

EDWARD THORP GALLERY  
Press Release

**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

**June Leaf Paintings & Sculpture**

by John Yau

Edward Thorp Gallery February 29 – April 5, 2008



Has anyone ever thought about the fact that June Leaf helped pave the way for a generation of women artists, including Kiki Smith and Daisy Youngblood, among others, and has never received an ounce of acknowledgment for it? These days you would think that the only woman artist over seventy-five is Louise Bourgeois. And yet, even if Leaf didn't pave anyone's way, and was in fact a completely isolated figure, as she has been called by some observers, her work—she paints, draws, and makes sculptures—demands far more attention than it has received. Perhaps the neglect is because she is a painter. Perhaps it is because her work doesn't fit into any of the narratives routinely used to prop up far less interesting artists (like the ones that validate Jeff Koons instead of tagging him as a dumbed-down version of Claes Oldenburg and James Rosenquist). Perhaps it is because critics think her subject matter isn't hip enough, cool enough, obvious enough, or predigested enough. Or finally, perhaps it is because she is one of the only painters to take the sketchiness we associate with French painting, its roots in Impressionism and culmination in Pierre Bonnard, and make it gritty and undomesticated.

Only an artist of real imagination and verve could have done what she has done, which is synthesize the whimsy of Fragonard with the poignant bluntness of primitive art, and do so in a way that is neither nostalgic or a form of pastiche. In her recent exhibition, which consists of paintings of very different sizes as well as constructions involving a piece of fabric stretched between gears and handles, implying an endless, moving screen, and a number of figurative sculptures, including *Man as Gutter Spout* (2007), in which whimsy and wretchedness embrace as tightly as lovers spending their last night together. It is this embrace of opposites that animates her work, as well as elevates it to a realm far more worthy of poetry (connotation) than criticism (denotation). *Man as Gutter Spout* is a little more than a foot tall, made of hammered sections of tin, and with the gutter spout, his penis, sticking straight out. With arms pointing in opposite directions, and head tilted slightly up, he looks as if he is about to jump from his narrow perch (is he headed for water or for solid ground?).

For years, Leaf, who developed an allergic reaction to oil paint, has been using acrylic in ways that are nothing short of astonishing. She is able to imbue her paintings with an airy transparency, at once wet and full of light, that serves her purposes: to evoke an empty, primal landscape of grass, sand, and sky that is reminiscent of the Nova Scotia countryside where she and her husband, Robert Frank, spend a considerable amount of time. Leaf's bleak but not necessarily abject landscape is the opposite of Fragonard's parks and gardens. Her paintings tend to be of a single, naked figure, who is often in a state that is simultaneously joyous and tormented. In the painting *Hanging Figure* (2006), a naked red man is hanging just above the ground, a rope tied around his wrist. There is no indication of who or what has put him in this predicament. This deliberate absence of information, of what preceded or what will follow, endows the situation with a feeling of permanence. At the same time, the pose suggests that the man isn't completely ill-at-ease, that in fact he may be dancing or trying to gambol across the field.

In *Landscape with Hanging Figure* (2006-2007), a naked man is seen from a distance, the rope seemingly draped around his chest. Is he being hoisted in the air, about to be received by the elements? Or is he being lowered to the ground? The man is turned away from us, and one leg is in front of the other, as if he is running. Is he running from us? And if so, what threat do we represent? Again, the artist offers no clue to the outcome of what we are looking at.

It is extremely difficult to work in an allegorical vein and not descend into obviousness. The whimsy that Leaf is able to meld with her otherwise disturbing predicaments give her work an emotional edge and poignancy that is exceedingly rare in contemporary art. The most ordinary event—*Man Turning Out a Light* (1989), a mixed media construction—becomes painful in its evocation of finality. In *Green Scroll with Figures* (2008), Leaf depicts figures on or near a tightrope, which she stretches between two cylindrical posts via gears and handles, suggesting that they will stay suspended forever. Time's winged chariot isn't hurrying near; it's carrying us toward our destination.

One senses that Leaf recognizes that fancifulness is a necessary and even practical antidote to the worry that routinely envelops us. At the same time, I had the nagging feeling that the hanging figures might have had their origins in something all too real and now largely unspoken of, what happened at Abu Ghraib. One of the strengths of Leaf's work is her ability to lead us to such a disturbing place without following any of the proscribed or institutionalized routes. This is not an artist who finds contentment in pointing the finger at others, because that's too easy and self-satisfied. Leaf isn't trying to prove herself exemplary, which is a posture after all. She knows that we are all hanging by our wrists, and that the lucky ones will be let down gently.