

GERSON LEIBER: RECENT WATERCOLORS

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The Genius of the Place: The East End Watercolors of Gerson Leiber

by Avis Berman

Gerson Leiber has spent seven decades of his life as a practicing artist, using that time to create considerable bodies of work in painting, sculpture, and printmaking. But watercolor had no place in his mature oeuvre. That all changed in spring 2008, when Leiber decided that he wanted to “master the medium,” although on his own, not entirely traditional terms. In an ongoing series of compositions based on his observations of the villages of eastern Long Island and their architecture, Leiber fuses two aqueous media -- the classic transparent pigment and gouache, which is opaque watercolor. Experimenting with this sort of duality – indeed, any duality – engages him. His watercolors strive to unify contrasts and oppositions with balance and symmetry. His examination of constructed and organic forms is both the subject and method of the work. Leiber’s geometries are rooted in the visible world of landscaping, roads, and buildings, but they never portray an actual experience or a duplication of one. Rather, they represent his integration of the symbols and themes from his own environment with formal invention. Cubist principles, Leiber says, are highly compatible with and hospitable to analyzing built structures, because of the equation he makes between architectural qualities and orderly thinking. Such Cubist compositional devices as overlapping planes, dissected and rearranged shapes, and discontinuous viewpoints move him away from literal description. This rigorous sense of pictorial organization supports exuberant color and lively painterly incident. For Leiber, watercolor remains an active journey whose byways he is still bent on traversing.

The dichotomous character of Leiber’s watercolors begins with his relationship to the immediate motif—the residential architecture of the Hamptons. His surroundings plainly furnish him with an enormous amount of information. This particular body of work could not have been conceived without long scrutiny of the small towns and country roads of Eastern Long Island or the planning and labor he has devoted to the extensive gardens surrounding his own house in The Springs section of East Hampton. “For about the last six years of being out in East Hampton,” Leiber says,

“I’ve noticed that the village stares you in the face continually. Everywhere you go, there’s another little village with a somewhat different feeling. But, overall, they are practically the same. I’ve also become fascinated with the way the house is presented in children’s art: its simplicity is amazing. I feel that the house equals the village equals the town equals Long Island and almost everywhere.”

Yet Leiber does not so much paint from nature, but extract its substance. He drives around the area, takes photographs, and clips real estate advertisements, but the principal creative activity takes place in his studio. There the images he gleans are combined imaginatively with and abstracted from recollections of the original subject matter: “I react to nature by reacting to what’s on the paper; what’s happened there,” he explains. “It’s not really an experience that acts outside of the canvas or paper. Everything on the paper should be evoked and derived from its relationship to other elements already on the paper.” To Leiber, the fact of putting down a broad stroke of color on a canvas or a sheet of paper produces a tangible element that will require a response.

All sorts of houses and their groupings become promising points of departure for Leiber. There is no such term as “beautiful” or “ugly.” Any building with a defined geometric shape, or even an agglomeration of oddly proportioned shapes, is weighed and can be exploited. Although aesthetically he prefers the solidity and straightforwardness of old saltbox houses and the refinement of Greek Revival manors, Leiber also embraces “the spec houses that were put up, with hundreds of gables and all kinds of other improbable things going on. Architecturally they’re a tremendous mishmash.” Most artists would not deem the strange sprawlings of McMansions and their ilk as fertile grounds for inspiration, but Leiber zeroes in on the Cubist aspects of their innumerable nooks and crannies. By adopting easily identified and willfully simple imagery – the house form as children customarily draw it can be reduced to a few elements, like the roof, the window, and the gable, all of which lend themselves to geometric schematization – Leiber can focus on shapes, strokes, and patches of color that occupy the paper, as well as the subtle relationships that obtain among them.

However, it is undeniable that Long Island houses, from the most blatantly ostentatious dwelling to the humblest cottage, are imbued with a personal iconography of perceptions and emotions for this artist. In a comparable case, the Jewish quarter of late-nineteenth-century Vitebsk, Russia, consisted of little more than some bleak, falling-down buildings lining rutted, unpaved roads. But Marc Chagall, whose early work Leiber admires, called the houses of the shtetl where he grew up “simple and eternal, like the buildings in the frescoes of Giotto.” Naturally Chagall was waxing nostalgic, but he was loyal to the notion of the village because it kindled his imagination and he, in turn, transformed its prosaic appearance into art. Whereas Chagall flourished in exile and

conjured up Vitebsk by making idyllic approximations of it in his paintings, Leiber, who spends a good part of his life on a sylvan property in East Hampton, distills his local horizons into the tumbling squares, triangles, circles, angles, and lines that suggest the human and architectural congestion overwhelming the region's farmland and woods.

Leiber has an enduring and ardent tie to Cubism, the artistic force that pulses through his watercolors. Cubism, of course, is the primal movement for most other strains of modern art and the one that all Western artists of Leiber's generation had to wrestle with, reject, or assimilate. Doing away with the old reliance on one-point perspective and a static apprehension of the object was a matchless visual equivalent for the ambiguities and fluctuations of existence, as Leiber realizes. In his village-scapes, architectural structures are not represented as great masses. Instead, they are shifting and emerging shapes that dissolve and reassemble into relationships that are recognizable but not easily decipherable. Because Cubist esthetics have conditioned his painting and printmaking, Leiber feels comfortable and familiar with them, but he sees the need to re-examine his ideas in regard to the particular demands of watercolor: "As I look at Cubism," Leiber says, "I always remember that I was born in 1921, which wasn't that far from the birth of Cubism. At my age, it's beginning to tell -- and affect my thinking about everything. It's almost my birthright. So I'm trying weave together Cubism, watercolor, and my feelings about living on Long Island."

Leiber is not a purist, and just as he mingles transparent and opaque pigments and elides and dissects shapes, his absorption of artists of the past into his own work is not limited to the vital discoveries of Picasso and Braque. He has incorporated Expressionist paint energies, particularly as exemplified in the landscapes painted by Chaim Soutine in the early 1920s. Several years ago, Leiber said, he thought of those canvases as "highly objectionable. Now I'm studying them to find out what is it that he projected, what is it that he said." Like Soutine, Leiber often approaches his subject matter from a low vantage point, which then tilts the house shapes of his villages upward. This rolling perspective can run up and down each watercolor sheet. Sometimes the houses are observed from different angles: as a result, contradictory perspectives operate within the same composition. Then the houses surge and coalesce. Both artists maintain a staccato rhythm in their landscapes, although Soutine often takes animation to the level of frenzy. And each artist shares a gift for formulating an underlying structure that holds any anarchic elements together.

Leiber's vision of his village-scapes is inseparable from his fifty-plus years of experience as a gardener extraordinaire. Beginning in 1956, when he and his wife, Judith Leiber, bought their house in East Hampton, Leiber immersed himself in devising formal gardens for the property. Over the ensuing years, he acquired adjoining

pieces of land whenever possible. Now the gardens spread over six acres, and the handiwork of their creator is strongly evident in the intellectual discipline of the designs: various gardens are laid out with geometric precision and partitioned by lines of clipped shrubbery that form layers and regular shapes of their own. Leiber's artistic preferences for order, balance, and abstract form are translated into in his gardens, whose geometric patterns are established with boxwood hedges. (Boxwood is the classic plant formal gardeners employ to obtain exactly the edge and border arrangements they wish.) "The garden is mainly hedges and greenery with elements of color placed in there," Leiber says, "and those hedges are very geometric. The fact that one hedge is in front of another and meets in diagonals is very important in my thinking. And of course I've taken all kinds of photos of it to use when I'm not in front of the motif." Thus the gardens express a horticultural Cubism, which in turn feeds back into the paintings and watercolors. As a exponent of the formal garden, Leiber has done his best to impose his will on nature, but he had to learn patience and acceptance too. "Working with nature gives you a deep appreciation of the beauties of that," he has said, "but you also come to know the pitfalls -- the cruelties of nature, storms, diseases, insects, all things you couldn't plan on. Working with nature, you learn to accept them." Despite his distaste for untamed nature in a garden, he nonetheless bows to its power, and in form and process, he acknowledges Alexander Pope's famous dictum: "Consult the genius of the place."

Gardening is a metaphor for Leiber's compositional process, preparing him to embrace the fruitfulness of accidents. For all the deliberation behind the watercolors, he relies more on improvisation in composing them than he did when working with oil. The medium inherently demands this -- transparent watercolors cannot be easily corrected, although gouache allows for changes -- but Leiber was more attuned to

"the accidental here and there. Instead of rejecting something, I tried to work around it and work with it. And rejecting and accepting and all those things go on, on the canvas or on paper. It's like an arena. It's almost like a bullfight. Maybe it is very much that way. But instead of the bull killing the artist, he just loses the battle."

Leiber does not make preliminary sketches or start with any underdrawing. He begins a watercolor by moving freely around the paper with a large brush. He describes this initial pigment as a background color that functions as "a sort of impetus." Then he returns to the piece the next day, and lays shapes on top of the first layer of color. To establish the composition further, he adds shapes and colors that will oppose or balance the shapes he has already made. Or, in another kind of contrast, he will have many layers of paint in one area near an empty space -- as represented by

white paint or the white paper shining through. The choice of white as an effective counterpoint can be seen, for example, in *Sprightly Village* (1), *The Village of Self Denial* (2), and *Not in the Cards* (3). Color progressions move the eye around, up, and down through the picture. That is the role yellows and ochers play in *Hamptons Rocking* (4), and in *A Thriving Market Town* (5), the climbing movement of reds and purples give the work its buoyancy. If Leiber spies a pattern, he tries to develop and accentuate portions of it. For instance, in *Maidstone* (6) and *A Village Startling in its Incoherence* (7), he seizes on the parallelism and opposition of vertical and diagonal forms.

A word must be said about Leiber's antic titling of the works in the village series. His names for the watercolors are premeditated. Whenever wry gnomic phrases that he free-associates with the theme of the village pop into his head, Leiber writes them down on thin strips of paper that look like the slips salvaged from Chinese fortune cookies. Later, he appends these whimsical aphorisms to the watercolors after they are completed. A random survey of Leiber's pile of paper strips yielded "Costive Village," "Village of Uncertain Reputation (8)," "Mortgage Man About to Strike," and "The Market Town of Ish Kabibble (9)." The artist purposely invents titles that have no connection to the work, trusting that their absurdity will discourage attempts at teasing out literal or narrative meanings from them. Yet every-day titles drawn from the area's actual streets, neighborhoods, and towns, such as "Maidstone (6)" and "Madison Street (10)," appeal to him.

The studied randomness of how Leiber decides which title belongs to what painting -- why does one watercolor get the audacious title of *Unfortunate Village, Bereft of Moo Goo Gai Pan* (11) pinned on it while another merely receives the bland *South Fork Summer ?* (12) — occurs, he says, according to "the feeling of the moment." That way, he hopes, viewers "may interpret as freely as they wish." Leiber's enjoyment of his titles is at one with his adroit sense of play, which manifests itself in the disguises, deceptions, and small disturbances that he creates in the watercolors. One can find this propensity in a painting like *Madison Street* (10), in which the solidity of the gouache bumps up against the pattern of the rooftops, rendering the picture confusing to read. The arrowhead shapes sprinkled over the surface and pointing in different directions could be trees, gables, or rooftops. They change, blend, and re-emerge as the eye darts away and returns to them, a riddle without a solution.

Leiber's optical play ultimately questions the basis of our perceptions. We have been trained to recognize a triangle as a shorthand sign for a gable and a vertical slit for a window if we spot it in the wall of an image of a house. It does not matter that neither form remotely resembles an actual gable or a window. These visual clichés,

which Leiber connects with his attraction to the generic manner in which children draw a house, underscore the split between with what we think we know and what is a pictorial convention. Leiber capitalizes on our faith in the cliché we have accepted as a basic shape of a building, whether or not it is true to life, to divert attention and fool the eye.

The watercolors are a consistent body of work, but diverse in their emphases. *South Fork Summer* (12) is distinguished by multiple kinds of brushstrokes, and Leiber's superimpositions of thicker paint create a rich, dense impression of space. The fluid brushwork and compelling colors invigorate the composition. Another approach to creating lush chromatic harmonies is apparent in *Slattern Village* (13), in which overlapping patches of pigment, blotted and squared off, are brushed with translucent washes that hover in the front of the composition. An anomaly for the artist, who favors a palette of reds, blues, greens, and purples, is *Maidstone* (6), which displays a range of blacks, whites, grays, and browns, robustly applied. Its large house in the foreground, less minimized than in the other village-scapes, gives the work strength and monumentality. Leiber is equally at ease with nearly doing away with architectural forms altogether; a choice that informs *Not in the Cards* (3). In that work, Leiber has taken the most liberties with the village theme. One of the last watercolors of the series, the painting is pared down and ethereal. His chief interest lies in dividing the sheet of paper in half with prismatic colors, and he relies on expanses of blank paper to convey light, breadth, air, and simplicity. Above all else, Gerson Leiber's achievement in the medium that was new to him a year ago is infused with a serene flexibility that usually takes an artist much longer to attain. "I find my feelings about color and composing have completely changed since I started out," he muses. "There are harmonies and beauties that I never suspected. Everything is coming together and melding. When I think of my age, it's high time."

¹Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the author's interviews with Gerson Leiber on May 4 and May 16, 2009.

²Quoted in Alfred Werner, *Soutine* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), p. 17.

³Gerson Leiber, quoted in Gerrit Henry, "Gerson Leiber: My Garden," in *Gerson Leiber: My Garden* (New York: Denise Bibro Fine Art, 2001), unpagd.



F01 • Sprightly Village, 2008, Gouache on paper, 13 3/4" x 20"



F02 • The Village of Self Denial, 2008, Gouache on paper, 13 3/4" x 19 1/2"

image not included!



F05 • A Thriving Market Town, 2008, Gouache on paper, 11" x 15 1/2"



F06 • Maidstone, 2008, Gouache on paper, 9" x 13 1/2"



F07 • A Village Startling in It's Incoherence, 2008, Gouache on paper, 11" x 15 1/4"



F08 • The Village of Uncertain Reputation, 2009, Gouache on paper, 11 1/4" x 15 1/4"



F09 • The Market Town of Ish Kabibble, 2008, Gouache on paper, 11" x 15 1/2"



F10 • Madison Street, 2008, Gouache on paper, 9 1/2" x 14"



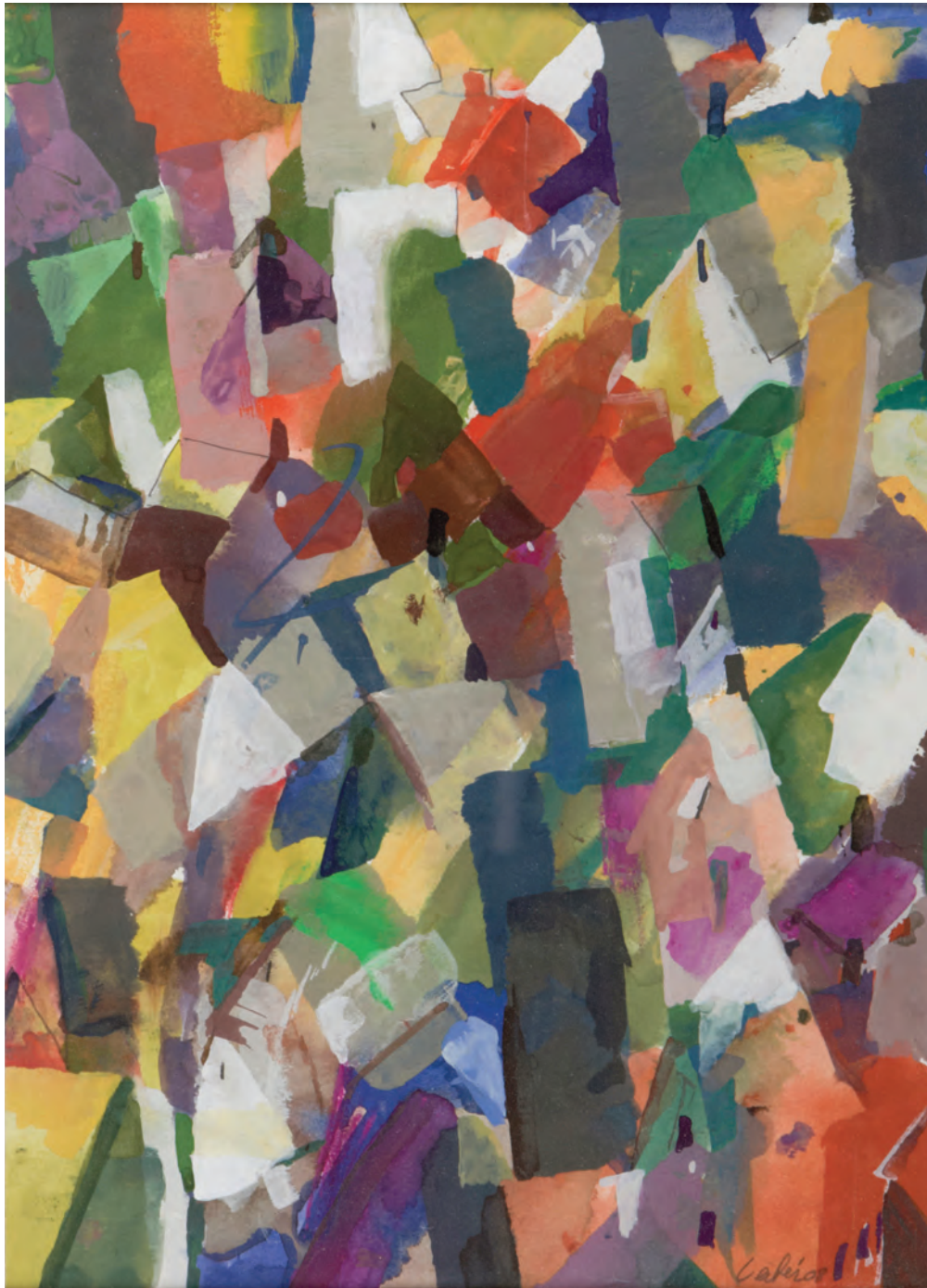
F11 • The Unfortunate Village, Bereft of Moo Goo Gai Pan, 2008, Gouache on paper, 11" x 15 1/2"



F12 • South Fork Summer, 2008, Gouache on paper, 9" x 13 1/2"



F13 • Slattern Village, 2008, Gouache on paper, 13 1/2" x 19 1/4"



F04 • Hamptons Rocking, 2008, Gouache on paper, 9 1/2" x 13"

COVER: Maidstone, 2008, Gouache on paper, 9" x 13 1/2"

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ISBN: (number to come)

Publisher: The Leiber Museum
 446 Old Stone Highway
 East Hampton, NY 11937

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(back cover image
to come?)