Editors' Picks: 11 Things Not to Miss in New York's Art World This Week
Here's what should be on your agenda.
Sarah Cascone, September 17, 2018

Thursday, September 20–Saturday, November 3

5. "Abby Leigh: Sledgehammer Paintings" at Johannes Vogt Gallery
Johannes Vogt leaves the Lower East Side, debuting his new Upper East Side space with the layered oil and wax paintings of Abby Leigh, who hasn't had a solo show in New York in 10 years. She works on aluminum dibond surface that has been scraped, sanded, pierced, and sledgehammered.
Location: Johannes Vogt Gallery, 958 Madison Avenue
Price: Free
Time: Opening reception, 6 p.m.–8 p.m.; Tuesday–Saturday, 11 a.m.–6 p.m.

September 19, 2018

The first shot of Fellini's Satyricon (1969) is a closeup textured surface. The camera pulls back to reveal a web of scratches, crude drawings and the shadow of a man. A passionate voiceover begins: "Listen, the earth could not bury me. The sea could not smother me, rage and storm though she might…" which continues with images of the protagonist, Encolpio, framed by the carvings. The set was made by artist Antonio Scordia, who said, "When Fellini asked me to paint the wall, I painted it as a place where every Roman had left a sign of his passage."

This scene came to mind while looking at Abby Leigh's new paintings—works like Sea Life, Nervous Condition, and Competitive Skies, all from this year. Leigh's process begins by beating Dibond aluminum panels with a sledgehammer, covering them with dents and dings. From there she layers oil paint, pigment and wax in a range of near monochromes—pinks, blues, and blacks. Leigh then turns her attention to nascent shapes on the battered surface—scratching lines out of the undulating plane, following its topography, in a technique that harkens to automatism. Sometimes she paints over and into these forms. Other colors are revealed as she cuts into the glittering metal, which is left exposed. It all adds up. The resulting paintings have an all-over composition, like bacteria floating in swamp water, or an elegantly graffitied wall. They beg for free association.

On that note, Freud's little essay on "The Mystic Writing Pad" from 1925 also comes to mind. In it he describes a toy made of a slab of dark wax covered by two sheets—one of translucent wax paper and the other of clear celluloid. The celluloid protects the wax paper when pressed with a stylus, which leaves mark at the point of contact with the dark layer below that can be erased by lifting the sheets. He sees this as a structural metaphor for consciousness because the continual new impressions are also secretly stored in the layer of wax below, "legible in suitable lights," he writes. "Thus the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad." Leigh's new paintings have something of that quality—an accretion of actions that is only ever partly accessible, while remaining palpably present. They are arenas for thinking without thoughts.'

958 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021
www.johannesvogt.nyc

May 6th, 2018

ABBY LEIGH *Pause*
by Phong Bui

315 GALLERY | APRIL 1 – APRIL 25, 2015

Who's afraid of endless squares that sing independently,
Black chromatics that blaze high above the floor?
Each member of the tribe longs to separate himself,
Herself as soon as possible.
Distinctions from yesterday are barely recognizable today.
Masses move across the planes to their outer edges,
Defy the various shades of the night landscapes that
She saw a year ago.
Sometimes they conceive a crucifix that imparts
Deep mournful gestation.
At other times, transparency conquers opacity for
Spatial clarity. Slipping, sliding, migrating, puncturing
Is all suffused with utter calm
Before the storm on a far away ocean.
Here I see vertical form stretch beyond the sky and earth.
There moonlight hovers over a specific field, black and abraded.
Gestures articulate what occupied between
Confident flatness and occasional atmospheric latitude.
Emphatic density at times pressures innumerable
Justifications as to why things resist appearing as they do.
Squeezing, dragging, skating, scratching, buffing,
Scrapping if necessary—whatever means
To start again with a clean slate
Unassuming predisposition.
Onward. Onward.
The preference is simple: liberation of the mind will
Dictate the habits of the body;
The gravity of nostalgia alone discourages us
From embarking on a new journey.
Onward. Onward.
Why fear the asymmetry of darkness?
She can navigate it with her eyes closed
Through the touching of hands
She has finally found a space she calls home.
Onward. Onward.

Abby Leigh, "ML 07" (2014). Peach pit soot, glue and graphite on paper, 10.5 × 10.5 ˝. Courtesy of 315 Gallery and the artist.

April 2014

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www.johannesvogt.nyc

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

October 5th, 2009

INCONVERSATION

Abby Leigh WITH THOMAS MICCHELLI

On the occasion of the painter's new exhibition, on view at Betty Cuningham Gallery from October 15th to November 14th, 2009, Managing Art Editor Thomas Micchelli paid a visit to Abby Leigh's New York studio to talk about her life and recent work.

Thomas Micchelli (Rail): So, how long were you legally blind?

Abby Leigh: Actually, I didn't know I was legally blind, which was quite fortuitous. My eyes were healthy, but I was profoundly myopic, to the point where I was classified legally blind until I had my Lasik surgery eight years ago. I think that my spatial orientation was formed early on when I was making close-ups of fruits and vegetables in my early watercolors—I had the orientation of a profoundly myopic person. I used to say that I worked with fruits and vegetables because the models didn't talk, but it was that I was immersed in looking at their skins, textures, the way they decayed, what the source of their decay was, and the bruising on them. It was very interesting to me.

Rail: So you would stand inches away from your subject?

Leigh: Yes. It took me a long time to do these watercolors so, by the time I finished a painting of a bunch of radishes, I would have cycled through many bunches—the radish greens would wilt within a few hours, so that they had to be replaced constantly. This made me less slavish to the actual models, and I began to understand how radish greens react to placement, how they fall—the Platonic sense of radish greens. Looking back at those paintings, I see that I'd found a very simple solution to my problem, because I could see the vegetable models before me in a way that I wouldn't have been able to see, say, a landscape. And having painted with watercolors affects my work still—to this day I'm interested in transparency and in the application of colors in terms of layers. Not only transparency that is physical, but philosophical transparency.

Rail: At your previous show at Betty Cuningham, which was titled The Eye is the First Circle, you joked that you had wanted to call it Landscapes for the Profoundly Myopic.

Leigh: Yes, that is what it sort of was.

Rail: The surgery, that must have completely altered your imagination.

Leigh: Oh, it was completely miraculous. Nonetheless I still see things as somewhat flat, which I don't mind, because it has given me a natural appreciation for what we would think of as a more Eastern portrayal of distance.

Rail: I read about a scientist who noticed that with certain artists like Rembrandt or De Kooning, one eye is sort of looking in one direction and the other eye is looking in another direction, and neurologically that would create a more flattened perspective, which aided their composition of the two-dimensional plane.

Leigh: There are similar theories about El Greco's vision, and that of various other artists.

Rail: But I often think that myopic people, like you and me, wouldn't have had the ability to be artists at all back in the 1400s, because they couldn't see. Were you doing watercolors of vegetables and fruit up until you had the surgery?

Leigh: Oh no. I had three shows during the 80s, but I put my work aside for some time—I really had no idea what I was doing as an artist. I never went to formal graduate school in art, which was both good and bad. It was good because it made me find my own way and not just follow in the teachings of the time, but it was bad because I really didn't have a network of colleagues. I eventually found a friend and mentor, Louis Cane, a painter/sculptor and a member of the group Supports/Surfaces, who showed me how to set up a studio, and what it meant to work every day. He gave me the courage that I had lacked. I set aside still-life and did a watercolor series of my children underwater in the pool.

Rail: From photographs or from your imagination?

Leigh: From photographs that I took underwater, so they were disembodied creatures that could have been bobbing eggplants. After the pool series, I had the Lasik done, which revealed another problem—I realized that I knew what direction my work was going, but didn't understand some of the logistics of getting there.

Rail: So the subject was fairly self-evident to you at that time—is this when you started to make paper?

Leigh: No. What astounded me when I discovered Dieu Donné Papermill was that it was the only place in the world where artists can actually make paper to suit their needs. The first project that I did there was really a translation of a watercolor and in retrospect it was much too literal; it didn't take advantage of the uniqueness of the medium. Then I gradually began working with pulp painting and definitions that were watermarked within the paper, and that became very engaging for me. I was fascinated by abaca, which is a plant whose pulp can be made into a transparent, skin-like paper, and I began to insert sliced reindeer horn that I had bought a few years before in Chinatown without knowing why.

Rail: Going from painting watercolors of vegetables to embedding actual objects in the paper was a radical break—did you think of it that way at the time?

Leigh: Absolutely. I saw that paper could be twisted in endless ways to present a multitude of possibilities. And the idea of combining language with paper appealed to me. I loved the unpredictability of the natural processes involved in papermaking. It seemed like a logical extension of dealing with growth variation within nature, like the differences between one radish and another.

Rail: When did you develop your attraction to circular forms?

Leigh: I think it evolved gradually. First by inserting the reindeer horn slices, which were irregular circular forms. From there I began to make a series of works using Oxford English Dictionary definitions: "walnut" was the first time, and "oyster" came later.

Rail: So you take a typographical element, the text from the dictionary, which traces the evolution of a word through various linguistic influences, and you superimpose an image of that particular thing over it. Are you making a metaphysical or philosophical comment on the constancy of the image and the shifting of language?

Leigh: Yes, definitely, but it also all goes back to vision. If you can't see something, you don't know exactly where it starts, where it ends, or where it is in space, so you feel a need to try to pin things down. And I think that it was more of a comment on that. The OED always struck me as very funny. Ultimately, what emerges from reading definitions is not a cohesive image of, say, an oyster, but a fragmented kaleidoscope of meaning. An oyster, for example, can be a bivalve, a morsel of dark meat of fowl, a pressure mine from WWII and a laconic person. And the quotes are great too. My favorites: "she gave him oyster kisses" and "a certain oysterishness of eye and flabbiness of complexion."

Rail: In your current works on paper you've got these ethereal textures made out of various shades of smoke. They're in a concentric form, like your previous sumi ink drawings, but the level of abstraction is more pronounced.

Leigh: They evolved out of the ink drawings, which I've been working on for maybe two or three years. One of the things that really interested me about the smoke was the challenge to capture its natural movement, to affix that which disappears before your eyes onto paper.

Rail: How did those sumi ink drawings translate into the profusion of circles in your series of paintings ["The Eye is the First Circle"]?

Leigh: I would say it comes back to being myopic. The canvas was so big that the circles began to increase into a multitude, and my work came out in a way other than I intended. But then I followed that road, because when something unexpected comes up in your work, you can either fight it, or you can see where it will lead.
Rail: And that work was also based on the body, in that you would paint an underlying structure with a broad stroke of your arm but when it came to the overlay, you had to zoom in and hold the brush between your fingers to create the tiny, tiny circles that would just keep growing across the canvas.

Leigh: Yes, enjoy the process of making both the larger gesture and the minute marks.

Rail: I understand that your mother was a mathematician.

Leigh: Yes, and one of my aunts is a mathematician who is working on the Genome Project at Columbia University. And another aunt was a botanist.

Rail: So there's this scientific aspect to your background. Do you feel that it informs your investigation of the basics of your art?

Leigh: In some ways, yes, because I'm analytical as a person, and I tend to think more empirically, so the work is an outcome of an empirical nature.

Rail: In your smoke drawings there are two motifs—the concentric circles and the vertical bands, which recall Barnett Newman's zips, about which there's been quite a lot of controversy over their spiritual dimension. I think Newman denied it, but some historians have tried to impose their own views on the subject. The fact that you're affixing smoke, which has this implicit spiritual aspect to it—candle smoke rising to the heavens, disappearing, something between the material and the immaterial—and that you are creating these highly geometric patterns. I'm just curious whether the impetus for this imagery came out of some kind of metaphysical meditation, or was it an attraction to the material and what could be done with it visually?

Leigh: I feel that my drawings are created intuitively, with one insight leading to another. I think Newman was being honest when he denied a "spiritual" dimension in his work—and I must honestly say that I am attracted to smoke's physical beauty, its twisting forms and dense color, rather than anything spiritual.

Rail: In a sense, it's sort of a hands-free charcoal drawing.
Leigh: Definitely. But I like the sensual element of materials—in these new paintings I'm working with a wax medium I make myself. It makes the paint really viscous and gooey.

Rail: Do you mix the pigment directly into the wax?

Leigh: No, I first take the pigment and add a little oil to it and then grind them until they reach the consistency I want. Then I add the wax medium to the mix in order to achieve a certain texture.

Rail: But the wax does not have to be heated at all?

Leigh: I heat the wax when I begin a batch of medium but then I don't have to reheat it again. After the wax is blended with stand oil and a little turpentine, it never hardens.

Rail: Your surfaces look as if you've rubbed the pigment into them with your hand or a rag.

Leigh: I work mostly with a brush, applying many thin layers, which takes away the visibility of the brush strokes. You're right, the surface looks as though it's pushed into the canvas, in effect. As a whole these paintings are about the state where you're not quite asleep and not quite awake, when you're in the intermediate state between the two. Cézanne, in a conversation with Joachim Gasquet, said, "When you look at a painting, shut your eyes, wait, think of nothing. Now open them. One sees nothing but a great colored undulation. What then? An irradiation and glory of color. This is what a picture should give us an—abyss in which the eye is lost, a secret germination, a colored state of grace. Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colors, be steeped in the light of them."

Rail: Your paintings appear monochromatic, especially from a distance, but you can see vibrant colors coming through as you get closer. One might seem entirely green, but there are at least five different tones of green beneath, from yellow to blue.

Leigh: In some cases, I used oxidized copper, then worked over it with a slate gray, then green gray, while other paintings have at least five different tones of green beneath a yellow. Painting isn't really a verbal process, especially abstract painting, and so sometimes what you're doing is only apparent after the fact. Most of the time you start with an idea in your mind, but your idea is elusive, and immediately slips away once you make a mark on the canvas. Make another mark, and your original vision slips still farther away. This goes on, with one image slipping and another ascending, until you've reached a state of total and complete failure, and then the canvas is finished. And you begin the next one. [Laughs.]

Rail: Taking your evolution from there: each show that you've had has been very different, one from the other, but there are consistent concerns throughout: transparency, the collision of natural forces.

Leigh: I think that there are lots of things that painters go back and revisit. But if I feel that I have gone as far as I can go, and that my work has become repetitive, then I begin to search for something else. You can't impose a new direction on your work, but you can remain aware and open to the new problems that choose you.

Rail: You have certain distinct ideas that you've been concerned with, but there is an historical growth within you over time. I was thinking of someone like Bill Jensen—to see where he started, with those very exacting, not hard-edge, but gnarly, organic abstractions, into his recent, wild, poured gestures. Brice Marden is another excellent example. That both artists are completely involved with the materiality of their work, and the work leads them into unforeseen territory.

Leigh: The same is true for me. Certain materials fire you up. I remember walking into Dieu Donné, seeing the wetness of making paper, and finding it profoundly appealing. I find a similar thrill in the sensuality of mixing oil with pigment and watching them become paint.

Rail: You have these incredible astronomical prints and natural history specimens in the back of your studio. They seem to provide inspiration for your forms as well as connect you to the natural world in a way that you may not be able to in the city.

Leigh: Well, you're right. I began to collect these prints and specimens before I knew why I was doing it. One of my prize collections are porcelain eyeballs I bought without any thought of them being useful. At one point, maybe about ten years ago, I thought maybe I'd do an installation with them, but in fact they're too beautiful to alter and all I wanted to do was look at them.

Rail: They also trace the common history we have with the animal kingdom—the bats' wings are analogs to our hands and fingers, the skins of stingrays seem to reflect the circles that you were painting for your last show, and at that time we talked about how much they looked like bubbles on the surface of the water. So there was this analogy between the environment it swam in and the skin of the fish itself.

Leigh: Well, I think you internalize the objects you live with without knowing it, and then years later you begin to see those connections, those visual influences.

Rail: You mentioned that you didn't make the association between the Descartes astronomical map and the circular smoke drawings.

Leigh: No, I didn't make the association until a friend pointed it out recently.

Rail: How do you manipulate the smoke used in your work?

Leigh: Various artists have worked with smoke before, including Tony Oursler, who used smoke as a surface or projection screen, and John Cage, who made smoked imprints on the paper before making the print itself. I wanted to do something that both analyzed the smoke's shape and yet tamed it, controlling what seems random to the human eye, but is actually subject to physical forces such as the density of the air, etc. etc.

Rail: From a distance they look like very beautiful ink wash drawings, but to know that they are smoke adds a contemplative element.

Leigh: Yes, I'm glad you used the word "contemplative".

Rail: What did you study in college, since you didn't receive any formal training in art?

Leigh: Theater. I started out as an actress. I did the national company of Butterflies Are Free and some television commercials. I went to study at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, but then discovered that I really didn't want to be an actress.

Rail: What was it that turned you off?

Leigh: I remember auditioning for the role of Miranda, in The Tempest for Stratford, Conn., which would have suited my abilities very well at the time. I was called back twice but then they said that I was too tall and they wanted someone smaller than the actor playing Prospero. I thought that I could either let my life go by like that, or I could begin to determine my own projects.

Rail: So what did you do?

Leigh: Between auditions, I began to draw at the Arts Students League, which was right across the street from Carnegie Hall, where I was taking dance classes. After I learned to draw, I took painting classes with Will Barnet, and one day he said, "You should be a painter." And I said, "Please, I don't want to be a laughing stock at 40. Don't tell me that if you're just being nice." And he said, "No, no, I think you should be a painter." So I thought, well okay, I'll give it a shot.

Rail: Do you think your theatrical experience informed your painting or did you take a step away from theater and leave it all behind?

Leigh: Well, my husband is a composer and I love the theatre but I don't think that it had anything to do with it. We are a theatre-oriented family. My daughter is a director and playwright and my son is a composer. I won a Scholastic Art Award in high school but I never took any art classes in college. My family would have been delighted if I became an art historian, but I never considered it. However, as a child, I looked at a lot of art. My parents often took my two siblings and me to museums and I remember the thrill of seeing paintings.

Rail: Are there artists with whom you've felt a particular affinity over time?

Leigh: There are artists like Carpaccio, Francis Bacon, whose works I always love, and others come and go, artists who speak to you at different times. Of course lately I've been thinking of Rothko, Gorky, and Turner. I particularly like what Turner said about trying to paint the sun as if the inside of his eyeballs had been burned.

Rail: How about contemporary artists?

Leigh: I love Rachel Howard's work with its combination of seductive beauty and menace. William Kentridge's imagination blows me away, and I love his fusion of poetry and politics. Maurizio Cattelan's dark humor and morbidity appeals to my sensibilities and I admire Maya Lin's elegant, wistful constructions.

Rail: I don't think we've ever discussed how you felt when you finally could see. Did you feel as if you could never paint the same way again?

Leigh: No, the irony is that it didn't really change the way that I painted because my orientation was set. It was both tremendously liberating and disconcerting in that I didn't know how much my glasses had protected me, and even though I wore contacts, there was always a feeling that when I wore them that I was not the person that I appeared to be.

Rail: Yeah, you can hide behind them.

Leigh: Right, hide behind your glasses. But that's more truthful than hiding the glasses in your content.

315 Gallery
April 9, 2015
Interview between Abby Leigh and Carter Foster

Abby Leigh- AL
Carter Foster- CF

CF: I wanted to start with a thought that was expressed to me once by the artist Terry Winters in which he described drawing as “a haptic environment”. In other words, the environment of touch, which seems to me to relate to materiality, and I know that you're someone who uses material - sometimes in an exploratory way - but also in a way that you derive content out of your work. Why don't you talk about, maybe your approach to materials in general and then we could talk about specifically how it relates to this series.

AL: Well, I always think that the choice of material determines the direction the work will go in and that there are certain materials which are very compelling. The reason that I work with pigments when there are so many astounding paints available in tubes is that the pigments give you a nuance and range that you couldn't possibly get. You can make a much more transparent surface by using pigments than you ever could from squeezing out a tube of paint, like toothpaste. These particular drawings are made with peach-black soot, and the reason that I used peach-black is because of all the blacks it is the most absent and the softest, and it seemed to me to be an appropriate metaphor for the subject. Some people view paints as what you use to make what you are going to make. But to me, the individual characteristics can open up a world of possibilities.There can be grape-black from grape seeds, there can be cherry-black from cherry pits, there is iron-oxide blacks.

CF: I have never heard of peche de noir. How did you discover this wonderful sounding material? It's so interesting.

AL: I discovered it in a tiny family-owned art supply store in Montmartre Paris. I think that the store had been around since the Impressionists. I saw peach-black that, the peche de noir, and I thought what a great name for a racehorse. Since I wasn't buying racehorses, I bought the tube and I loved it. I have never seen another tube of peach-black. It's simply not on the radar. I thought when I started this series, let's see if I can find peach black.

CF: So you could say it's a type of charcoal because it's a type of burned material in a sense?

AL: Charcoal is generally refers to ash from wood. This is soot from peach pits. You can make black out of many sources, like cuttlefish bladder. These things are incredibly interesting to me. Why is cuttlefish bladder different than something else and how can I not find out?

CF: Starting with that material, did that lead to the beginning of this series in particular?

AL: No. I just had this idea. The drawing of this series, the graphite, is almost like a rubbing. I felt like the process of doing them was almost like doing rubbings where they emerge from the surface and where you have something, and you don't know what you have until you rub it. That process really intrigued me. I took a small bit of paper, that happened to be lying around, and I tried it out.

CF: Which was this scale?

AL: This scale. And then I thought, well this is a good scale. It seemed right. So I kept going with it, and only after I got a few of them did I take a look at the wall and though these are memorial drawings.

CF: The scale gives them an intimacy that your work doesn't always have, and your paintings can often be large and expansive, even if they are small they can have a monumentality. Of course, these were produced in certain circumstances after your husband’s death. You said that you realized they were memorial once you started working on them. I was very struck the first time that I saw them by the fact that they were a shift down in scale, and there was an intimacy. So why don't you talk about them as a kind of meditation?

AL: Well, I think that it was the poet Marianne Moore who said, “The best cure for loneliness is solitude,” and as I was working with this, they started out as memorial drawings, but they quickly- I don't mean that Mitch isn't in them- as much as my work is about transparency, Mitch is a layer that's there. But they became less about tearing my hair out and more about finding my center, and more about finding balance, and realizing what I had learned from Mitch, had taken from him, that is now in me and a friend said to me that she found this show an optimistic. I loved that comment because I am an optimist, and what I feel is gratitude. It is gratitude, which is cumulative and these drawings are constructed in an cumulative way.

CF: Black as a color is obviously associated with mourning and death, but it's also the color of drawing and it's the color of typography, and it has many, many associations. It's also, it's not technically a color I suppose, but one can think of it as a color and it allows an infinite range. Of course it goes into greys and whites in tonal gradation. It allows for a subtle range of form and shifting. You are a painter too, you are very aware of color, but your drawings often do something very different, I find.

AL: They do. I love drawing because it is spontaneous. It is the artist's first reaction and being who I am, I tend to rework the first reaction, which for me, is gratifying.
CF: Do you make drawings for your paintings?

AL: No. I make a scrappy sketch usually and that become the genesis of a painting.
CF: Your drawing are always a finished work.

AL: They are always independent projects. And again, I think that's because I respond to mediums. The idea of translating a drawing into a painting is a very tedious one.

CF: Talk about selecting. I imagine the materials you use, correct me if I'm wrong, that it is some part selecting and some part discovery.

AL: Totally, totally. And there's usually a reason that makes me select a given material. For example, I was intrigued to see if I could control the overall shape that the smoke would take smoke in the smoke drawings without without interfering with the natural pathway of the smoke.

CF: That's interesting because Abby has these amazing smoke drawings. That is a very experimental material to use, though not totally unprecedented.

AL: It seemed interesting to me to try to make smoke drawings is if I could find some way to control the smoke. And not to bully the smoke, but to capture diagnostically the natural movements of the smoke on paper. How can I freeze, how can I highlight what has already happened so that instead of being transient, instead of evaporating, it's there and it remains stable. That's an interesting idea to me.

CF: Like the smoke drawings, these drawings have both chance and extreme control...

AL: Totally. I started to work, the first work that I ever did was watercolor and I felt that the choice of watercolor, the first beyond crayons and coloring books and whatever, but watercolor is a very good medium for me because it's transparent and because it's sort of like walking on a tightrope to do. Whatever you do, you're stuck with but it's also cumulative. The way I did it I could go back, and rework, and heighten. I think the idea of transparency and layering has been in all my paintings and I think it's related to the way I see things. I was very, very myopic. I don't have depth perception, so whatever I work on, I see in layers rather than perspective. When I see something, I kind of have to infer where it is in space because it's not evident. I can only guess exactly where it might be.

CF: I get the sense, especially looking at this body of work, that there is a sense of looking very, very closely at a very small area.

AL: Absolutely.

CF: That you are trying to come to terms with that. What about working serially? Did these become a series after you started them? I think of you as working serially all the time.

AL: I do work serially. Because if I find something that interests me, then I keep on going with it. Then when I feel as if I have come to the end of the natural evolution, I don't want to repeat.

CF: I imagine as though there is a learning curve to some degree. That when you figure it out, you master it and then keeping going with it.

AL: Usually I am on the way to figuring it out. Then I make it more complicated. Then I try to reduce it to the simpler essence again.

CF: How did you make these more complicated when you were working on them?

AL: By reworking them. First of all, one of the things that is terrific about doing these drawing is that sometimes they get messed up and when they get messed up, just like with watercolor, you have to figure out how you are going to deal with the unexpected. Sometimes you don't do it well, but other times, because something happened accidentally, you incorporate it and discover something that you wouldn't have.

CF: Do you throw a lot out in general?

AL: Not a lot from these, but from the smoke, yes. These drawings have a looser process. Sometimes, I put up them on a wall, and they are not as satisfying to me. Others grow on me when when I look at them and they make me want to go further with the idea.

CF: I said to you that when I first saw these, I think that there is a musical quality. In the history of drawing, one can pick out a history of drawings as scores, almost. In some cases, like John Cage who are literally using them as scores, and some cases choreographers who find out it's a good way to work out ideas, to record something on paper that isn't working spatially, but sometimes it's more of a progression, a syncopation. A theme is picked up, it's repeated somewhere else. You lived in a musical household.

AL: I lived in a musical household and I benefited from osmosis!

CF: There's musical talent in your household.

AL: I would say that I grew up in a visual home. The musicality I soaked up from my husband and my kids.

CF: Were you aware of it at all while you were working on these? Did you feel like they had any musical aspect to them?

AL: You were the first one to say, “Oh, these are musical”. You said they were musical and I thought wow that's a good comment and I know exactly what you mean, but there's a conversation between them. A syncopation is a very good analogy.

CF: You said that you like to close things out. Have you finished with this?

AL: Nope, still going. My studio has a dozen more. I'm not at that stage yet. I mean, you don't know until you are, but right now I'm still finding it productive and gratifying. I thought, Mitch died at 86, maybe I'll do 86, but now I'm thinking maybe not. You can't just stretch it...

CF: You'll know when you're done.

AL: Yes, I'll know when I'm done.

CF: There's something of weights and balances in these works and there's something about the interaction of the support and the medium. Maybe you could talk about how that helped create the form.

AL: The form and the medium.

CF: The surface. I'm thinking about the interaction of the surface and the medium.

AL: I think that when I built it up, some of the surfaces are pre-smoothed.

CF: Is the paper fairly smooth?

AL: The paper is fairly smooth. I use to love harsh paper. The one that I loved for watercolor is bumpy, it's rough, and I love that. Nonetheless, when you finish with harsh paper, the paper becomes a little grey when it's photographed and looked at because the multitude of shadows all the bumps create.

CF: That's interesting, yeah.

AL: So I wanted a hard surface, I wanted a clean surface and I wanted a reactive, a sharp contrast between what wasn't the drawing and what was. This paper is Italian: it's Fabriano extra white, heavy. The reason that I looked for the whitest paper that I could...

CF: Do you size it? Do you do anything to prepare it?

AL: I didn't size it. The peach pit soot is mixed with rabbit skin glue. That was the basis for the blacks.

CF: What about the graphite? That's...

AL: The graphite is in a bar, more like a stick, and the graphite is really, really soft. The thing about graphite is, at least the way that I use it, is that the harder you press, the more the graphite floats above the surface and I really like that. I mean most things if you press hard it goes deeper in, but with this you press hard and it separates.

CF: Interesting.

AL: I don't know why that is. The drawing series that I did before, that I showed in San Francisco, that was also the basis. Realizing that the graphite stays on a different plane, at that point I used charcoal, that it's never on the same plane. That's what made me think it might be an interesting thing to explore.

CF: Graphite really is unlike any other medium. Artists like Ingres who were able to use it in this incredibly delicate way. It must be the fact that you can get this detail down to the eyelashes. You know working on incredibly, almost miniature-like way. No way you could do that with charcoal. There's also almost like a liquid quality to it. It gets a sheen. You can tell graphite right away if you are trying to identify medium; it picks up light and shines it back at you.

AL: Ang probably used a very hard pencil. Like 9H, the hardest possible pencil to use. Let me turn the tables, Carter. Let me ask you about white paper. What made you intrigued?

CF: Definitely the intimacy and directness. There's an absolute- if you study art history, you can pick it up. If you are a curator at a museum you can pick it up and look at it. The relationship you have to a drawing, if you are studying the history of drawing, is bodily. It's usually flat on the table and there's some different connection. I think it is the nascence of an idea, often. You experience it as a viewer that studies the medium. That's why I mention scale. These are drawing scale and there's a concentration in them. It's not possible in painting in the same way. Even in a small scale painting. I have to ask: historically, Barnett Newman comes to mind, 'Stations of the Cross', those are paintings with a strong drawing quality, the weights and balances, there are some formal similarities. Were you thinking about that at all?

AL: I wasn't. Yes they do, I like that. Here's a bit of trivia: Barnett Newman was buried next to Mitch's parents in the cemetery.The adjacent tombstones. I went out with Mitch to the cemetery and exclaimed “Barnett Newman is here.” He said, “What?” I said, “Look! You never told me Barnett Newman was right next to your parents. Maybe in a very subliminal way. Okay, so, I think that black is something that I've wanted to get around to. There is something very compelling about black. I think I was attracted to the idea of rubbing and rubbing and rubbing. It's a gratifying process especially when you affect the result. When you go over paint, all you get is a more three dimensional paint. With graphite the layers are so miniscule that you have the opportunity to build it up in a very different way.

CF: It continues to float and doesn't get denser.

AL: Yes, exactly.

CF: So these are a combination of peche de noir and graphite.

AL: And the glue.

CF: And the glue. So you're not mixing them up in some pot.

AL: The glue and the pigment get mixed, however the peach-black in the pigment tends to in a lot of them, sometimes I work it. In a couple of these drawings the peach-black and glue was wet, and I worked it into the wet. Most of them had surfaces that were dry and then I worked the graphite. I wanted to see what happened. For some I used graphite in a powder form. Generally the layers were isolated from one another, certainly the black layer. Then it was never mixed.

CF: Did your experiences working here with paper help you understand paper as a medium?

AL: Very much so. This place, for anybody who doesn't know it, is an absolutely extraordinary place. It is the only place on Earth that artists can actually collaborate with paper makers and they can do whatever they want. The fact that a lot of the artists that work here have exhibited within the last five years in New York museums. When I came in the first time and saw rows of galoshes-there are rows of galoshes because it is a very wet process. As you begin to make paper you find the size that best suits your foot and you clomp around the studio in these galoshes all day. There was just something very different about it from printmaking. There's almost something archaic, simple. You drain the paper. You watch the water drip. You're working in a mold. Now I put things in the drying machine. What she meant by the drying machine was a stack of absorbent rags, followed by plywood planks. This was the machine. Just as I like archaic medicine and things before they figured it all out, there was something very seductive about this. It also opened my mind to the possibilities of what could be done with paper. This I did in my studio. I've done a number of projects and it opened my mind up to what paper could do and what it was.

CF: I think people that aren't specialists in drawing or the history of art just don't realize that the history of drawing and of printmaking too is the history of paper. It's like black. The texture is incredibly important. Seurat found a way to draw without line because he found a way to use the texture of the paper, and that goes for almost every artist that works with drawing in a subtle way. It is really fascinating. You mention the book. We have this beautiful book in the Whitney that I love, that is also a serialized idea.

AL: In the book, it was actually a lithograph of powder, and in many of the drawings I dispelled it as a repellent and then tilted the paper around. The idea of the repellent- first of all you put it in something to spread the liquid and then put a repellant into it. There's a certain observation of the natural process...

CF: It's scientific almost.

AL: Yeah, but more like chemistry of room explosions. The idea of calculations on the computer has less allure then the experiments.

CF: Some wouldn't want to get bogged down, but that is what you thrive on. I find that interesting. There's an instinctive something going on.

AL: The physical labor is gratifying to me than move than a process where you're many steps removed.

CF: You don't always work abstractly. Sometimes you work with text and create an image or form that goes with that text. You have done image based things here, a series of paintings. Do you consider them separate bodies of work? How do they influence one another?

AL: When I started to work, because I was so nearsighted, the idea of painting something abstract, there are too many variables here. I have to get some variables out. It seemed logical to concentrate on something very small but I could see. That was fruits, vegetables. Then I realized this concentration on fruits and vegetables put me into a tradition that I didn't feel a part of. It put me into a botanical tradition which was not where I wanted to be. I thought to myself, what would happen if I took something very small and I made it very big? Since this was watercolor it was hard to do 40x60 radishes because they had to be painted flat otherwise the

water was going to run. As I got more confident, and as I got to know the materials better, I felt that I could do something more abstract but with a stimulus from life.example the paintings that I'm doing now are a series of subway paintings.

CF: With text.

AL: With text, with text. I did a series of maps with text on them. I like working with text, but I do my best to edit out, the phrases in the text are ambiguous. These paintings do not take a stand. They're not didactic. It's more the irony of language and the randomness of placement that we all have living in the city. You're constantly exposed to random events. Bits of paper on the street. Signs that you see. Bricks that are chipped away on a building. Taxis that have an interesting scratch on them. You are just assaulted.

CF: But the natural world is also quite important. For those of you have been to Abby's studio, she has a wonder counter that has a collection of all kinds of objects, many of which feel 19th century. Talk about the things that you collect and why.

AL: In my collection, nothing is super valuable. I think of it as things that interest me. I have a wonderful collection of eyes that I bought long before I was even working seriously. They were so mesmerizing, made of porcelain and they are hand painted. The first set was from Dublin and they went around the countryside, and anyone who needed an eye, they just gave them their choice. The person would stick in the eye. The beauty of the eyes...

CF: It's interesting for an artist to choose to...

AL: Yeah. When I first started to work, I thought maybe I'd do something with these, and then I looked at them and thought this is it, this is already what it is, you can't do anything to it. That will make it less than what it is.What intrigued me about it is here you have a series of ostensibly identical forms. Every eye is an eye and works within a given set of specifications to be a human eye. The incredible variation between them was very compelling to me. The detail, some of the eyes had veins that had been painted, probably with a single squirrel hair; that's how thin the veins were. So delicate.

CF: Does one body of work usually lead to the next? After these do you have an idea of where you are going to go?

AL: I often have an idea, but it very often doesn't. You have an idea, you start playing with the idea. Sometimes it leads to the next. For example the cityscapes that I was doing naturally lead to the subway series with text. That was a pretty seamless transition. When I finished the series that's environmental, it was called “Undertow”, I thought that's not a direction that I'll go in. It was very interesting. What I learned from it is that it wasn't a direction that I'd go again, but it enabled me to go back to my more abstract painting with a more concrete idea of what it was that I was going to do with it. I approached the abstract work differently after that.

CF: In the history of art, not necessarily in abstract painting, do you have heros?

AL: Everybody has heroes. In abstract painting?

CF: In general.

AL: Piero della Francesca. That's the first one that comes to mind. Bacon. I don't emulate his paintings but I am riveted by them and in awe of them. I really like medieval painting on panels.

CF: I think that awe is a good way of inspiring. It's okay to be in awe.

AL: How about you? Let me turn the tables.

CF: I always say Michelangelo. I don't know why, he's just my favorite. I had experiences with his work when I was young and still like forming my ideas about art history- I really was in awe. My most favorite work of art is this piece in Milan, this piece that is unfinished in Costello's Rondanini Pieta. It's an incredible piece. That may be my favorite work of art ever and his drawings are unbelievable.

AL: I want to thank Carter, I know Sue did it before, but to come when the Whitney is on the cusp, here is really incredible. I also want to thank Sue and Jack for making this available to me and all of you for coming. Thank you.

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