

LESLIE LASKEY: ON CREATIVITY

September 2009

A couple of years ago I was in Laskey's studio in St. Louis. He was working on a series of drawings of very simplified figures, just a few lines; most of them straight lines but here and there a "v" or a segment of a circle. They were analytical as opposed to the predictability of stick figures but they were closer to stick figures in their simplicity than to gesture drawings. Laskey, a mature artist of great facility, was spending a lot of time to arrange half a dozen lines in a meaningful way, to capture the position of a figure, to summarize its essence. Later I saw those drawings clipped to a cord, hanging like Tibetan prayer flags at a party and then they disappeared.

Last year in Michigan I saw the first of the "Tango" paintings. The stick figures were dancing! And, they were big. A grey and white one, of no more than a dozen lines, was charged with energy. A red, grey and black one was very complex and fervent. The next day much of it was painted over. Then it disappeared. I suspect it exists in a new incarnation or perhaps it is now part of history, part of experience.

The Japanese potter Shoji Hamada had his assistants keep all in preparation for throwing pots every day. For periods he would not appear. Then one day he would come and throw hundreds of pots within a period of a few days and then continue to do the work of firing and glazing. Hamada had been preparing himself for the moment when everything was in order for creating. That preparation included

inspiration, mental focus and physical well being. I am sure that those stick figures I saw in St. Louis were part of the preparation for "Tango". Laskey is constantly experimenting, constantly looking, constantly searching for the idea that will engender a new body of work. Like Hamada, he believes in a simplicity that is a distillation of experience. When the hard work of preparation has been done, one creates with ease. The results are not easy solutions but they easily summarize all that preceded them.

And, like Hamada when all is in order Laskey can be very prolific. The work flows as pots from the wheel.

Creativity is different for every artist. I know that Laskey relates to the mystic sensibility of oriental artists such as the ceramist Hamada and the woodcut artist Shiko Munakata, who was his personal friend. I know that Laskey connects to the work ethic of the Bauhaus—the artist as craftsmen and worker. I know that he admires the prodigious creativity of Picasso whose artwork revealed the various manifestations of his life. Laskey's art results from a continuity or work. It is also about the mystical connection to the essence of experience. And, it is an ongoing work process that engages his entire life.



The focus of his artwork changes constantly. Sometimes he discovers a new material such as automobile touch up paint, or roofing caulk, or water based printing inks. Those sources can provide the

means for making new work. A new process likewise can generate new ideas. Using styrofoam packing elements as printing blocks or dragging a comb dragging through thick paint or using spray paint and stencils can suggest new forms. Sometimes it is a new visual stimulus such as Japanese kimonos, or an old doll, a salvaged hinge or watching a couple dance. With each new discovery Laskey probes the possibilities of its development in multiple forms. Perhaps the discovery lends itself to sculpture, or to drawing and painting or to monoprints, woodcuts, or photography. The change in Laskey's artwork is in response to new materials, new processes, and new visual sources. It is about discovery.

A friend said to me after Laskey's last exhibition, "it was different from his other work but there was no mistake that it was Laskey." The work generated by new discoveries does constantly changing but in a certain sense it is always the same. One recognizes Laskey's forms, his color, his response to materials and his devotion to process. Whatever their manifestations Laskey leaves his distinctive mark. It is his vision, his visual language which manifests itself in multiple forms. Throughout his career, he has continued to test resources. He is a master woodcut artist, a needlepoint artist, a graphic designer, a jewelry maker, a painter, a sculptor, and architect. At Washington University he shared his passion for creativity and was a legendary teacher.



A few years ago in Michigan, Laskey and I were driving down the road and were talking about the mailboxes that stood at the end of driveways. There would be a single mailbox, a couple together, an assemblage of three or four or a whole group. As you drove down the road these compositions would suddenly appear. As we talked about these changing compositions and how exciting it was to see what the next turn would bring Leslie said to me, "isn't it fun to be a visual person."

The Tango series brings together the most recent of Laskey's excitement about the visual world. They are the distillation of years of experience. Their simplicity contains decades of looking and making. They are classic Laskey.

—Jim Harris

Jim Harris is an architect and a Professor Emeritus at Washington University where he was a former associate dean of the School of Architecture. As a woodcut artist he has studied for the last number of summers with Leslie Laskey in Michigan. He lives in St. Louis and Stillwater, Minnesota. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

TANGO (Azul II), 2009. Acrylic on board , 87 x 52 inches

TANGO (Rouge Noite), 2009. Monotype and crayon on paper, 15 x 12 inches

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

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