *Pull My Daisy*, a classic American underground film, narrated by Jack Kerouac and featuring, among others, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Alice Neel, Larry Rivers, and Richard Bellamy, with a soundtrack sung by jazz singer Anita Ellis. *Pull My Daisy* featured Jack Kerouac's voice-over, as well as the screen debut of French actress Delphine Seyrig.

That year Dorothy Miller selected Leslie to be one of the "Sixteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art. At the same time that he was becoming known as a painter, he started to gain recognition as an experimental filmmaker. *The Last Clean Shirt* with text titles by Frank O'Hara and music by rock and roll legends Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller won first prize at the Bergamo Film Festival, although it caused a riot as it had when originally screened at the New York and London Film Festivals. In a review in *Encounter* magazine in 1964, Philip French described the booing, groaning and foot stamp of the audiences, while acknowledging that *The Last Clean Shirt* was one of the two most original films shown in the London festival—the other being Jean-Luc Goddard's *Bande A Part*. "What is Truth" was the headline for a review by Philip T. Hartung in the *Commonweal*. In 1964, he filmed painter Dorothea Rockburne in "Philosophy in a Bedroom," —a title taken from the Marquis de Sade. It was shot in 8mm and blown up to 35 mm.

Leslie also made assemblage sculptures of a variety of junk materials found in the streets. In 1960 he published a single-issue review *The Hasty Papers*, with texts by among others, Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Ashbery and Terry Southern. In 1962, Pontus Hulten, then director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, put him in a show of *4 Amerikane*. The other Americans were Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and assemblage sculptor Richard Stankiewicz. Leslie might have gone on to be the only French New Wave film director in the U.S., but after his negatives were burned in the 1966 fire, he focused on painting. During the sixties, he showed with Richard Bellamy, a lifelong friend and champion at the Green Gallery along with Claes Oldenburg, Dan Flavin, Jo Baer, Ronald Bladen, and John Chamberlain.

The idea for what would turn out to be a new style of black and white figure painting began to germinate in 1955 when a collector friend gave Leslie a Polaroid camera. Leslie had developed his own photographs since the age of ten and the new technology of instant developing within the camera fascinated him. He began taking hundreds of police-style mugshots of his friends long before Andy Warhol made a photograph. (The only two that survive are of the young fellow painters Al Held and Sam Francis). In their stark black and white documentation and straightforward frontal stare, the polaroids are precursors of Leslie's *grisaille* figurative paintings which he began painting in 1962.

In these first full-scale figure paintings, he created a self-imposed limitation eliminating color, employing four horizons for the figure and working exclusively in the gray scale. By concentrating on the way light hits forms, he creates the impression that they are actual three-dimensional volumes and not flat shapes silhouetted against a flat ground. The full-scale preparatory drawings for the *grisaille* paintings resemble large scale preparatory drawings for monumental frescoes artists from the Renaissance were trained to produce.

Feeling that abstraction could not accommodate all his diverse interests in photography, cinema, sculpture and theater, he now wished to synthesize the various media he had worked in. And this was his objective in 1963 when he abandoned abstraction to begin his startling *grisaille* portraits. They were executed in an antinaturalistic but nevertheless figurative style. The compositions were conceptually determined, yet the subjects acutely observed. These unsettling frontal nude and clothed figures were monumental in size, and done with his composite perspectives and irrational unjustified lighting, revealing they are as much imaginative constructs as direct observation.

Eliminating color to paint exclusively in the monochrome gray scale necessitates laborious studies to create sculptural effects through the use of light-dark contrasts to model forms. The wish to create sculptural effects amounted to blasphemy in the era of Clement Greenberg's definition of the essence of painting as flatness. Once again, Leslie was compelled by the evolution of his own pictorial process to go against the grain.

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Leslie's *grisaille* paintings had precedents in both Northern and Italian Renaissance art in works like Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel and Jan van Eyck's exterior wings of the Ghent Altarpiece. The purpose of painting in monochrome *grisaille* was to produce a sculptural effect. For example, Mantegna used *grisaille* in imitation of the effect of a classical sculptured relief and the ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel have portions in *grisaille*. Both Goya and Ingres painted rare *grisaille* masterpieces, but the most famous modern *grisaille* painting is in Picasso's *Guernica*, on loan to the Museum of Modern Art until it was sent to Spain when democracy was restored. Picasso's masterpiece was *the* painting the New York School had to better to make an important mark historically and undoubtedly it was part of Leslie's education as an artist.

By rejecting abstraction for figuration, *chiaroscuro* for color contrast and modeling for flatness, the *wunderkind* was suddenly an outcast challenging the very definition of modernism. The art world did not know what to do with what appeared to be an out and out rejection of the culminating phase of modern art. Indeed, one critic compared Leslie to a Dostoevskyan character bent on self-destruction. Nevertheless, some were appreciative, and a show of the *grisaille* portraits was proposed for fall of 1966 at the Whitney Museum. That summer, Leslie's close friend and collaborator, Frank O'Hara was run over by a jeep on a beach on Fire Island. Leslie was devastated. Then, on October 17, 1966, a blazing fire destroyed the contents of his home and studio in lower Manhattan. He lost his unpublished writings, film negatives and most importantly, fifty to sixty *grisaille* paintings and drawings. The Whitney show was necessarily cancelled. He had to start all over again.

Now the works would be more complex involving groups of figures in what were essentially tableaux vivants. In 1967 he began *The Killing Cycle*. Originally a series of five works based on the death of Frank O'Hara, he edited them down to three major multi-figure paintings, making hundreds of studies along the way. It would occupy him for two decades. In *The Killing Cycle*, Leslie deliberately subverts expectations, turning conventional wisdom upside down, toying with the bizarre, the uncanny and the *mauvais gout* that is the only thing left that can shock the bourgeoisie. The banishment of figuration and narrative modernism was for him an unnecessary limitation since they continued to exist in film, theater and literature, fields in which he was also involved.

The artificial lighting, theatrical gestures and implied inclusion of the spectator in the unfolding drama was intentionally reminiscent of Caravaggio's close-up style and sculptural physicality. In fact, at least one of the scenes is based directly on Caravaggio's *The Deposition of Christ*. That Caravaggio started a revolution by rejecting the theoretical basis of Mannerist art, which was based on refinement and not discovery, copying art instead of working from life was not lost on Leslie. Abstraction was beginning to look like bloodless repetition to him. He wanted a more robust, emotionally engaging art that working directly from life provided. Caravaggio used props and so did Leslie. As opposed to borrowing real feathered wings to hang on his street urchin Cupid as Caravaggio did, he hauled a real jeep up to his studio. And like Caravaggio posing real models in *tableaux vivants* in the studio, Leslie's theatrical props were lit with dramatic light, exaggerated *chiaroscuro* and foreshortening.

Everything about Alfred Leslie's work is exaggerated: the paintings are too big, the subjects too personal. The multiple pregnant women caress their naked bulbous bodies long before *Vanity Fair* shocked its readers with a naked, pregnant Demi Moore on its cover. A profile photograph of a pregnant nude movie star is sensationalistic, but Leslie's full frontal pregnant women are just ordinary people about to give birth, the moment that begins a life that will inevitably end in death. This sense that the shadow of death is one of life's unavoidable realities is in fact implied in the subjects Leslie chooses and the way he paints them as flawed and often suffering.

Like his buddy Jack Kerouac, Leslie liked to take road trips to see the country. One that started in his new home in Amherst, Massachusetts and ended in Ohio was particularly significant. He had been sponsored by the Wein Engineering Company to celebrate the opening of a newly established arts college at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. The day he arrived in Youngstown, September 19, 1977 is known as "Black Monday". On his first day in town, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company closed its doors and some 40,000 people lost their jobs. Black Monday was the beginning of the destruction of the industrial heart of America known as the rust belt from which the country has never recovered.

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Leslie spent the next ten weeks in Youngstown, witnessing the unraveling of an entire community in what would become a familiar story of lives crushed and hope extinguished. The sadness in the eyes of his subjects and their dejected postures tell the story more poignantly and personally than any Michael Moore documentary. He had decided beforehand to paint a three-panel work of the citizens of Youngstown in the style of the 9-foot-high larger than life standing figures of the first *grisaille* paintings of the sixties. He worked in an empty classroom with ordinary clamp lights he could shine in any direction. The subjects were drawn and painted from life.

A second generation American whose father was brought up in an orphanage, Leslie wanted to understand his parents' America, its melting pot culture and its diverse population. He wrote about America and used America in titles for abstractions. Indeed, a full size American flag hung in his studio from 1950 until 1966 when his studio was gutted by the devastating fire that destroyed virtually his entire previous output. Many artists painted the American Scene, but Leslie was more interested in the American character.

Americans, Youngstown, Ohio, 1977-1978 is a haunting triptych, a group of figures, some isolated, some entwined, standing together in unison. The clothes and casual poses are as much of that specific moment as the ruffs around the necks and codpieces of sixteenth century portraits. The color is a very subtle pairing of original mixtures of tints and shades. The figures are isolated against a painterly burnt umber ground that appears almost like a curtain behind them, emphasizing the theatrical nature of their presentation as well as shutting off space so that the area they inhabit is so shallow they appear ready to step into the spectator's space.

How to translate drawing into painting, turning detail into generalization. In the Youngstown *Americans*, the standing entwined figures are larger than life size. Their confrontational attitude as their gaze meets yours suggests an equality between subject and spectator that is disconcerting in its intensity. In a time when the decorative style of "post painterly abstraction" dominated, Leslie refused to provide visual Muzak. These looming figures are obdurately present, sometimes like ghosts. Clearly they are specific people, individuals who stand before us nude or intertwined in relationships that are affectionate but not erotic. In fact, the lack of eroticism in Leslie's nudes is itself shocking, recalling Kenneth Clark's distinction between the idealized nude and the realism of the naked.

Initially, Leslie made a charcoal drawing for each panel on a 32 x 40 inch sheet of Strathmore two-ply paper, scaling up each figure onto the three 9 x 8 foot canvases he had brought with him. Each of the subjects came separately and he painted them directly from life. The result was the heroic 9 x 24 foot triptych, *Americans, Youngstown, Ohio*. The assembled groups stare out at you in silence, their gaze meeting yours. This direct engagement recalls the riveting stare of the barmaid in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. The implication of an intimate relationship between subject and viewer is already implicit before Manet in Caravaggio's bold style that ended theory-based, aestheticized Mannerism and initiated the fully embodied theatrical Baroque style, which engaged a larger and more democratic audience than the aristocracy and the clergy.

Like Caravaggio, Leslie posed and lit his models in a way that made them seem ready to enter the spectator's space. Caravaggio was derided for picking his models up off the street, and especially for showing the soles of the dirty feet of the prostitute who modeled for his masterpiece the *Dormition of the Virgin*. Just the choice of painting not the ascension into heaven but the earthly death of the Madonna was enough to cause alarm in the Vatican. In a similar fashion Alfred Leslie would manage to disturb the New York *cognoscenti* with similar revelations that his models were often street people with the physical imperfections of real people.

Cindy Cresswell (from *The Lives of Some Women*), 1976-1977 silhouettes a young girl in a pale green tee shirt with a gaily colored scarf against a monochrome brownish ground, the light grazing her body to emphasize its curves. *Brenna Gordon*, a 1984 portrait from the series *The Lives of Some Women*, is an oil painting of an unashamedly indeed proudly pregnant nude, seated like an enthroned Madonna. Forms are generalized but details are specific: the bandage on her crooked toe makes the moment actual. The quality of the paint handling is the only aesthetic element to be seen, but the image is so unsettling we

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almost do not notice how beautiful it is. A three quarter length 1990 *grisaille* portrait of Becky Windmiller is done entirely in shades of grey. A nude young woman with frizzy hair is seen in profile, slumping unselfconsciously in a chair.

Leslie's paintings are highly stylized, reductive in both palette and details and cannot be confused with Photorealism, a style of hyper-realist painting. The relationship between Leslie's abstract and figurative works is best seen in the context of the swing between the two of artists like Richard Diebenkorn and Philip Guston. One also thinks in this context of abstraction versus representation of the formality of Edward Hopper and monumentality of Balthus, both figurative painters whose reductive styles cannot be confused with photography. He extracts the essential and generalizes form in ways congenial to geometric abstraction. Undoubtedly, black and white photography with dramatic studio lighting informs Leslie's *grisaille* paintings, but so does the compositional contrasts between black and white in Japanese *Notan*, a compositional system introduced to America by Arthur Wesley Dow, the teacher of Georgia O'Keeffe and referenced in Leslie's black and white watercolors *100 Views Along the Road* begun in 1978.

It was difficult to shock the public with a style rooted to a degree in the academic paintings of David and Ingres and the dramatic lighting of old masters like El Greco, Georges de la Tour and above all, Caravaggio, whose paintings Leslie, an inveterate museum goer, knew well. Since electricity did not exist, their lighting was clearly by candle whereas Leslie is clearly using artificial studio lighting to create the light dark contrast that is the basis of *chiaroscuro*. When in 1971 he moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, he built a studio and had a fake business card made that said Leslie, Caravaggio and David, Contractors, an indication of who he thought his partners were now.

Leslie is not afraid to attack the biggest issues we face like birth and death, aging and suffering. He refuses to entertain or distract. When accused of morbidity, Leslie answered: "You could say they're dead, entombed figures. Their unnaturalness is a dialogue with perception. The four horizons were each painted at eye level. You can only see a figure like that with a long lens of a camera brought into a close-up or, if you're far enough away, through a telescope or binoculars. Then you don't have to move your head up and down to scan the figure. With the multiple horizons and unjustified light, I democratize the body. The person I paint doesn't exist; the body is a reflection of process and randomness, a composite of sittings. By the time I'm through, the only 'there' that's there is the 'there' I have made."

A Death in the Family is a 1976 group portrait of four figures, two women, and a man standing beside a dead body lying horizontally on a gurney. Eggs on a plate on the empty chair, a cigarette snuffed out in the yoke, indicate they were eating breakfast when a sudden tragedy interrupted a casual family gathering. They look stunned. The man looks straight at us. This is a scene in a drama whose dialogue we have to imagine. Because they address us, we become actors who react to what we are seeing as well—the specificity of details versus generalization of form.

Clearly, Leslie had no fear of challenging the old masters, perhaps because he was an autodidact who did not believe that art progresses. He was willing to experiment with materials and techniques, styles and images so bold that bordered on the offensive. The degree to which filmmaking and animation inspires Leslie has not yet received sufficient attention. Without his previous experiences as a filmmaker, Leslie could not have arrived at his mature painting style, which synthesizes the physicality and literal presence of painting with the dramatic potential of narrative and psychological immediacy.

At ninety, Alfred Leslie is still a workaholic investigating new media and new subjects. He calls his latest paintings *Pixel Scores*. They are digitally painted portraits of characters from literature he has constructed from his own drawings that are part of an ongoing series of *Fifty Characters in Search of a Reader*, a reversal of the title of Pirandello's play *Five Characters in Search of an Author*. Once again, the spectator is activated to interpret or project a narrative. It is no accident that collage is invented in painting at the same that *montage* becomes the means to create emotional drama in moving pictures by splicing them together in atemporal juxtapositions.

Their idea for the *Pixel Scores* evolved from a film editing computer program Final Cut Pro, which allows images to be manipulated digitally. The day that Final Cut Pro was released in 1999, Leslie realized he

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could put it to use in making a new kind of painting using a tablet and stylus to photoshop drawings. He does not use photography as a source, but rather manipulates his own drawings on the computer screen, then prints them. For Leslie, the *Pixel Scores* are a summation of his varied interests, incorporating the elements of his previous works in drawing and painting, including the abstract works that first won him fame.

Because we know that the characters in his gallery of fiction are not real but fictional, the effect once again is hallucinatory, encouraging the viewer to invent their own mini-series for these characters to act in. The “people” in the *Pixel Scores*, however, are all invented characters taken from fictional works. They range from *Johnny Perry*, a character in Chester Himes’s *The Crazy Kill* to the three daughters in Pushkin’s *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* and Isabel Archer in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. Their characters are revealed by their expressions, postures, costumes and background. All the forms are generalized so the frontal figures staring at us seem like archetypes or icons.

Leslie thinks of the Photoshop program as a tool like a hammer or a brush. He changes his drawings, altering color and form with the new digital technology until he finds them aesthetically satisfying. The idea that they are scores like musical compositions implies the plots must be played out in the spectator’s mind. In an interview with Phong Bui, Leslie explained, “I like to think of everything as automatic artifice, from images greatly disproportionate in scale to kitschy images of marshmallow clouds and whatnot, it’s all intermingled in these *Pixel Scores*. It’s all complete artifice, bound together—I hope—by first-class formal attributes.”

About the Author:

From 1962 until 1965, Barbara Rose was a New York correspondent for *Art International*; a contributing editor at *Art in America* (1965-1971), *Vogue* (1966-1988), and *Artforum* (1965-1973). She was an art critic for *New York* magazine from 1971 until 1977, art editor at the *Partisan Review* from 1975 until 1996, associate editor at *Arts* magazine from 1978 until 1988, and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Art* from 1988 through 1991. The College Art Association of America awarded Rose the Distinguished Art Criticism Award in 1966 and again in 1969. Rose’s publications include *American Art Since 1900* (1967); *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting* (1969); *Lee Krasner: a retrospective* (1983); and *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art* (1989). In October 1965, Rose published the essay ‘ABC Art’ in *Art in America*, in which she described the fundamental characteristics of minimal art. She has published countless catalogue essays, and written extensively on the work of many artists including Georgia O’Keeffe, Barnett Newman, Jasper Johns, Larry Rivers, Hans Hoffman, Joseph Stella, Claus Oldenburg, Lee Ufan and several others. Rose produced eight films, including *North Star: Mark di Suvero* (1977), a documentary film about the artist co-produced with filmmaker François de Menil and with an accompanying musical score composed and recorded by Rose’s friend, Philip Glass. She has curated several museum exhibitions, and from 1981 to 1985, she served as Senior Curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.