



SFMOMA SECA Catalog (2007)

Essay by Janet Bishop

Curator of Painting and Sculpture,

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Leslie Shows reinvigorates the practice of landscape painting with large, materially rich pieces that conflate a vast continuum of geological and human change. Through broad gestures and intricate details, she articulates a world in which we are but fleeting specks. *Two Ways to Organize* (2006), for instance, suggests both the big bang paradigm of energy explosion-reaching as far back in time as one can imagine, and a look back at today from a distant future. Little splotches of paint and collaged cutouts recall particles organizing themselves into the beginnings of the universe. Lower in the composition, one sees “matter having a flow to it—a transformative sense of stratification, layering, and deposits,” as the artist explains. A variety of found images including antlers, seashells, rock formations, and compass roses appear within ribbons of acrylic paint, rust, and mud. Residue of the present-day hobbyist shows up in gridded needlepoint patterns, which stand in for salt or other crystalline structures. The surface also bears several little faux copper, bronze, and silver scrapbook labels that were manufactured as organizing tools for hypothetical memories: History Lessons, Autumn, Travels, Cruisin’. In Shows’s composition, however, they are trapped in amber—made into archaeological relics of contemporary middle America. Influenced by the philosopher/filmmaker Manuel De Landa and his recent volume *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (2000), Shows collapses time across the earth’s multiple histories.

The landscape of her childhood is more specifically present in *View from the West of High-Viscosity Lithic Form, with Carbon Freeze* (2006). “Glaciers, calcified mining ruins, and rainy rebar-strewn lots were my playgrounds,” Shows recalls of Juneau, Alaska, where she grew up. In the painting an old mining structure sitting atop an icy, mountainous horizon that gives way to a sheer drop below. Baggies of yellow pigment resonant with gold, sulfur, and even “yellow cake” mix seem to have been extracted from the veins in the rocks and pinned like specimens along the dark chasm at the painting’s center. Further evidence of human history appears in a tumbling cascade of stone figures and images of ancient cities. In her dense and detailed approach to composition, Shows has a hand as distinctive as that of Jess; in her geoaesthetic awareness, a debt to Robert Smithson.

A third new piece, a long horizontal titled *Heaps of Elements for a Body, About to Act or Finished Acting* (2006), zooms way in, eliminating the horizon line completely. The flow of matter moves side to side, punctuated by cubes poetically representing the quantities of various elements in the human body (hydrogen and iron, for instance, and more obscure elements such as cobalt and zinc). Plastic googly-eyes pool together like fish eggs. Actual fingernail clippings mimicked by paper hole-punch crescents allude to some of the calcified parts of our bodies.

An avid reader, researcher, and thinker, Shows plans her works for a long time before realizing them, and each is the result of what she calls a sort of “brain frenzy.” Once she has her compositions in mind, she prepares many of her materials before applying them to the huge sheets of mulberry paper that support each work. She “grows” her own salt and rust; brushes acrylic paint onto Plexiglas and then peels it off in skins; and culls images from magazines and the Web. The results are synthetic, symbolically potent assemblages that hold both micro and macro lenses onto ancient lands ravaged by short-term occupants.

THE NEW YORKER

Goings on About Town (May 19, 2008)

Leslie Shows

Shows's quasi-abstract paintings and works on paper conjure up a psychedelic landscape marked by black icebergs, reflecting pools and celestial phenomena. At times, lines of text or collaged images of figures and hands are arranged into patterns of crystals or the concentric rings of a tree. Robert Smithson is an obvious inspiration, underscored by titles like, "The Sky Becomes the Sediment." But where Smithson applied his sci-fi slant on sedimentation and entropy to actual landscapes- pouring asphalt down hills or building a stone spiral in an inland sea- Shows sticks to two dimensions, to leapfrog the laws of time and space. Through May 15th. (Hanley, 136 Watts St., 646-918-6824)



Must See Art (September 20, 2006)

By Amra Brooks

Leslie Shows "Carbon Freeze" at Jack Hanley Gallery

Leslie Shows uses collage and abstract-painting techniques to create layers and depth to her constructed landscapes. The paintings really work in two ways: From a distance they read like photorealistic paintings of geological formations, while up close they reveal a miniature otherworld of tiny constellations rich with texture and depth. Looking closely, we see mini Ziploc drug bags filled with yellow powder, a pile of fingernails, salt, mud, confetti and cardboard, all adhered to panels. The result is almost a Where's Waldo search for her intricacies, with equal pleasures.

945 Sun Mun Way, L.A. | (213) 626-0403 | www.jackhanley.com | Through September 23



Critics Picks, Artforum.com (June 2005)

By Glen Helfand

Leslie Shows

In an assured solo debut, Leslie Shows combines her interest in social and environmental issues with obsessive hands-on methods to form collaged visions of a world in decline. The colors of her vast landscapes evoke oxidation, rust, and strip-mined American vistas, yet Shows manages to dazzle by composing these works with incredible detail and the dramatic sweep of a geopolitical paradigm shift. Her works express a hard-to-fathom vision somewhere between utopia and dystopia, a retro future of corporate ruins, as well as crafty environmentalism. The pieces themselves are acts of recycling, with passages articulated with pale confetti of hole-punched office paper (often broken down to fingernail clipping-sized slivers), lines carefully sliced from ruled notebook paper, tiny images from magazines and newspapers, grains of sand, and connective areas of painting and drawing. They are redolent of endless deserts, black holes and rubble piles, yet Shows combines these unsavory subjects with a haunting, dreamlike beauty. This is post-apocalyptic fantasy at its finest- or is it really a palpable vision of now?



Heap of Elements - Leslie Shows (2007)

Artist book published by Headlands Center for the Arts

Essay by Anuradha Vikram,
Program Director,
Headlands Center for the Arts

Leslie Shows' pictures compress time and space to human scale. They have been said to evoke a cataclysmic vision of devastation. While it's tempting to interpret these empty landscapes as critical of our callousness toward nature, she is quick to clarify that this is not her intent. Erosion, decay and disappearance are part of nature, as are we, and all that we make and destroy. Thinking in geological terms of time and space, Shows recognizes the potential for apocalypse in every action. All of this is simply matter reorganizing, devastating to some entities and inconsequential to others.

Shows has been deeply influenced by the theory that our behavioral systems follow the same engineering principles as all matter to self-organize into hierarchical structures and non-hierarchical composites or aggregates. Bureaucracies of state, church and academia might represent the former, while markets and assemblies on the local level might represent the latter. Architecture can operate as an exoskeleton for humans, structured similarly to mineral crystals. Similar ideas of living and nonliving things as aggregates in flux come up in Buddhist philosophy, and Shows composes self-organizing systems of geometries and symbols drawn from all these sources. In these paintings we can see indications of a humanity that at first appears absent, nonliving matter being the principal actor.

Constructed narratives from film and television have resurfaced in her latest work, *Shape Quarry* (2007) which seem at first incongruous with the inhospitable settings that frame them. Shows employs these familiar tropes as another kind of visual shorthand, representing narratives that arise from inorganic elements into sentience as humans did. Language is another material that she uses to reference narratives in the present. Text culled from specific and varied books are recombined into a topography of words, a tactic influenced by Robert Smithson's 1966 drawing *A Heap of Language*, in which words pile upon one another to suggest meaning without revealing it. In Shows' hands these ambiguous texts form a geological "unconformity", a phenomenon whereby strata within the earth, formed eons apart, are compressed and touch one another across millions of years.

When speaking about her work, Shows has invoked Marjory the Trash Heap from the 1980's children's show "Fraggle Rock". This is a creature that originated as an immense pie of compost, but gained both sentience and wisdom through some fortunate combination of ingredients. If organisms are but heaps of elements evolving into consciousness, a similar alchemy applies to painting, as pigments are manipulated to evoke anything from a rock formation to an animal to a mood. Somehow base materials give rise to society and culture, religion, science, architecture and art. This is a wondrous transformation that Leslie Shows approaches with fascination and critique in equal measure.

Art Review:

California Above All (May 2006)

By Elizabeth Armstrong

Leslie Shows

Leslie Shows spent almost five years developing her painting and collage techniques before enrolling in the graduate programme at the California College of Art. She is one of many young artists painting today who have turned their attention to the landscape, but her approach is anything but neutral.

An Alaskan native who grew up in "nature"- abandoned mines were her playground- she draws from such diverse sources as photographs in *National Geographic* magazine, Robert Smithson's art and writings, and the projects of Matthew Coolidge and the California-based Center for Land Use Interpretation. Shows is also a prodigious reader with an interest in Manuel DeLanda and Mike Davis, whose work on entropy and social change is mirrored in her paintings.

Despite their fantastical appearance, her apocalyptic landscapes are closer to documentaries than fiction. *Salt Field with Attributes* (2005) envisions the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, a flat landscape of sodium chloride- the remnants of a lake that once covered a third of the state.

Standing in front of her work is like witnessing a reverse mirage, where representation dissolves into abstraction. There is a wonderful synthesis in Shows's paintings between the wasted landscapes of her subject and the overlapping layers of paint and collaged bits of paper.

The visual effect parallels the physical transformation of the landscape, whether by excavation or time. Her landscapes border on sci-fi terrains in which ruined mines morph into future sites of play. The uncanny is beautiful.



Postcards From the Edge:

Leslie Shows surveys the downslide, gorgeously. (June 18th, 2005)

By Glen Helfand

News reports of quickly accelerating global warming and the sooner-than-anticipated day when the world's oil wells will be sucked completely dry are hitting the airwaves and cyberspace with increasing regularity. Regardless of where they appear, such ideas fuel fantasies of major paradigm shifts driven by Earth's uneasy relationship with capitalism. How will our lives change when the polar ice caps melt and airplane fuel is a truly precious element?

Artist Leslie Shows, in an assured debut solo exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery, taps into such free-floating anxieties with her densely collaged landscape images. She captures the psychic vibe of collapsing infrastructures, environmental peril, and the peculiar way we, particularly as Americans, seem to survey the downslide from a cool distance - even though, as a culture, we are highly complicit

in the decay. The exhibit, "International Parks," is made up of sizable landscapes that are at once dazzling and calmly nightmarish. They express a difficult-to-fathom position, one of postapocalyptic utopia and dystopia, a retro future of corporate ruins as well as a crafty environmentalism, as the pieces themselves contain acts of recycling. Passages are articulated with pale confetti of hole-punched office paper, often broken down to fingernail-like slivers, lines carefully sliced from ruled notebook paper, tiny images clipped from magazines and newspapers, as well as saltlike grains of sand. Shows sometimes uses paint and colored pencil as a kind of visual mortar.

The mourning after

The pieces combine the artist's interest in social issues with seemingly obsessively hands-on methods. The compositions are generally in hues of gray and brackish brown. They are rendered in the colors of oxidation, strip-mined American landscapes, and rust. Yet Shows manages to dazzle by composing these works with incredible detail and dramatic sweep. These are thrilling images that are simultaneously timeless and utterly contemporary.

The painstakingly produced works bring to mind Max Ernst's war-inspired surrealist landscapes and Edward Burtynsky's large-scale photographs of polluted plains, the rusty salvage yards of industrial ships, and black mountains of burning tires & the smoke creating dark clouds that cast a frightening yet impressive form in the sky. Shows channels the inescapable attraction and repulsion we experience when faced with such grand instances of disaster & be they natural and/or cultural. The attacks of 9/11, for all their ominous implications and insidious aftermath, were well choreographed to etch iconic images into a nation's imagination. With the images in this exhibition, Shows visualizes a nuanced, dreamlike aftermath. They are a series of universal Ground Zeros that, post-apocalypse, has no need for memorials as the population is apparently extinct, withered away, or perhaps vaporized. Shows's vision evokes endless deserts, black holes, and rubble piles, although she combines these unsavory subjects with a haunting beauty.

Communication breakdown

Each of the seven recent pieces featured in the show (five of which were sold before the exhibition opened) reward prolonged viewing. Looking at them, you'll find visual surprises and make discoveries akin to an archaeological dig through a culture that has fallen apart. The vast arid valley of Complex #13, for example, is dotted with remnants of corporate culture and the currently embattled United Nations. In the foreground there's an imposing round council table, a wood-grained piece of furniture that provides a platform for seemingly meaningless ritual and pontification. The objects seem freshly deposited in the wasteland, in the first stages of becoming a gathering place for rocks and detritus. Yet the microphones still seem clean and warm, whether from the beating sun or maybe the hot air of the missing orators. Nearby, Shows collages in images of potted plants in big, round metal pots, the sort of foliage convention seen in the controlled environments of glass and steel office towers. That the plants maintain a green hue in this inhospitable environment indicates that these are probably plastic or silk, artificial elements that seem particularly out of place in such a wasteland. Out of the craggy mountains that loom at the left side of the piece, a stately castle is nestled in the foothill rock- a fortress of imperial power.

There may be a hint of reductive political parable, though with the use of gray tones and open-ended possibilities, it hardly comes off as a diatribe. Communication is unquestionably breaking down in the arena of international relations, and this is an evocative illustration. The situation is more metaphorical in Megaton Ferris Wheel Excavator, Psyclone and Slag Piles, a mixed-media work in which Shows creates a sturdy image from the rickety architecture of amusement park ride, viaducts, and satellite-like

forms. The piece is lorded over by an ornate roller coaster in which all tracks lead to a black hole. In the foreground, Shows creates an image of tar pits in which mastodon tusks, whale bones, and modernist furniture are caught on the surface of the oily muck. The scenario makes the point that the ride we're on may be giddy, but it doesn't last forever. Shows's images, on the other hand, confidently linger in the mind.

Leslie Shows's works are on exhibit in "International Parks" through July 9, Jack Hanley Gallery, 395 Valencia, SF. Free. Call for hours. (415) 522-1623. www.jackhanley.com.