

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

November 16, 2024

PRESENTED BY VISUAL ART SOURCE, THE DEMOCRACY CHAIN and FABRIK

William Leavitt, “Gothic Electronica”

by Jody Zellen

Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, California, Continuing through December 3, 2024

Sebastian Gladstone, Los Angeles, California, Continuing through December 1, 2024



William Leavitt, installation views and images, 2024

Tracing the trajectory of William Leavitt’s work from his early photographs and installations to later paintings, the theatrics of his sensibility emerge. Beginning with the multi-panel photographs at Marc Selwyn, “The Consequences Can Be Real” (1975) and “Are You Sure She Said That? Yes, Absolutely” (1977), these pieces contain disjointed fragments, filled with props and actors, that imply but never fully disclose a narrative. The first three in a sequence of five color photographs that make up “The Consequences Can Be Real” depict silhouetted trees against the night sky that block the view of a house, a close-up portrait of a young woman in profile shot against a black background, and an antique garden sundial, also photographed at night.

From there the sequence transitions to a fragment of an orange-red stage curtain and ends with a photograph of a painting that depicts a violent bolt of lightning glowing against the night sky. This work directly relates to “Gothic Curtain” (1970), a site-specific installation with curtains and the sounds of a thunderstorm that is installed in the slightly darkened back room.

Leavitt’s recent paintings most definitely speak to the digital age. Many depict science-fiction-type robots, though not generated AI. He states, “Recently I’ve done portraits of cyborgs who could operate in a more theatrical realm, perhaps as characters in a sci-fi movie. My work is about things of the world as props for narratives, sequences of objects, places, persons, their combinations evoking random choice, or a mood, a kind of blank absurdity, or the suggestion of a story.” “Circuit Torso 12,” “Circuit Torso 21,” and “Circuit Torso 14” (“all circuits are busy now”), (all 2023) are anonymous silhouettes filled with exacting and detailed paintings of enlarged circuit boards set against blank linen grounds. These mechanical people exude personality, yet remain functionless. In “Male Robot” (2018), Leavitt depicts a gray silhouetted figure encircled by concentric rings of white that encase loose, random scribbles. The figure stands upon rocks in front of stone ruins.

Fragmented walls and ruins also appear in other paintings. “Wall 9” (2012), juxtaposes atoms and sections of a brick wall hovering in space above a dark planet glowing with spots of light. “Roller, Reflection, Fieldstone” (2020) is a painting of an interior and exterior space simultaneously. On the left side of the painting, a winding rollercoaster cascades through a desert landscape as its metal supports segue into wall struts of a stone interior. The interior is divided in two: the upper and lower sections are mirror images of each other. Within the space, Leavitt paints five figures from the shoulders up, as if they were gathered around a table, their lower bodies strangely invisible. The witty and surreal image is an iconic example of Leavitt’s compositing.



William Leavitt, "Roller, Reflection, Fieldstone," 2020, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 81". Courtesy of Marc Selwyn Fine Art.

The installation at Sebastian Gladstone also includes photographs, paintings and a large-scale sculptural work that contains elements found in the two-dimensional pieces. Attached to a circular rig suspended from the ceiling is a classical column, a red curtain, a tree trunk and a stone pillar — all props with myriad meanings and associations. The curtains, walls and natural elements (cacti, trees, grass, etc.) within the images are realized full-size in the installation. Leavitt surrounds his figures with architectural fragments to ground them, yet also to fantasize about the narrative possibilities that connect figures to spaces. Leavitt is a conceptualist who draws from his environs and reinterprets that reality to transform it into a surreal yet strangely welcoming place.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com