



The garden outside the Leiber Collection is a work of art on its own.

# Abstract Acreage

THE INSPIRING GARDEN AT THE LEIBER COLLECTION IN EAST HAMPTON IS JUST AS DAZZLING AS THE SCULPTURAL TREASURES WITHIN. BY PAULA DE LA CRUZ

“My most geometric drawings come from the garden,” says Gerson Leiber, a 92-year-old modernist artist living and working in Springs. Walking along a winding brick path through his five acres of verdant space, Leiber mentions a series of abstract paintings based on hedges. “Strict lines help define the canvas, but I found them too limiting,” he says smiling mischievously. “I want to be free!”

That freedom pervades Leiber’s barn-style studio in East Hampton, where he still paints today. Its double-height windows overlook English boxwood parterres pruned in diagonal and oval lines. Since completing his hedge series in the late ’90s, Leiber has continued to observe nature’s energy and expansiveness and maintains the

moxie necessary to preserve it. Leiber’s most recent exhibition, “Rites of Spring: A Modernist View of Nature” at the Carter Burden Gallery in New York, which ran until mid-May, was a synthesis of more than 50 years of work along with an evocation of the beauty and honesty one can derive from nature.

Springs was already known as the cradle of the Abstract Expressionist movement when Leiber and his wife, Judith, the famed handbag designer, moved there in 1956, the same year that Jackson Pollock died in a drunk-driving accident near his house on Fireplace Road. Leiber says he slowly developed a love for gardening while continuing to grow the couple’s successful accessories company. To one side of

their long driveway, which is lined with climbing roses on a green wooden fence, a small gate opens onto a rectangular lawn with five columnar hornbeams in the center. The design came to Leiber as a way of “not fighting” the flatness of the lot, which he purchased years after buying the original farm. A double row of 15-year-old pink rhododendrons flanks the lawn on one side, breaking the geometry of the landscape and adding a touch of color in spring.

Beneath the rhododendrons is a clearing for teak benches and a cement column built for a bronze urn in the style of those made by the great bronzemaker Claude Ballin for the gardens of Versailles. On the urn’s handles, the faces of a young man and a young woman look outward, while their old

RIGHT: Kimber Berry's *A Small Miracle of Circumstance*, 2013.  
BELOW: A path leading from the Leibers' private garden ends at a cherub fountain.

faces look inward. He says he bought it locally at an antiques shop and wasn't sure where it came from, but he knew it was something special.

Across from the geometric lawn is Leiber's studio, with English boxwood parterres just beyond it, now partially removed after a winter of extreme and fluctuating temperatures. Leiber mentions that his dwarf-leaf boxwood is more fragile and prone to decline than the large-leaf varieties. Three columnar junipers

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stand in the center of the pruned boxwood, creating a scene of emerald and grayish greens.

Although some of Leiber's paintings evoke his garden, his abstract paintings are "inspired by abstract thoughts, not actual landscapes," he says. On the other side of the boxwood garden is the quarter-acre potager, with two espaliered pear trees at one end and raspberries running along the side. Asparagus lettuce, chard, and corn peek out of the loamy soil, which has come

a long way since the old days, when this was an abandoned farm with furniture and a car half-buried in the ground.

The path from the Leibers' private garden to the back of their house and to the nearby Leiber Collection, ends at a gate with knob-shaped boxwood topiaries strewn under red oaks, looking like children running to greet you. Beyond the gate there is a giant lawn with a fountain of a cherub holding a dolphin, a copy of the original by Andrea del Verrochio, created for Lorenzo de' Medici in the 1500s. At the end of the lawn a Palladian building, in the style of a garden folly, houses a collection of Leiber's paintings, the couple's Chinese porcelain pieces, and Judith Leiber's magnificent purses, spanning the decades between 1963, when she started the company, until 1998, when she retired. As if freshly plucked from their potager, minaudières shaped like asparagus, watermelons, and eggplants sparkle in all colors of the rainbow from inside the display cases. Gerson Leiber recounts how exclusive the purses always were, and that husbands would give them as presents to their wives "if they could afford them." But the Leibers never gave each other expensive gifts—"just our love," he says, still smiling. 446 Old Stone Hwy., East Hampton, 329-3288; leibermuseum.org **H**



## DRAWING FROM NATURE

**Elisa Contemporary Art** mounts "Zenscapes," an exhibition of landscape abstracts from three coastal artists.

East Hampton artist Michele D'Ermo is just one of a trio of talents displaying landscapes and seascapes that have been reimagined through paint, rag paper, and mixed media as part of the "Zenscapes" exhibit at The Design Studio in Bridgehampton through July 7. The local talent blends together land, water, and skies through her use of rich colors and ambient light, creating paintings that contain "the unfiltered, unfamiliar, and unknown."

Also part of the show are Los Angeles Flow artist Kimber Berry and San Jose paper constructionist Michael Buscemi, whose latest work was inspired by Georgia's Caucasus Mountains, Black Sea, and wild winds. His recently completed piece *Your Path* is part of his white paper collage series. Berry's work, *Plastic Gardens*, explores the modern relationship between humans and nature through digitally manipulated photographs of paint, natural and plastic plants, and flowers embedded into paint. "I create a dialogue of the human condition and raise important questions about how we live with nature," she says.

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