

June Leaf

ORTUZAR PROJECTS

This was June Leaf's first show in her adopted hometown since the artist's 2016 exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, "Thought Is Infinite," which focused mainly on her drawings. And while the presentation at Ortuzar Projects included several pieces dating as far back as the 1970s, the accent was firmly on work created since the Whitney show. As ever, Leaf has been equally active in sculpture and painting, with drawing as the inevitable fount of inspiration. Her art seamlessly and beguilingly stitches together naturalistic detail and abstract structure with elusive symbolism and allegory. The results are resonant images whose meaning floated almost intangibly through the viewer's mind.

One of Leaf's recurrent themes is movement. And, like Zeno of Elea, she finds that motion leads to the paradox of an endless series of half-way points. Her paradoxes are not logical, like those of the pre-Socratic philosopher, but existential; they lead to quandaries about living: Does one ever really get anywhere? Is there an actual destination?

Here, the drawings *Wheel*, 2021, and *Drawings in Movement*, 2020, showed existence as an endless circle, recalling that of the mythological Greek king Ixion—who was bound to a fiery, spinning wheel for all eternity—as did the wall-mounted relief sculpture *Figure in Landscape*, 2020–21. The freestanding sculpture *The Wheel*, 2022, featured a walking personage who, no matter how the circle turns, can never get any closer to the reclining figure across the form. *Man with Coattails Climbing a Staircase*, 2018, and the sculptures *Figure Descending a Staircase*, 2010, and *To the Sky*, 2022, seemed to promise a determinate goal—but the works' subjects are always stuck in the middle. One feels that the stairs and ladders depicted are endless, cut short only by the mortal artist's incapacity to continue them to infinity.

scrolls merely loop around them, so our effort to find a conclusion would have been frustrated. Such motion is really just another form of stasis. In a 2007 interview, Leaf questioned her own intentions in creating these works, saying, "We can't make much going around, because nothing goes around, except maybe people dancing in circles. Or nothing." This remark resonates with the strange Delphic inscription on *Drawings in Movement*: THE SECRET IS NOT DRAWING BUT DANCE.

Born in 1929, Leaf is part of the generation that, in the wake of World War II, embraced existentialism. Her Ixion is another avatar, perhaps, of Albert Camus's Sisyphus, and as the philosopher wrote, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." All of Leaf's work, but especially her sculpture, appears as a form of play, but of the most serious sort. And she seems to be an inveterate tinkerer, someone who can take a few random bits of tin, wire, and wood and construct something out of them by prestidigitation—even make them dance. Few artists have such a genius for, as it were, thinking directly with the hand. Her sculptures are essentially educational toys, and what they teach is how fantasy comes from and confronts reality.

—Barry Schwabsky

Joel-Peter Witkin

BRUCE SILVERSTEIN GALLERY

In an arresting black-and-white photograph, two figures in profile stand face-to-face before a dark screen, which is partially surrounded by a pale border. Their heads are tightly bound together, completely obscured by what appears to be white gauze—calling to mind the linen strips ancient Egyptians used to wrap their dead nobles—while their bodies are strapped to one another with what may be a pair of black leather belts. The towering model on the left appears to have no arms, yet the much smaller one on the right clearly does, and they're folded around the other's waist. Whether their intertwining is being enacted of their own volition, as in a consensual BDSM framework, or represents something much more sinister—a scene of subjugation and violence evocative of, say, the torture programs at Abu Ghraib—is ambiguous. The surface of the print bears a number of calculated scratches, accentuating that, overall, the image is a product of dextrous darkroom manipulation.

This profane fantasy, titled *Erotic Dream Series: Two Women Bound #4*, 1975, is by photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, who has been interrogating the more extreme aspects of difference and desire for fifty years. Disturbing yet curiously tender, it was but one of the twenty vintage prints, created between 1950 and 1978, that were on view at Bruce Silverstein Gallery. The benefit of focusing on the first chapters of an artist's oeuvre lies in the opportunity not only to shine a light on lesser-known pieces, but also to try and understand the art in a different or expanded context. Indeed, though we encountered familiar photographs such as the aforementioned, there were also a few surprises. *Puerto Rican Boy*, ca. 1956, is a hazy portrait of the titular subject in an arcade reminiscent of a Giorgio de Chirico painting, and *Star of David Dancer*, 1963, is an abstract whirl of merriment—or even agitation—enhanced by flickering scrawls of light. The latter was apparently Witkin's first foray into the abrading of negatives, which can produce an array of effects either jarring or joy-inducing.

Other prints—such as *Christ, Coney Island*, 1967, which shows a lifeless Jesus eerily laid out on a dark shroud, as if just detached from the crucifix, at a beach crowded with gawkers—demonstrated more clearly that religion, for its convoluted and ecstatic qualities alike, has always been central to the artist's work. It is important to note that Witkin, born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, is himself a



View of "June Leaf," 2022. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Several of the sculptures took a form resembling that of a fabric scroll, usually painted, on a pair of spools with a crank (*Scroll with Figures [Family on a Raft]*, 2008, and *Sleeping Man*, 2020) or a sewing-machine treadle (*Mechanical Table*, 2016) to produce movement. We gallerygoers could only imagine ourselves as the works' possessors, free to turn the cranks or pedal the treadles to our hearts' content. But we noticed that the fabric "pages" are not fixed to the spindles in such a way that they have a definitive beginning and end—rather, these false