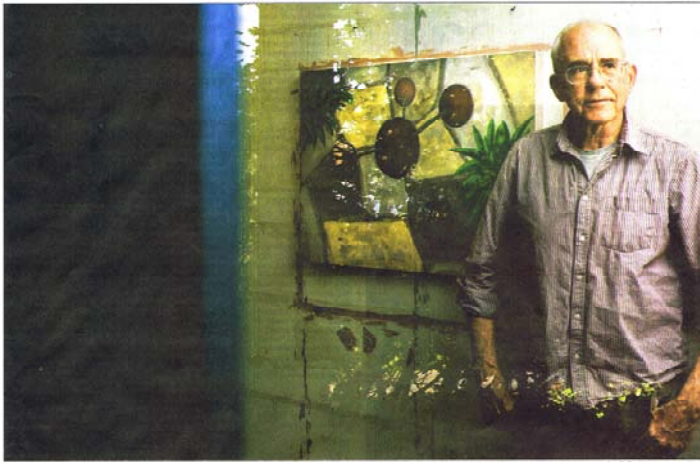


Pagel, David. "Multi-tasker at heart: William Leavitt writes plays, builds sets, takes photographs, paints and draws." *Los Angeles Times*, 6 March 2011, p. E10.



Multi-tasker at heart

William Leavitt writes plays, builds sets, takes photographs, paints and draws.

DAVID PAGEL

Over the last 40 years, William Leavitt has made a name for himself as an influential artist while staying so far out of fame's spotlight that his hard-to-categorize works have been all but invisible to the public.

That's not how it works in Hollywood, where fame and fortune go hand in glove. Nor is it how it often goes in the art world, which has become so infatuated with market-savvy celebrity that making a name for oneself has become an art unto itself — and not a particularly interesting one.

But Leavitt is a misfit. He and his wife, painter Janet Jenkins, live and work in two small cabins built in the 1930s on a Silver Lake hilltop accessible only by foot. A romantic with no illusions, Leavitt writes plays, builds sets, takes photographs, and makes paintings, drawings and installations. To relax, he handcrafts

cellos and then plays them, solo and with the local groups Solid Eye, the Subtones and Provisional Riviera.

His art combines the analytic clarity of Conceptualism with the make-do efficiency of stage sets, the accessibility of Pop Art and the mundane strangeness of Los Angeles.

"I don't think of myself as a Conceptualist because I interpret that term narrowly," Leavitt says. "I feel like there are some pure Conceptualists. I would say that my work is [that] of a narrative specialist or something. That I'm trying to frame some story through an object or a painting or a situation that would lend itself to further narrative."

Next week, viewers will have the chance to go further than ever before with Leavitt's paintings, drawings, photographs and 3-D tableaux. "William Leavitt: Theater Objects" at the Museum of Contemporary Art brings together nearly 100 works the 69-year-old has made from 1969 to the present, including six installations and two performances (one staged in a 1977 installation and the other read by actors seated on a stage in an auditorium).

Organized by curator Bennett Simpson and former senior curator Anne Goldstein, now director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the retrospective is Leavitt's first.

All of its works invite double takes. And then some.

On first glance, Leavitt's art seems to share much with Hollywood moviemaking: Props, sets, storyboards, location scouts, sound checks, edits and reshoots. So does the painstaking creation of scenes and stories that want nothing more than for audiences to get lost in elaborately fabricated fantasies.

Leavitt, however, dispenses with the drama of tightly scripted, meticulously directed stories. As an artist, he has no interest in micro-managing a viewer's emotions. As a storyteller, he never ties up loose ends.

He explains, "I think it comes back to my problem with writing for theater. In that case you really have to come to some kind of conclusion. That is always difficult for me," he says. "One does have to respect the audience. I feel strongly that if you're going to make people sit in a theater for a while you should try to give them something that they can come away with. It's easier in the visual arts to be inconclusive. We have more leeway."

That leeway is essential to the freedom Leavitt is after.

"I was thinking of it as the work is functional," he says. "I think the work would have a use, a use in some other context, besides the art history stream or the art museum stream. It could be an illustration for a stage set for some imaginary theater piece. Or maybe a painting would be something that could be in some kind of

office or a hallway of a restaurant. Or if there was a drawing it was a plan for some kind of theater scene and then maybe I did the writing because it was something I enjoyed but I think it gave me the excuse to say, 'OK, you're making these scenes, writing about these people and then you can do this work that would connect to that.'"

In other words, Leavitt's writing for his theater pieces forms what he calls the "back story for the work itself," the context or background from which his objects emerge.

Although he is willing, even excited, to talk about his investigations in the studio, he is cautious when it comes to viewers. "It's a difficult thing," Leavitt says, "how one understands the interpretations of others, looking at one's work." This does not, however, get in the way of his art. His goal is "hopefully to involve viewers more," to bring us to an experience of being "maybe just lost."

Leavitt calls this the "pre-answer" state and says that his work leads there because it "maybe creates distance or opacity. It has enough formal qualities that make it alive or interesting to look at. It's compressed enough that you can get something out of it without having to really read it as meaningful. It's all there, but it doesn't go anywhere. Sometimes you don't need the answer," just "what's in the gap."

Leavitt speaks of his art objectively, as

if it exists apart from his control or possession, almost as if it had a life of its own, but not in a mystical or magical way. He describes its function philosophically, as "maybe a kind of phenomenological bracketing."

He belongs to the generation of artists for whom talking about oneself is unseemly — not off-limits but certainly not the main point. Biography is supposed to stay in the background, where the facts can be summed up quickly and are not meant to be fetishized or glorified.

Plain and simple, these are Leavitt's: Born in 1941 in Washington, D.C.; grew up in western Kansas; received an MFA at Claremont Graduate School in 1967, and afterward, he stayed in Los Angeles. "I realized I was a Westerner," he says.

He taught occasionally at various colleges and art schools; worked intermittently on sets for movies and commercials; and exhibited, every two or three years, in Los Angeles, New York and Europe.

Two instructors had a big influence on Leavitt's development. In graduate school, he was inspired by a ceramicist: "John Mason was a great person and a great teacher. My life would not be as good if I hadn't known him."

And at Immaculate Heart College, where Leavitt took his first teaching job, he met theater director William Shepard. "Bill had a very distinctive approach to theater," Leavitt recalls. "He had studied with Jerzy Grotowski for a year in Poland. His approach to theater was more like my friends' approach to art: 'OK, let's see what we can do if we strip these parts out and leave these in but rearrange them in this way.'"

That process has become a concise and open-ended body of work that is Leavitt's trademark: a pedestrian and peculiar, bland and fascinating *oeuvre* that keeps its distance from drama, pedagogy and message-mongering to evoke the mundane mystery of everyday reality.

Paradoxically — and appropriately — that distance defines Leavitt's relationship to his retrospective. Over the last three years of its organization, he says, "It became more administrative. I felt this kind of separation from myself. I felt like well, OK, now I'm working for this person named William Leavitt... I became a kind of project manager for this artist."

That's not a bad job, especially when the work is Leavitt's.

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