

Bedford, Christopher. "William Leavitt, Los Angeles." *The Burlington Magazine* (July 2011), p. 501-502.

EXHIBITIONS



74. *Mme Joseph-Nicolas-Panrace Royer, née Louise-Geneviève Le Blond*, by Jean-Marc Nattier. c.1750. Pastel on paper, 80.6 by 64.1 cm. (Private collection; exh. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

1760s but cataclysmically with the Revolution. The point is that the phenomenon can only be fully understood by exploring it in depth rather than the dazzle of half a dozen superstars. Thirty or forty artists merit inclusion in this type of exhibition, among them Valade, Lenoir, Ducreux, Hoin and Mme Roslin. Many belonged to the Académie de Saint-Luc (as of course also did some execrable artists), an institution that is overlooked entirely. The organisers have triumphantly shown that pastels can be exhibited, but they have left room for further explorations.

¹ Exh. cat. *Exposition de cent pastels du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris (Galerie Georges Petit) 1908; and exh. cat. *Pastels français des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris (Hôtel Jean Charpentier) 1927.

² Catalogue: *Pastel Portraits: Images of 18th-Century Europe*. By Katharine Baetjer and Marjorie Shelley. 56 pp. incl. 48 col. ill. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011), \$14.95. ISBN 978-0-300-16981-2. Reprint of *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 48/4 (Spring 2011).

³ Over nine days in February 1818; a sale in London on 28th and 29th October 1817 included part of his coin collection.

⁴ The arms which appear on the print are in fact spurious, as suggested by T. Lefrançois: *Charles Coypel 1694-1752*, Paris 1994, pp.309-10, unaccountably omitted from the bibliography.

⁵ C. Léoffroy de Saint-Yves: *Observations sur les arts et sur quelques morceaux de peinture et de sculpture, exposés au Louvre en 1748*, Leiden 1748.

⁶ Details for the provenance, literature etc. of each exhibit can be found by searching 'New York 2011' on www.pastellists.com.

⁷ The press release draws from a sentence in Shelley's otherwise impeccable article in the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 40 (2005), p.105, quoting A. Bury: *Maurice Quentin de La Tour*, London 1971, p.8, which in fact states 'When La Tour began his career there were few pastellists in Paris. Towards 1780, it is said that there were 2,500 artists working in this medium'. My estimate is closer to 200-300 in 1750, doubling every generation until the Revolution.

William Leavitt

Los Angeles

by CHRISTOPHER BEDFORD

IN A RECENT PREVIEW written for *Artforum* on the occasion of William Leavitt's retrospective at the **Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles** (to 3rd July), John Baldessari, the grandfather of West Coast conceptualism, noted: 'William Leavitt is finally having a retrospective in his hometown. There is some justice in the world [. . .] Bill's subjects are almost everything I hate about Los Angeles: patios, sliding glass doors, tract homes, etc. I've always said anything can be art, but he has done what I didn't think possible. He may be the Edward Hopper of Los Angeles. He is master of the overlooked and inconsequential'.¹ All of this is true. Leavitt (b.1941) moved to Los Angeles in 1965 to pursue an advanced degree at Claremont Graduate School, and, along with near contemporaries such as Douglas Huebler and Morgan Fisher, is associated with the emergence of a distinctive brand of conceptualism in Los Angeles that took the city as subject and object, figure and ground. But although Leavitt's name is mentioned in the same breath as West Coast cohorts such as Michael Asher, Richard Jackson, David Lamelas and Allen Ruppersberg, among others, his work bears none of the obvious trappings of a post-structuralist 'conceptual' practice hell-bent on announcing itself as such. Always neatly articulated but unfailingly flat and unassuming, Leavitt's work is resolutely ignorable, doing next to nothing to announce an agenda or curry

favour with the viewer. Despite – or perhaps due to – this withheld quality, Leavitt's work commands a strange intensity of attention – a tense expectation never quite fulfilled – that makes the experience of *William Leavitt: Theater Objects* (covering the period 1969–2009) extremely absorbing.²

Leavitt's pastel on paper works, acrylic paintings and theatrical environments or tableaux, all thoroughly represented in this show, tiptoe around an idiosyncratic threshold of Leavitt's own devising where the quotidian and inscrutable intermingle to produce a lingering effect that is like sand tumbling endlessly through one's fingers. Whether working in two or three dimensions, Leavitt's works appear as sketches for some other absent thing; nothing, from the patently artificial set pieces to the cleanly rendered pastel drawings, seems complete. For instance, in pastel sketches such as *Curtain with two lamps* (1985) the eponymous objects plus a turquoise tiled floor are rendered with care and precision, while the edge of the paper is left untouched to imply that this is an image of an idea for a place, not a specific place. Floating unmoored in a no-space, it is, in other words, a proposition, not an actuality. Much the same could be said of *Outdoor living* (1984) from the same period. In earlier works from the 1970s such as *Detail of a dramatic setting* (1975) Leavitt's interest in social spaces as synthetic constructs untethered from an authentic context is clearly marked in the title of the work as well as in the image itself.

This point is made even more emphatically by the artist's theatrical sets, which punctuate this aptly titled retrospective. Such *mise-en-scènes* achieve the very opposite of the elaborate television and movie sets ubiquitous and



75. *Spectral Analysis*, by William Leavitt. 1977/2010. Mixed media set for performance piece, dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist; exh. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles).



76. *Hillside lights (Incandescent)*, by William Leavitt. 2004. Canvas, 61 by 152 cm. (Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles; exh. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles).

familiar to all in Los Angeles. In the case of the latter, every measure is taken to conceal the constructedness of the space and to suggest a natural, familiar environment. Leavitt's sets – often comprising furniture, temporary walls, curtains, genre paintings and potted plants – announce their artifice, much like the artist's pastel drawings, by dissolving at their edges: temporary walls are buttressed with plywood and weighed down with sand-bags, paintings hang over the edges of jagged unfinished walls, and curtained windows open out onto patently synthetic assemblages of potted plants. Although sculptural tableaux such as *Spectral analysis* (1977/2010; Fig.75) feature seating elements, in this case a couch, they have an unnatural objecthood about them – a to-be-looked-at-only quality – that derives from their status as sets, rendering them more visual than participatory. If we are to be involved with these assemblages in any way, that involvement is decidedly more conceptual than literal and filtered more through the eye and the mind than through the body.

An emphasis on the visual and psychic also plays a prominent role in Leavitt's paintings. While the sculptural tableaux and pastel sketches derive much of their uncanny charge from their fragmentary quality or status as free-floating extracts, the effect of Leavitt's oil-on-canvas works is harder to analyse and codify. Like his peer Ed Ruscha and his often cited predecessor, Edward Hopper, Leavitt works hard in his paintings to de-emphasise technique and expression, keeping both at a very low register to achieve an aesthetic that is deadpan. *Hillside lights (Incandescent)* (2004; Fig.76) and *Green apartments* (2009), two recent landscape paintings, are emblematic of this strategy. Both are fully realised compositions, painted to the very extremes of the support using a quiet, natural palette, both follow conventional laws of perspective, and both have an apparently straightforward relationship to mimesis. Yet seen en masse and in the context of Leavitt's broader body of work, they too read as inert sets awaiting the arrival of life as we know it. No activity is given or revealed, but rather is left up to the viewer to conjure. They hum with potential but nothing more than that.

If, as in his paintings, much of Leavitt's work functions as a stage set of one kind or another, then his actors have always been figments of the viewer's imagination. During the 1960s and 1970s it was assumed that the viewer's body was instrumental in completing works of sculpture, activating them as works of art. In Leavitt's case, the viewer's mind is the primary participatory tool, meaning that the kind of psychic phenomenology his work offers operates as powerfully in two dimensions as in three. Consequently, though the human form appears only occasionally in the artist's paintings, drawings and sculptures, the experience of his work could not be more intimate and personal.

¹ J. Baldessari: 'Previews: William Leavitt: Theater Objects', *Artforum* (January 2011), p.87.

² Catalogue: *William Leavitt: Theater Objects*. By Thomas Lawson, Ann Goldstein and Bennett Simpson. 144 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2011), \$40. ISBN 978-1-9337-5118-4.

Glenn Ligon

New York, Los Angeles and Fort Worth

by JESSICA BECK

EMBEDDED IN THE introductory wall text of the mid-career retrospective *Glenn Ligon: America*, seen by this reviewer at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (closed 5th June), and running at the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** (23rd October to 22nd January 2012),¹ are the artist's words: 'When I first started making art, painting was one of the few spaces in my life where I felt free'. Although he works in other media – including neon-light sculpture, video and with appropriated photography – Glenn Ligon continues to refer to himself as a painter. In this retrospective, which covers the artist's twenty-five-year career, one can see how Ligon has tested and challenged the term and, more importantly, how he has broadened its definition.

Ligon is perhaps most celebrated for his 'Door paintings', consisting of black and white text on painted wood. These stencilled texts deliberately echo the alphabet and number paintings of Jasper Johns, while engaging with the debates on identity and race of the 1990s. Also suggested in these works is Ligon's investment in the body and his admiration for Willem de Kooning's abstract paintings in which figures emerge from densely layered brushstrokes. Ligon manages to honour but also break free from this weighty tradition by imbuing his paintings with caustic jokes taken from the comedian Richard Pryor's stand-up routine and from the writings of James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston. Ligon's painting is political, and the charged content of the stencil paintings, propelled by the recurring and confusing use of the pronoun 'I', freezes the texts in a contemporary moment as they are relived and made present with each reading.

Ligon's move from abstraction to text painting was first developed during his studies at the Whitney's Center for Advanced Study in 1985. The previously unexhibited early works on paper from this period open the show and reveal Ligon's first steps as a painter. *Dreambooks* is another early series that highlight these initial stages of development. In this series, Ligon incorporated interpretations of dreams offered by pamphlets that were popular among African-American communities during his youth to experiment with the joining of text and monochromatic painting. Ligon's adapted phrases from the so-called 'dream books' read like Freudian fortune cookies. Humour and desire come together in works such as *No.276 (Honeycomb)* (1990; cat. no.6; Fig.77), which reads: 'HONEYCOMB: To suck honey from a honeycomb denotes pleasure. To save that honey in a jar denotes a



77. *No.276 (Honeycomb)*, by Glenn Ligon. 1990. Oil, synthetic polymer, oil-stick and graphite on paper, 76.2 by 56.5 cm. (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).