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ArtSeen

June Leaf

By [David Rhodes](#)



June Leaf, *The Machine That Makes Itself*, 2021. Wire, chalk on wood and string, 14 x 24 x 13 1/4 inches. © June Leaf. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

This is June Leaf's first exhibition at Ortuzar Projects and the first solo presentation of her works in New York since the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2016 show *Thought is Infinite*. For over fifty years, the artist has divided her time between a house and studio near the Bowery on Blecker Street and a house and studio in Mabou, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The exhibition includes drawings, sculptures, and paintings that create a core sensation of movement: a mobile, structuring trace that leaves impressions of both improvised and considered action. That animation, both physical, and visual, is associated with dance, and is combined with the fabricated or mechanical. But what do the resulting images signify? Seeing them allegorically, I would say, is apt.

As allegories tend toward very different ways of understanding in comparison to analogies (and as Leaf is an allegorist in this writer's view), it is not only expedient but also necessary to begin by saying more about this distinction and approach. *Man with Coattails Climbing a Staircase* (2018) is a painting, small in scale and elongated vertically, a fact that gives emphasis to this image of a man ascending a staircase that spirals upward and ahead of him into darkness. The staircase is partial, a white, inscribed diagram-like representation subsumed against the black across which it traverses. There is clear ambiguity since the passage of the man and his unknown context exposes an open signification: this appears to be an allegory; open to the viewer's imagination and thoughts, connecting the viewer to a specific communication. Like Franz Kafka's stories, aphorisms, or Giacometti's tableaux, sculptures, and drawings (with which Leaf's work also has a formal affinity), the artist is not presenting an answer to the question that is the work itself. The work, in other words, is not an intermediary between one subjectivity and another, but is mysterious and productive in itself.



June Leaf, *Man with Coattails Climbing a Staircase*, 2018. Acrylic, chalk, gouache, on paper mounted on tin plate, galvanized sheet metal relief and wire, 69 3/8 x 42 x 3 5/8 inches. © June Leaf. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Take another example, *The Machine That Makes Itself* (2021). This wire sculpture is like a drawing in space. It has all the contingency of a Giacometti charcoal portrait with the reclaimed, rough lengths of wire, all odd and combined, eschewing any newness of material. What could the machine, in this case something very close to a manual pedal-powered Singer sewing machine, be making other than itself? What is this machine that makes itself? The machine would sit well within a Kafka tale. There are two sculptures that incorporate the actual parts of sewing machine stations: the foot pedal, in one example, below two diminutive figures connected to a horizontal wire circle, participating in perpetual/infinite movement. All the figures that appear throughout the exhibition are involved in activity, turning, walking, laboring their landscapes or interiors sensuous and bleak. In *Drawings in Movement* (2020), figures circle and support one another like time lapse photography and make their way in repetition,

contained, like the purgatory of Vincent van Gogh's prison yard drawings. "The secret is not drawing but DANCE" is written across the top of this drawing leaving no doubt about Leaf's bodily relation to temporality, scale, and movement itself.

There are no concessions to the passing fads and fashions of the art world, instead a resolute daily working with the materials at hand and the configurations that emerge. Although the machine technology and its effect on existential experience that emerged with the first industrial revolution and its subsequent rejection by Romanticism in northern Europe is itself part of a now increasingly distant past, these contentions still manifest their effects today. From the continued mechanical production and standardization of consumer goods to the resistance of rationalized life under capitalism. This shift did change everything—as our current technologies are bound to do—but as Leaf makes us aware, philosophically, we are far from done with it.

Contributor

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David Rhodes is a New York-based artist and writer, originally from Manchester, UK. He has published reviews in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum*, and *artcritical*, among other publications.