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KIM KEEVER - INTERVIEW WITH LEAH OATES

When did you know you were an artist and what is your background? How did you imagine an artist's life would be?

I remember the big move to first grade after kindergarten. One of the first assignments was to paint a tree. I made a tree and it looked something like an evergreen with a trunk and green leaves tapering to a point at the top. At the end of the class I noticed what the other kids were drawing. Their trees were more like stumps with a few leaves here and there. It was at that moment I felt like, wow this is something I can do really well. This was the first time I felt a kind of separation from the world, a feeling of being different, a feeling of accomplishment, a feeling of standing out from the rest. Not that I felt better than anyone else but that I knew who I was from then on. When I talked to my father about the experience he told me I would starve as an artist. I took that idea quite literally and that scared me off for a long time.

Though I always made art on and off growing up, my university background before I became an artist was in engineering. I skated through grammar school and high school and really had no desire to accomplish anything. My main ambition in life was to get a sports car and a girlfriend in either order. Aside from those two goals, I just wanted to blend into the population and become part of that silent majority. I had no drive, no desire to make a mark in the world. I even felt a strong dislike for people who loved their jobs. My sister and I had been kidnapped by my mother when I was age 9 and taken from the bucolic countryside of Virginia to the heart of the big city of Chicago. Obviously I am leaving out a lot in that last sentence but the end result was that even though I loved life from day to day, I had no concept of building a future, no grand plan for the future. It wasn't until I returned to my childhood home on the Eastern Shore of Virginia after finishing high school in Chicago and a stint in a factory that my father convinced me to become an engineer. I stayed in school for most of my master's degree in engineering but dropped out when I made an absolute decision to be an artist come hell or high water. I stuck to my decision from the beginning partly on the grounds that within a few months as a full-time artist I would be well on my way to becoming famous and successful. As I later came to find out and as 99% of my artist friends know, it ain't so easy. I quickly found out that talent does not equal success as an artist. Art is like one of those "invisible" fields like ancient history or philosophy or poetry. There's just a very few at the top and the rest are struggling. When multimillionaires feel philanthropic, not much gets given to the artists. If you can accept those kinds of odds you are either crazy or very determined.

I always imagined myself in a studio creating one piece of great art after another without any financial problems and just going up, up, up, in the art world. As it turned out it took more years than expected to find my own unique creative statement and start getting recognition. There are of course exceptions; young artists almost out of art school accepted into major galleries and doing well. This is what you should shoot for but if it doesn't happen right away, and you really want to be an artist, you have to accept your own reality and keep working on your art.

You started out as a painter. How has this effected how you approach photography?

Though I experimented with sculpture, etching, drawing, and black-and-white photography I was mainly a painter for a long time or at least until I was totally bored with paint and didn't feel I could go

any farther or contribute any more to what I felt painting should be. I reached the point where you either wade through the muck and come out on the other side or you just do something else. I chose the latter.

In terms of my approach regarding photographic process, I don't think I can separate painting from photography. Indeed, most of the forms of art that I made have come back into my work by way of photography. For that matter even the engineering comes into play when I make various constructions both in the tank and out of the tank. You could also say the photography I make is an extension of what I used to paint. This is a holistic approach bringing together various aspects of my life. I think I go through life repeating myself artistically one way or the other and trying to improve with each go-around. It's about trying to create a greater originality and depth each time. If part of your goal is to continue learning and improving throughout life then I think it will show in your continuing "phases" of repetition. One would hope to reach an art nirvana sooner or later.

When you look at my photographs it is relatively obvious that I have a painting background. The photos are very much in focus and the arrangement and cropping seem more like what we see in painting. Add to this the various imperfections on the surface and an otherworldly and sometimes apocalyptic beauty to the look. I never try to make photos that look like paintings but I think it is just something I can't help. Having been a painter for so long it is natural for me to approach photography in a like manner. Sometimes when people don't know my work they think they're looking at paintings of some type.

Please explain how you create your work? I read that you photograph miniature sets in an aquarium? Please elaborate.

Before I started using a fish tank in my work, I was working with elaborate tabletop models but it always seemed like something was missing. I couldn't get any kind of atmosphere. This made the first work look like what it was, a photograph of a collection of plaster mountains. I tried enclosing several of the models with clear plastic and started placing lit cigarettes within the space to get some atmosphere. This worked to a certain extent but it never really had the feel of clouds. The result was more like fog. Another major memory as a child was living so far out in the country there were few modern amenities. My dad would fill a glass with water and add canned milk to it. Beautiful white clouds would disburse in the water and though it didn't taste that good the visual thrill made it go down easier. It eventually dawned on me that an aquarium filled with water and a little paint would give the appearance of a real atmosphere. After all, the landscape we look out upon is mainly influenced by water vapor in terms of the distance to the horizon line. What is water but highly compressed atmosphere.

My early work in the aquarium involved plaster models of mountains arranged into a landscape, the tank filled with water, various gel covered lights and colored liquid paint dispersed into the water to make cloud effects. The back of the tank was covered with translucent Mylar and more lights were shining through this layer to create a sky effect. Recently I have been working with a larger (200 gallon) tank and have constructed a relatively large table in back of the tank. I place various items (including miniature model trees) on the table and in the tank. From the top of the tank in back, I have suspended a large sheet of translucent mylar sloping down towards the back of the table but suspended somewhat above it. Various puffs of cotton are attached to the mylar to look like cloud banks. Lights shine upward from beneath the back side of the table so that I get various lighting effects similar to a sky with the sun low on the horizon. The back surface of the tank is left uncovered so that from the front the view through the water in the tank makes cotton cloud formations and table top items visible. The other elements of water and gel covered lights and paint in the water remain the same.

I'm always looking for new materials, either on the Internet or walking down the street or through Central Park. I keep my eye out for little things that could represent the real world. It's almost like looking for pieces of a miniature world relating to a fractal model of the real world. Fractals represent a mathematical model of worlds within worlds where small systems mimic larger systems and are mutually connected visually and mathematically. Many examples exist in nature. For instance in some ferns tiny leaf and stem patterns are connected to larger leaf and stem patterns where the original leaf and stem pattern appears to be a "leaf" connected to a much larger leaf and stem pattern. Another example is the random pattern a shoreline a few hundred miles in length exhibiting the same visual patterns of a shoreline thousands of miles in length. It's almost as if the push -- pull forces of the universe reveal themselves in all levels of the physical reality.

Your work deals with traditions in landscape painting and photography. What artists inspire you within this tradition and why?

I used to step out the back door of my house in Virginia and look across a beach and tidal estuary with pine trees and marshes and ocean water spreading out to what seemed like infinity to the other side of an estuary called the Machipongo Shore. It was especially beautiful at sunset with the sun disappearing over the marshes. I was mesmerized. It was much later that I felt mesmerized by the paintings of Albert Bierstadt among others. He seemed to capture that feeling of the beauty of nature for its own sake and the limitless quality of looking out across a vast landscape. Since I realized that he was an artist who was certainly not accepted historically into the realm of conceptual art, it was more of a feeling of guilt that kept me from appreciating the work even more. I very much wanted to be part of the higher echelons of the art world and if I went around saying I liked Bierstadt, I would most certainly have been viewed askance since conceptual art has been so overwhelmingly powerful for so long. One dare not go against this idea or be relegated to being called an academic artist.

That said, it was more of an accident that the miniature sets I photographed in the water turned out to be more like Hudson River school paintings. But it was certainly a huge break for me as an artist since now I was "painting" model landscapes in an aquarium. Since I was putting paint of different colors in the water it became truer still. The gift in all of this was that here I was making retro-paintings in a conceptual way through photography. I had accidentally managed to combine the past and present in terms of art history. Through photography I was able to realize 19th-century landscape painting combined with 20-21st century conceptual art. Though I admit that this all came about more by accident than design, it has always felt like a great accomplishment to me.

Your work looks quite different from what the current trends are in photography - tending towards hyper realism. What do you think of hyper realism and how did you develop your work apart from this trend?

In 1995 when I first started working with aquariums, I mainly worked with models of plaster mountains in the tank. There were no signs of life. The result was more like a barren planet with an atmosphere. Eventually I started adding life in the way of model trees and live plants. Lately I have been building tall trees from dowels covered with plaster with model railroad material for branches and leaves. This has led to a more realistic look in the work though I try to maintain a certain abstraction.

I don't think about hyper realism one way or the other. I know that there are paintings and photos I like and I can't help passing by the rest. I think this is true for most artists. One gravitates toward what one likes or is doing at the time. I don't really think about what others are doing in photography at all. I appreciate other artists work but I feel like I am an artist who was a painter and uses photography as a means to express himself. In any case I think the greatest competition is with yourself and not with

those around you. It's more about trying to stay ahead of the "Joneses" instead of trying to keep up with them.

Do you think it important for artists to be aware of trends or not?

I think it really depends on how one looks at the world. I've always looked inward and have valued what was important to me and how I could express myself. Though I am generally aware of trends, I don't try to follow them. I would be untrue to myself if I did. On the other hand, it seems perfectly acceptable that other artists follow trends. Perhaps these artists look more outwards. To be clear, you need to find out who you are as an artist and what appeals to you to make the best work. It's also a question of sincerity in that if you are true to yourself, you will make the best work possible. It's not to say that you will only make good work, you won't. I can't think of an artist who doesn't have failures.

I think your work is very beautiful, romantic and painterly. What do you hope that the viewer gains from seeing your work?

Thank you. I hope to help the viewer appreciate nature for itself, for its own sake as it exists. When I look at tall trees I don't see board feet and when I look at mountains I don't see mineral deposits and when I look at rivers I don't see hydroelectric dams. When I look at a beautiful landscape I go into a daydream. This is a daydream of escaping briefly into another world. Having lived in New York City for so long, it seems like another world. If there are no elements of humanity in the view I can't help imagining how this could have been a landscape from a million years ago or a million years hence. I hope the viewer sees the timeless qualities that I try to portray in my work through the absence of people and various signs of humanity. Ultimately I hope that people are inspired to help preserve nature, not just in the United States which has done a relatively good job but throughout the whole world which lags behind our example. And no, I am not saying we are perfect.

I believe you have been in New York since the late 70's. How have you seen the arts community and art market change since the 70's? What do you think of the current market and community, etc?

It's true; I arrived here in late 1978. And at the time space was relatively cheap. You could buy something without having a six-figure income. I managed to find something really cheap in the East Village mainly because it was such a dangerous neighborhood. Drug dealers had people lined up every night in front of the building next door and I often heard gunshots from the roof. As a result the little stores in the neighborhood were very cheap to rent and within a few years the East Village art scene magically appeared. Brand new young art dealers were opening up galleries in storefronts which rented for \$75 a month and young artists were getting shows with the first 10 paintings they ever made in their lives. It was quite a lively scene and often times I would be in three group shows in one night. My first solo shows were at Life Café and The Red Bar. All of the artists over here were on the mailing lists for all the cool clubs and some of the clubs like Kamikaze would put on art shows every week. Within a few years it seemed like every magazine in the world was doing an article about the East Village and long black limos were carrying freshly minted collectors from gallery to gallery. During my solo show at Sensory Evolution, a collector got out and bought five paintings. That seemed great as an artist but on the other hand paintings were generally as inexpensive as the storefronts so it wasn't a lot of money but it felt like it was.

While all this was going on the rest of the art world was pretending not to be impressed at all with this cheapo art scene. That started to turn around. Newer and bigger galleries with more money came in and all of a sudden artists you hadn't really heard about were big East Village artists. It all crashed in the late 80s and the art world moved back to Soho which was already established. A few galleries survived the move and fewer still are around today.

In today's art world, Chelsea has taken over. Though it's a bit out of the way, there are lots of major spaces to rent and lots of major galleries. I think this is good. I think it is also good that the art world itself seems to remain rather plural in that there isn't some absolute school that one has to belong to. After the major schools in the 50s and 60s conceptual art seemed to take over. But by the late 80s I didn't hear about schools at all. It seemed and still seems that artists are doing their own thing. I think that is very good. You have more freedom to do what you want to do.

What advice would you give to emerging artists who are new to New York City?

My best advice would be that unless you are independently wealthy, you need to find a way to make good money on a part-time basis. It's about living efficiently. If you work a 40 hour week you're going to eventually stop making art at night and on the weekends if only from sheer exhaustion and the resulting lack of enthusiasm. You'll have to buckle down and figure out how to do your work and get by. You want to use your best energy for doing your own work. `