



Two Masters

by Mario Naves on Jan 17, 2012 • 2:45 pm

Turning on to Leaf and Dickinson

The Whitney Museum is honoring Sherrie Levine, an artist who helped usher in postmodernism—as if New Yorkers needed another reminder of that movement’s deadening intellectual certainties. Better the arbiter of American art should dedicate its institutional clout to June Leaf, a veteran painter and sculptor whose prodigious oeuvre needs a broader berth than can be provided by Edward Thorp Gallery, the venue currently exhibiting her recent efforts.

June Leaf, “Untitled (Theater),” 2010-2011, mixed media, 53h x 23.35w x 36d in. Courtesy of Babcock Galleries
June Leaf, “Untitled,” 2011, acrylic, collage on canvas, 20h x 16w in. Courtesy of Babcock Galleries

Leaf’s art is included in the Whitney’s collection (MoMA’s, too), but that’s not the reason she deserves a full accounting. Over the 30-some years Thorp has been exhibiting her work, Leaf has proved consistently intriguing and hard to pin down. Though she makes Manhattan and Nova Scotia home, Leaf was born in Chicago and, during the 1950s, proved an integral player in shaping the city’s artistic identity.

Since then, the gritty finesse and stern air of existential resignation typifying the work has garnered Leaf the sobriquet “The Best Artist Nobody Knows About.” How “best” is she? That’s where the Whitney should step in.

At Thorp, we have diverting drips and drabs: scabbled paintings of a post-apocalyptic Second Avenue; egg-beaters as signposts of mortality; anonymous figures, rendered in paint and tin, ascending staircases that lead nowhere; and “Untitled (Figure Cranking)” (2010–2011), wherein a vintage sewing machine is transformed into a parable about fate,



June Leaf, *Untitled(Theater)*
2010-2011, mixed media,
53h x 23.35w x 36d in.

all the while channeling Dante, Bosch, Giacometti and Calder. It's an impressive achievement—one you'd think would make our culturati sit up and take notice.

Any credible accounting of American art will place an emphasis on intractable individualism; the hard-won visions of sundry loners, originals and eccentrics speak more to the country's can-do spirit than any spit-and-polished category you'd care to name. (An example: Abstract expressionism seems a false conceit at this late date, less a matter of shared stylistic interests than a convenient tag for a specific social subset.)

Seen in this light, a contemporary like Leaf and a historical figure like Edwin Dickinson (1891–1978) appear less marginal—though good luck convincing those sold on the received wisdom. The folks at Babcock Galleries, which is hosting an array of Dickinson's canvases, know what they're up against. When the gallery makes a point of letting us know that Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning admired Dickinson's art, it does so as a means of conferring popular legitimacy on a painter who is nobody's idea of "user-friendly."

What, after all, are we to make of Dickinson's dour meditations on the body, the landscape and dressing up in outdated military gear? That "Self Portrait in Uniform" (1942) is among the strangest self-portraits extant, sure. But mostly, Dickinson was incapable of putting brush to canvas without embodying the transitory nature of memory and, not least, evoking its burdens.



June Leaf, *Untitled*, 2011,
Acrylic, collage on canvas,
20h x 16w in.

Modern without being modernist, Dickinson's poetic reveries are closer in tone and affect to Ingmar Bergman, say, than to either Gorky or de Kooning. But don't kid yourself: Dickinson is in their league—and maybe better. Here is a superlative chance to acquaint yourself with this vexing and elusive master.

June Leaf: Recent Work. Through Jan. 28, Edward Thorp Gallery, 210 11th Ave., Ste. 601, 212-691-6565, www.edwardthorpgallery.com.

Edwin Dickinson in Retrospect. Through Jan. 27, Babcock Galleries, 724 5th Ave., 212-767-1852, www.babcockgalleries.com.