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William Leavitt

140

William Leavitt Born 1941, Washington, D.C.; lives and works in Los Angeles. A graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder (BA, 1963) and Claremont Graduate School (MFA, 1967), William Leavitt is a sound and installation artist. He currently exhibits with Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles and has previously shown his work at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles; Artists Space, New York; and Metro Pictures, New York. His work has been featured in exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Most recently, his work *The Radio* (a static play) was produced by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.

In conversation with Erik Bluhm

William Leavitt and Erik Bluhm are sitting at William's dining room table after dinner, over tea. William hands Erik an 8 x 10 black-and-white photo of Gothic Curtain.

Erik Bluhm: This is the piece you're going to do for the show?

William Leavitt: Yeah, it's a sound installation from 1970. [Pause.] I'll play the sound track. [Rises and crosses to stereo. Sounds of rain, a thunderstorm.]

EB: It's from a sound effects record?

WL: I don't have the original tape anymore. That I got from someone in Hollywood who had a sound effects library in an office on La Brea. He would run off quarter-inch copies of effects for me, and I would make them into loops for the tape player that was behind the curtain.

EB: What color is the curtain?

WL: The color is pretty much the black-and-white color, very gray, a kind of brownish gray.

EB: With not that much color and the sound of rain—you don't have birds chirping—it's more of an ominous feeling?

WL: It's somber.

EB: Do you think it's a reaction to Southern California, the sunny climate? If you'd done this in, say, England, would it have had the same effect?

WL: Probably wouldn't register there.

EB: It wouldn't have that air of fantasy?

WL: No, because it was based on some nostalgia for another environment.

EB: And it wouldn't have that Hollywood feel to it?

WL: Well, I'm not sure that it has a Hollywood feel. I mean, it's designed for an art gallery, and it takes up wall space.

EB: But it's curtains, which bring to mind a stage. In a way it's a minimalist piece. Like Robert Morris.

WL: Right, with the felt.

[Erik shuffles through a stack of photos of other installations, holds one up.]

EB: It's from around the same time as this one? What is that?

WL: It's an island of plastic plants, and on the other side is a plywood box filled with water and a pump moving the water and a microphone picking up the sound and sending it to a speaker in the clump of plants. The speaker's in the middle there, just below the fern.

EB: It seems like the one with the curtain has fewer elements than either of these. You have it stripped so that it's not even revealing what it is, that it's making sound.

WL: It is kind of mute for a sound installation. I was hoping that there would be some fleeting illusion that there was actually rain coming down behind the curtain, but I'm not sure. I wanted it to have the feeling of the Hammer films, and the way they made use of the horror icons in their sets, the stone walls and heavy drapes, but instead I think it's just kind of an invisible place.

EB: What makes you stop at this point, when you feel you've reached this level of information?

WL: Well, I had originally thought of them as some kind of environmental theater of the absurd, because at the time it wasn't so common to put these kinds of settings into art galleries. I was influenced by how sculptors were

using gallery spaces theatrically. However, when I did *Forest Sound* again last summer [at Margo Leavin Gallery], I thought that it was an installation of the ordinary, of the everyday.

EB: Do you have more information? Do you hold back on that?

WL: Well, it would have to come from some kind of text, writing about the characters that might be there. Maybe that's hard to get across in a sculpture. *California Patio* did have a page on the wall next to it that told what people were doing, which pushed me to think, "You're building a set, and you're writing a scenario for what the figures are doing in the set—what about an actual play? It doesn't have to be a real dramatic work, but it could have characters, plot, setting."

EB: And that's how the chronology worked out for you to get to the live plays?

WL: I hope that's not too logical. There was quite a lot of experimental theater in the seventies—Grotowski, Bread and Puppet—that was trying to place theater in a more primal realm, which I saw as a possibility for myself.

EB: So as a visual artist and a playwright, your work in both mediums seems both whimsical and prosaic, often combining the two. Are these two worlds contradictory?

WL: Maybe it's a kind of hubris for artists to go into a discipline where we don't have the requisite skills, though we feel that our primitive approach might lead to results that a better-trained person wouldn't reach. Sometimes it works, although there's a chance of an aesthetic disaster, so then the question is why do it, unless for the purpose of regaining some degree of innocence in a culture that's highly competitive and specialized.

EB: Is it for want of this same kind of innocence that you reduced an "event" or "pre event" to just sound and a curtain?

WL: I don't think I'd gotten far enough along in my work at that time to foresee that eventuality.

Gothic Curtain, 1970
Mixed-media installation
with curtain, audio, and
speakers
84 x 168 in.
Courtesy of the artist
and Margo Leavin Gallery,
Los Angeles



Garden Sound, 1970
Artificial plants, plywood
box, water, circulating
pump, microphone,
amplifier, and speaker
36 x 96 x 144 in.
Courtesy of the artist
and Margo Leavin Gallery,
Los Angeles

California Patio, 1972
Mixed media, wall text
96 x 144 x 96 in.
Courtesy of the artist
and Margo Leavin Gallery,
Los Angeles

A Proof of Infinity, 1976
Performance installation
Courtesy of the artist
and Margo Leavin Gallery,
Los Angeles

