

Goldstein, Ann & Anne Rorimer. *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 162-165.

WILLIAM LEAVITT

(b. 27 November 1941,
Washington, D.C.; Lives
in Los Angeles)

William Leavitt describes his work in terms of an interest in a "distilled narrative."¹ Since 1969, his installations, photographic works, drawings, performances, videotapes, and films have employed ordinary fragments of popular culture and vernacular architecture as both props and signifiers within a generic narrative structure, in many cases modeled on 1960s soap operas and Hollywood B-movies. Leavitt takes into account the significance of every aspect of his works, including their location, lighting, atmosphere, props, actors, and costumes. As Thomas Lawson has written, "[i]t has been his practice to isolate a circumscribed group of features—the set, a few props, a potentially emotional situation—and circle them, refining his presentation as he clarifies his ideas, seeking ever greater economy and elegance of means."² Incorporating the "seams" or unfinished edges, rather than obscuring the artifice, of his constructions, Leavitt typically makes visible the process by which he takes apart an image. The resulting works are cohesive, yet quietly unnatural.

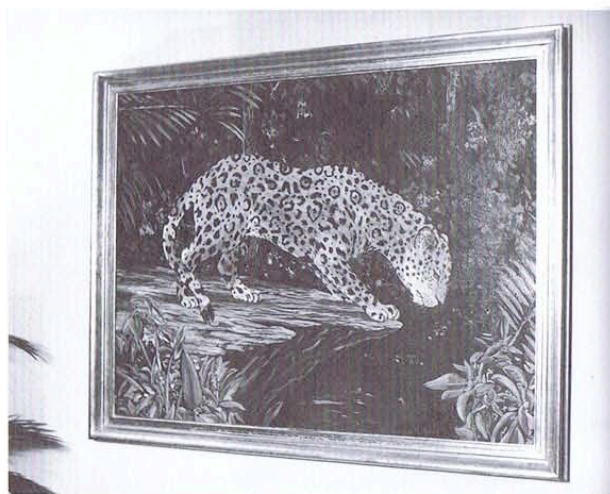
Interested in the often arbitrary nature of how symbols are assigned, Leavitt creates his own through this process of elimination and relocation. On the function of melodrama in his work, Lawson has written:

What Leavitt is doing, in effect, is to isolate elements of the subtext of any Hollywood movie, those spaces and objects and gestures invested with an ambiguous psychological content, the elements which serve to carry the audience along with the story on an almost subliminal level. It is this subtext which generates the anxiety which can only be assuaged by finding out what happens next.³

The culture and atmosphere of Los Angeles has played a significant role in Leavitt's interest in the play between illusion and reality. In 1988 the artist wrote:

When I first came to California I visited a back lot of a movie studio and I loved the deception of going up to one of those perfect houses and opening the door and seeing that there was nothing but canvas and 2 x 4's holding it up. I thought that was spectacular: all the bricks were made of composition board. It's built, not totally illusion, but something that is necessarily constructed. Maybe what I'm interested in is the edge between illusion and how it's supported—maybe that could also be the edge of the tract homes: here is this nice community—organized, everything is fine, green lawns, but just a few hundred yards away is this desert and wilderness again. If there is a rift between the two, one can go from one to the other and see both. But in order to have a true picture, one would have to hold both of them in mind.⁴

CALIFORNIA PATIO, an installation first shown in an exhibition organized by Helene Winer for the Pomona College Gallery in Claremont, California, in 1972, consists of a free-standing wall with a sliding-glass door behind opened brocade curtains. Visible through the slightly opened door is an evening scene of a flagstone patio with illuminated "Malibu" outdoor garden lights in the surrounding artificial plants. In contrast to an illusionary diorama-like scene, the free-standing installation is located at an angle adjacent to one of the existing gallery walls so that one may walk



around to view the patio on the other side, thus comprehending the artifice of the work, which is accompanied by a text that describes much more than is physically present in the installation, thereby "setting the scene" and further conditioning its meaning and animating its silent stillness with additional allusions. Like a storyboard, the text catalyzes more images, which are familiar but not wholly specific, and emphasizes the directness of the installation's set-like artificiality. Winer contrasted it with photography:

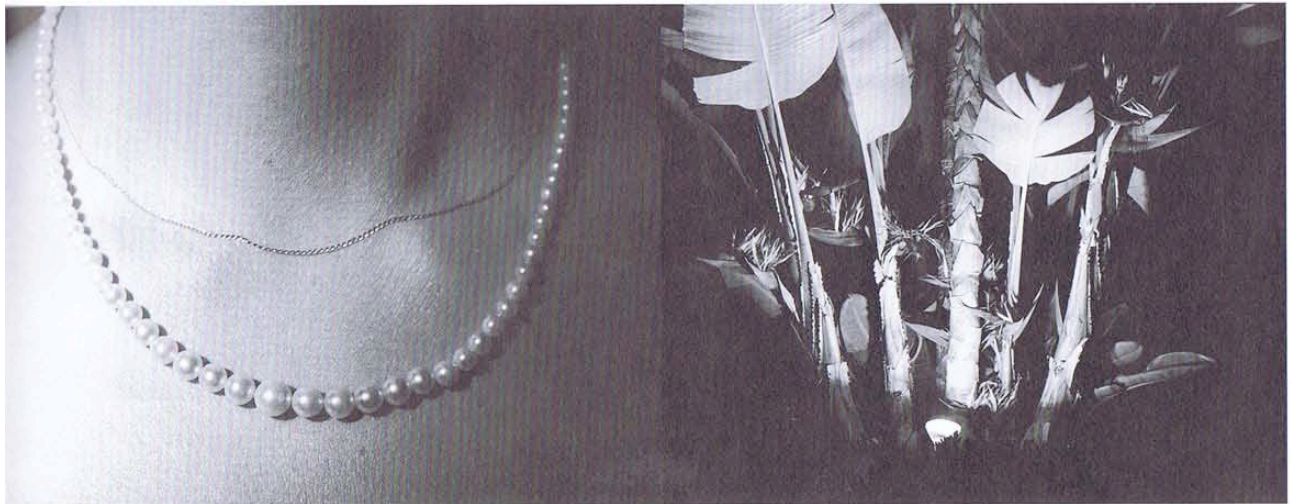
The scene is very believable and rich in associations. Instead of the isolation and displacement establishing a surreal aura, the piece succeeds in allowing a direct rapport and involvement with the proposition. We are obliged to consider a scene, encountered often in its ordinary context, and one which obviously requires the viewer's response for completion. Leavitt has provided a setting and a mood, with no apparent critical intent. The potential of the scene is of honest unmanipulated information. Unlike a photographic likeness, what appears to be a faithful reproduction is actually arrived at through careful deletions of specific details.⁵

Leavitt's work often evolves through various media, elaborating upon a specific scenario through different forms and building a vocabulary of symbolic objects or images that frequently populate different works. *PAINTED IMAGE* (1972) is a framed portrait of a "Shane"-like, Hollywood-studio dog painted by Leavitt that rests upon a free-standing painting easel. Taken out of context, this generic dog—like an actor—is open to characterization by the spectator.

Leavitt's first performance, *THE SILK* (1975), a drama in five scenes, evolved from a 1974 photographic work entitled *THE TROPICS*, as well as from an unrealized treatment for a film, *THE LURE OF SILK*, of the same year. *THE TROPICS*, first shown at Art & Project in Amsterdam in October 1974, consists of three black-and-white photographs framed together in a single horizontal line and includes images of a painting of a leopard, a close-up of a woman's neck adorned by a string of pearls, and tropical plants illuminated at night. Like *CALIFORNIA PATIO*, *THE TROPICS* is accompanied by a text, in this case describing a woman receiving a pearl necklace from a man in a modern apartment with a painting of a "South American jungle cat" over the sofa and a sliding glass door open to a garden of tropical plants illuminated by colored lights. The performance *THE SILK* substitutes a city view for the tropical garden, a painting of an orchid for the leopard, and a silk dress for the pearls and, like his earlier works, constructs its narrative through the assembly of disparate fragments. — AG

Notes

1. Conversation with the artist, 22 February 1995.
2. Thomas Lawson, "Every Picture Tells a Story, Don't It?," *Real Life Magazine* (New York), no. 2 (October 1979): 11.
3. *Ibid.*
4. William Leavitt, in *The Pasadena Armory Show 1989*, exh. cat. (Pasadena, California: The Fellows of Contemporary Art and The Armory Center for the Arts, 1989), 50.
5. Helene Winer, "Introduction," in *Bas Jan Ader, William Leavitt, Ger van Elk*, exh. cat. (Claremont, California: Pomona College Art Gallery, Montgomery Art Center, 1972), unpag.



THE TROPICS (1974)
Three black-and-white photographs (ed. 3). 16 x 60 in. (40.6 x 152.4 cm).
Private Collection.

It is evening in the backyard and garden of a contemporary hillside home in Southern California. There is a swimming pool, a flagstone patio, a redwood fence, some lawn and the usual tropical landscaping of succulents, ferns, leafy plants, and flowering shrubs. The beauty of the scene is most evident at this time of day when the combination of lighted pool, soft garden lights, black sky and the lights of surrounding homes comes into play.

On this particular evening a small cocktail party is being held on the patio adjoining the house. The guests are all close friends of the host and hostess. Their presence adds the elements of motion and sound to the setting; the men standing near the edge of the patio engaged in relaxed conversation, while the women sit in a loose circle of garden chairs arranged on the lawn. Now the hostess comes out through the sliding glass door to announce that a light buffet supper is ready inside.



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CALIFORNIA PATIO, (1972)
Mixed-media. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.