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RECENT WORKS ON PAPER BY GERSON LEIBER

THE LEIBER MUSEUM

Expanding the Vocabulary: Gerson Leiber's New Drawings

Phyllis Braff

Gus Leiber's recent abstractions expand the accepted vocabulary for drawing by bringing in unusual combinations of art's tactile, spatial and conceptual qualities. The results seem significant as well as compelling. In addition, his inventive uses of charcoal or graphite or chalk or oil-stick strokes provide a certain gravitas in their scope and invite special consideration of the human notation in an increasingly electro-cyber culture.

Graphic practices have always had a role in Leiber's seven-decade career, yet his current dedication to the potential of the direct mark presents a new phase and a different kind of exploration. An artist who understands the art of his era, Leiber builds on the optical velocities and gestural immediacies of abstract expressionism. Pushing further in these investigations, he goes on to give the medium's tactile properties a major place, and builds, too, on his experience with creating modernist space on a flat surface. Perhaps most importantly, he seems to be integrating the workings of the mind's subjective thoughts into the art in new ways.

What registers first is the range of innovations that develop from Leiber's sense of abstraction's expressive possibilities. Marks have distinct and assertive energies, and they have a physicality linked to their weight and texture. Bold or delicate, thick or thin, dense or open, they create dripping ribbons in some instances, or shadows and ghosts of earlier marks in other instances. When they are linear, they can quickly change speed and they can also hint at description.



Sea Wrack, 2010
Charcoal & oil stick on paper
20 1/8 in. x 16 7/8 in.

Virtuosity almost becomes a subject in itself. In *Sea Wrack*, for example, bold, loose color ribbons combine with an area of tightly massed, delicately outlined abstract shapes, while in *Downgraded Hurricane* wide, twisting linear gestures invent a strong visual force. Two separately articulated segments within the horizontal *Untitled* (2011) emphasize contrasting messages about tactile qualities, and both *Le Jardin Americain* and *Sagamore Hill Series No. 5* show vigorous marks congealing into a nearly solid mass projecting its own feeling of weight.¹

When configurations suggest movement, new kinds of lyricism often seem to emerge from the materials and their constantly inventive interactions. There are swirls, spins and spirited dashing markings activating the surface and leading the eye into charged optical experiences. Where color is added, it is often a yellow chalk or oil stick that augments the movement within the drawing. *Spring Riot on Pussy's Pond* is a particularly powerful example.

The very energetic, all-over configurations of expressive strokes appearing in many Leiber drawings have associations with abstract expressionism's pioneering steps, yet they

constantly test new dynamics. *Skateboarding Dialogue* uses an extensive variety of lines and shapes as it spreads then interrupts movement in a way that could convincingly parallel the real world. The grey on yellow *Untitled (2011)* does this with noticeable subtlety, while *Embrace My Garden* strikes a bolder, impassioned rhythm.

Spatial effects are an important part of the visual impact in these new drawings. In many instances the appearance of overlapping, multiple planes suggests roots in Cubism, which has informed aspects of Leiber's work in the past. The one previous exhibition devoted solely to his drawings (there have been more than a score of solo exhibitions which focused primarily on paintings and prints)² at Kennedy Galleries, New York, in 1996,



Downgraded Hurricane, 2010
Charcoal on paper
22 1/2 in. x 30 in.



Untitled, 2011
Charcoal & chalk on paper
22 1/4 in. x 30 1/4 in.

featured subjects from life interpreted as tight compressions of fractured, layered planes. A recent charcoal and chalk drawing, *Shalom, Shalom*, is close to the Cubist approach with its abstract forms treated as dynamic, overlapping surfaces. Leiber re-examines the layered forms concept as a vigorously interlocking but weightless configuration in *School Street Blues*, and re-examines the optical force of tumbling separate cubes in a charcoal and chalk drawing, *Untitled (2011)*. At times the treatment of depth in this new body of work calls to mind the figures and garden motifs tilted and pushed up against the frontal plane in the artist's paintings over the decades.

Now, however, he is exploring more complicated approaches to space, and seemingly with great confidence. The results make significant contributions to the high-powered impact of the new work. Contrasting dense or faint blacks and grays help the large, vigorously articulated units jostle for spatial position in *The Apotheosis of Henry James*.



***Le Jardin Americain*, 2010**
Mixed media on paper
16 in. x 23 1/4 in.

In *Empty Vessels* and *Find Your Footing*, forms actually project beyond the primary image border. Vast white space contains, pushes and interacts with a single configuration in both *Nor'Easter* and *Tribute to an Unknown Painter*, while in the powerful *Irrational Exuberance*



Sagamore Hill Series No. 5, 2009
Charcoal on paper
22 3/8 in. x 17 1/4 in.



Spring Riot on Pussy's Pond, 2009

Charcoal & oil stick on paper

16 7/8 in. x 19 5/8 in.

open space is centrally featured as bold, black units rush to the outer edges. Magical activities emerge from an earlier, alternative world in delicately defined spaces under the frontal plane in *Le Jardin Americain*. Where Leiber introduces color, it is often used to expand the rich variety of internal forces within the drawing.



Untitled, 2011
Charcoal & chalk on paper
22 1/2 in. x 30 in.

Leiber's career trajectory provides a solid background for his pursuit of innovation. At key times he was exposed to the pioneering ideas of the groundbreakers. He did the right things at the right formative points, starting with a total absorption in developing drawing skills as a young student in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Then, as a G.I. stationed in Hungary in 1945, he passed the drawing entrance examination at the Royal Academy of Art in Budapest and enrolled in classes. Following his discharge from the military, he settled in New York, the center of America's artworld, where he studied first at the Art Students League and later at the Brooklyn Museum Art School which was known then for its exciting, cutting-edge spirit.

"I studied there with Gabor Peterdi, who was recognized as the best etcher and engraver," notes Leiber. "He gave my work another dimension."³



Embrace My Garden, 2010
Mixed media on paper
16 in. x 23 1/4 in.

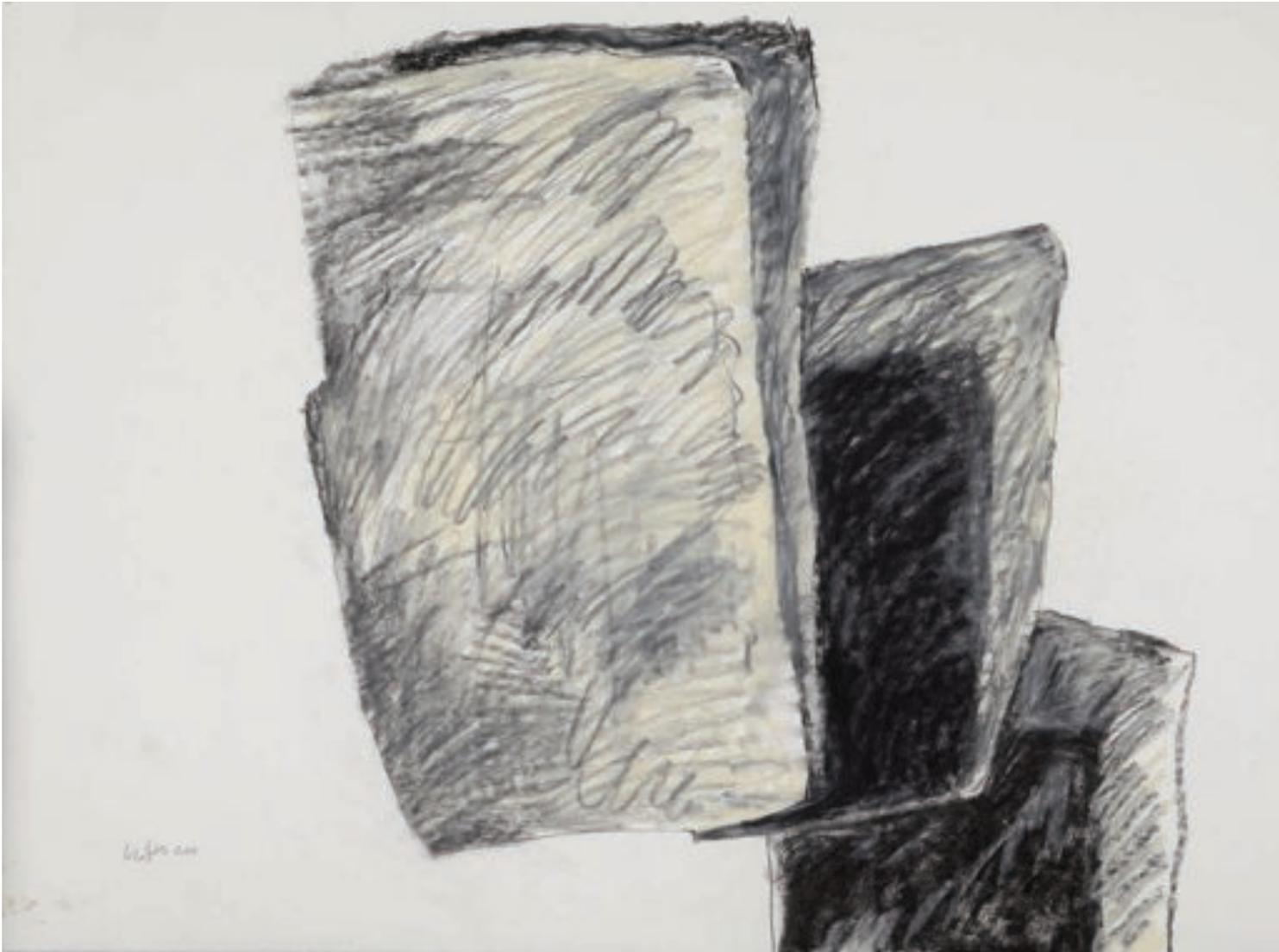


Shalom, Shalom, 2009
Charcoal & chalk on paper
26 in. x 20 in.

Next Leiber moved on to set up a studio and graphic arts workshop in Greenwich Village, in space shared with the famed printmaker, Bob Blackburn. Subsequently, Leiber taught at Blackburn's influential Printmaking Workshop. In addition to teaching, he was pursuing painting, printmaking, drawing and sculpture.⁴ Always keeping pace with the dynamics of the city's art milieu, he was well aware of the ambitions of everyone exhibiting, from Picasso to de Kooning. His own abstract canvases were shown regularly at the Terrain Gallery in the fifties.

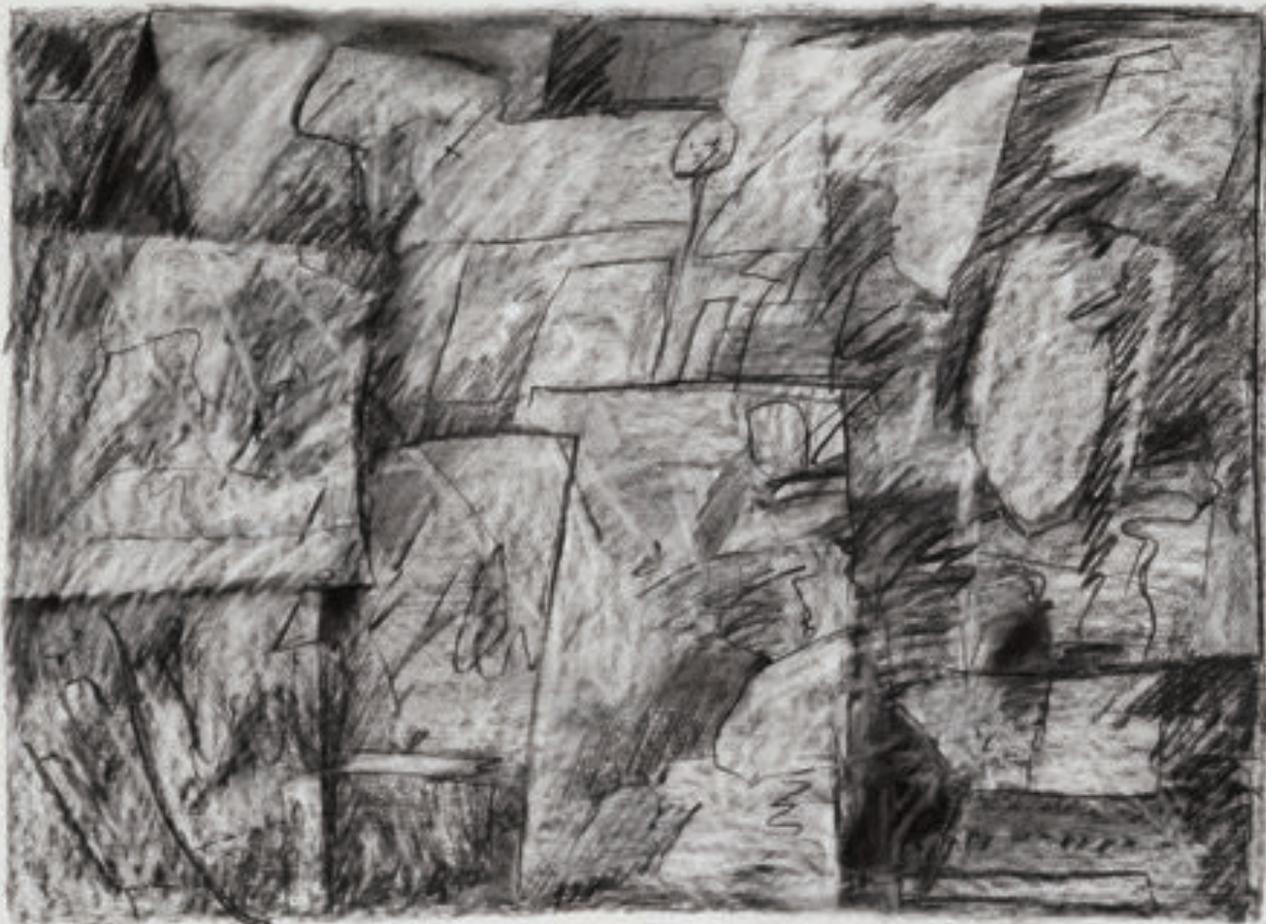


School Street Blues, 2010
Charcoal & oil stick on paper
23 3/8 in. x 30 in.



Untitled, 2011
Charcoal & chalk on paper
22 1/2 in. x 30 in.

As a student of Peterdi, Leiber was exposed to the pioneering ideas of Stanley William Hayter, with whom Peterdi had studied in Paris. Hayter, whose breakthrough work is associated with the period of Surrealist activity in Paris and New York,⁵ championed the validity of the accidentally discovered mark. His tenets contributed to the use of chance as a fertile path for unleashing imagery, and contributed to the respect for the role the creative artist's subconscious might take in the art-making process.



The Apotheosis of Henry James, 2010

Charcoal on paper

22 1/2 in. x 30 in.

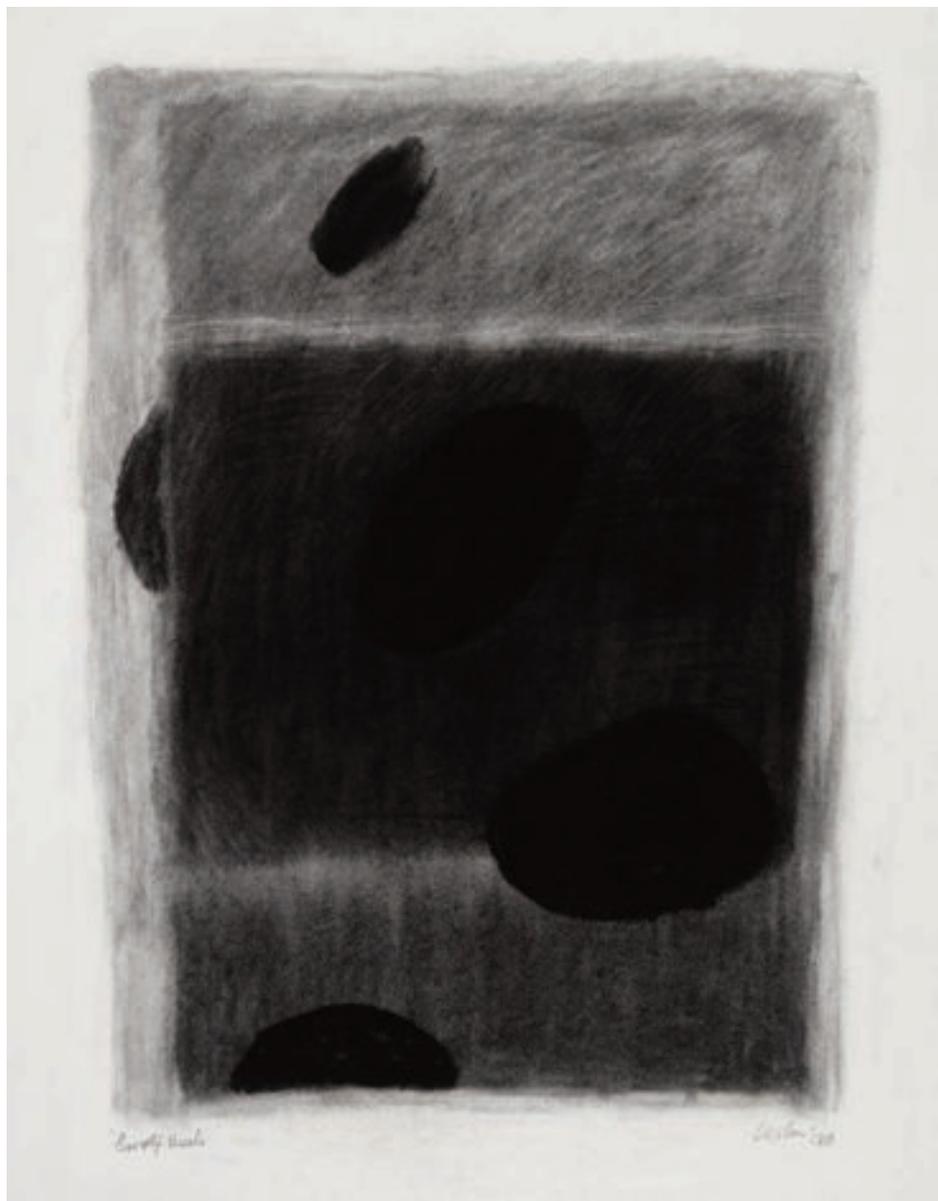
In his new drawing campaign, Leiber seems to be carrying this tradition further. “I routinely let the work flow out of hand, without a great deal of thought. After slowing down and regarding the formal elements, things then take shape. I can be amazed to see what takes place on paper, and what occurs is of great interest.”

His updating and expansion of the process is especially noteworthy. While following intuitive sensations and spontaneity, he also gives a role to what is partially buried in the

mind. Any triggering of a thought during the phases of drawing might become a creative appendage to the piece and serve as its title. "Near the end, a phrase often occurs; it might have nothing to do with the work. It might possibly be a comment or some thought from the not too distant past," Leiber explains. Not surprisingly, he is a prolific reader, an involved follower of social and political current events, and has keen concerns about local matters and local sites.

Many subjective, auditory and cognitive factors come into play in this semi-conceptual, semi-spontaneous step. Perhaps the most universal language appearing in the titles involves end-of-life connotations. One work has the designation, *Green River*, referring to the much-mentioned cemetery that is the final resting place for Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and others known for their art. Its location is less than a mile from the farmhouse that Gus and Judith Leiber purchased in 1956 in the Springs hamlet of East Hampton, Long Island.

At least three works executed in charcoal and colored pencil have the intriguing designation, *One of a Hundred Ways to Circumvent Death*. While totally varied in character, all



Empty Vessels, 2010
Charcoal on paper
30 in. x 22 1/2 in.

contain a rectangular form that hints at a burial plot. Underscoring Leiber's seemingly infinite variety of gestural methods, the fascinating charcoal drawing, *One Hundred Ways to Circumvent Death*, orchestrates swift markings and bold strokes that group together to suggest weighty forms.

It is almost inevitable that drawings with place, or location titles will seem diaristic. This is especially true when multiple examples hint at the concept of series, even though the finished sheets vary considerably. Logically, however, recollections of certain places



Find Your Footing, 2010
Charcoal on paper
23 1/4 in. x 32 1/4 in.

will generate a vast number of memory impressions, all with a different character and texture. Sheets from the Philadelphia series may have triggered their title by hinting at a city plan configuration, and sheets from the Sagamore Hill series have dark masses that appear weighty in a way that might parallel a recall of the building's architecture. The mystery surrounding a subconscious thought can be intriguing.

Drawing titles such as Gerard Drive, Barnes Landing, and Pussy's Pond reflect Leiber's intimate knowledge of the natural characteristics of the Springs landscape. "A pond is a biological thing," he has observed. "A marsh has cells, and is a mini-ecology site paralleling life itself."

Through his own gardening — there are six acres of showplace gardens, much treasured by visitors — he is especially attuned to the sense of constantly changing



Tribute to an Unknown Painter, 2009
Charcoal & oil stick on paper
20 1/8 in. x 17 in.



Irrational Exuberance, 2010
Charcoal & colored pencil on paper
22 1/2 in. x 30 in.

relationships generated by nature. This flux possibly contributes to the rich and varied complexities of the drawings.

Another realm of familiarity that logically slips into the mind-association language appended to drawings involves artist's names. Examples include *Willem's Gift*, *A Tribute to Gregory Litinsky* and *Further Conclusions Drawn from the Work of Henry Pearson*. As

Leiber explains, "The names occur because they could have been in my mind if I had recently read an article on the subject."



*In the Vicinity
of Green River*
2009
Charcoal on paper
20 in. x 26 in.

Reading is an especially fruitful source for combinations of words that sound intriguing to the artist. His range appears to span history, legend, The Bible, fiction and non-fiction. Striking examples of forceful drawing and appended titles from literature include *The Flying Dutchman*, *A Difficult Semester in Hades*, *The Footprint of the Creator*, *Brought to Justice*, and *Come Away With Me, Dear, to Baluchistan*. In the last instance we have a momentary association with a desert region of western Pakistan.



One Hundred Ways to Circumvent Death, 2010

Charcoal on paper

15 1/4 in. x 22 3/8 in.

Not surprisingly, such powers of free association stemming from a lifetime of intellectual resources can introduce considerable wit. There is humor in *Dunce*, *A Cubist*

Visits *Pussy's Pond* and *Twitter, Twitter*, and perhaps there is a bit of irony fueled by social observation in *Annie Get Your Gun* and *A Brief Course in Anger Management*.



New Year Roses, 2011
Charcoal, chalk & colored pencil on paper
30 in. x 22 1/2 in.

Various strategies are always at play in a drawing's mood and impact. Thus any close readings should look carefully at all the artist's methods, particularly the characteristics of the image and the mood created by the addition of color. Among the most effective reminders of this range are *The Word Unspoken on School Street* and *Poleaxed in Sagaponack*, dominated by piercingly direct, assertive sharp-edged forms and *New Year Roses*, with its pile-up of rounded, lyrical units.

An edginess associated with experiment runs through this entire drawing collection. Everything starts with the charcoal mark, although Leiber has been very productively exploring expansions with color, primarily using oil-sticks and colored pencils. Experimentation is fueled by the artist's background in developing expressive qualities of black when he was concentrating on engraving and etching, and also by his long involvement with vivid, high-impact paintings.

Seeking an edginess and taking risks is part of the art process. Leiber is considering more creative tests for his drawings by extending their potential for multi-sensory experiences via a totally uninterrupted wall installation of unframed works. This builds on the intensity already present in the animated gestures and provides a situation for discovery. “This installation vision is a liberating thing,” Leiber explains. “Everything together is a creative act, without confinement to anything.”

Leiber regards this group as his most important collection of drawings, and the new exhibition concept is offered as both a celebration of the vigorous work and a celebration of a long and full career.



Poleaxed in Sagaponack, 2009
Charcoal & oil stick on paper
26 in. x 20 in.

¹ Titles derive from Leiber’s personal responses to qualities developing spontaneously in the work.

² A Gerson Leiber retrospective, at the Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY, in 2003, included oil paintings, engravings, etchings, lithographs and chalk drawings.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the author’s interviews with Gerson Leiber on March 26 and April 23, 2011.

⁴ Jeffrey Sussman, *No Mere Bagatelles*, New York, 2009, pp. 70-71, is the source for supplementary biographical details.

⁵ Hayter’s print workshop, Atelier 17, was founded in Paris but relocated to New York during World War II.

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 Charcoal & colored pencil on paper
 22 1/2 in. x 30 in.

Back Cover Image: *One Hundred Ways to Circumvent Death*, 2010
 Charcoal on paper
 15 1/4 in. x 22 3/8 in.

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