ABSORBING SHAPES

JEFF LEONARD

by Danielle M. Walters

The paintings of Jeff Leonard question reality through abstraction. Sometimes appearing almost photographic, his pieces suggest elements of representation, but never go further than a suggestion. What is fascinating about Leonard's work is his unique process of creating. Leonard allows his shapes to unfold by pouring a two-part resin onto a horizontal canvas, and manipulating it with a variety of different techniques he has developed himself. The result is inventive compositions with room for endless possibilities.

Does working with resin make you think differently about the painting process than working with a more traditional medium?

Working with resin I'm not using a brush. I'm pouring it onto a panel and manipulating it with techniques accumulated through a lot of trial and error. The layering of techniques I use will determine the shapes and spaces. They are different than what I could get with a brush. Pouring and spreading material will create shapes and spaces much more quickly than I could with a brush.

How has your process evolved?

As I gain more experience with this material, I grow the variety of techniques to apply and manipulate it. It is constantly evolving. There is a lot of chance and exploring. To be open to new directions when they occur is important. I try layering techniques and ideas in order to find something new and incorporating it into a process of application.

What is it about the resin material that attracts you?

This material has held my interest for a long time because I have found many ways to work with it. It is a synthetic industrial material, but it can create very organic forms and deep space. It flows and seems to have a life of its own that I can guide and work with. I think the reason I was initially drawn to it was the way it moves as it sets. The speed that I can work with it and how its limited working time makes you stay focused are also important. Because it hardens chemically, I can use thick or thin layers and they will be set in a few hours and ready for another process.

Obviously, with this material you don't have complete control over the piece. Do you find this liberating in a way?

That's a big part of it. Pieces come together through a series of somewhat controlled accidents. I have to be open to letting things happen. Each shape has its own life. I don't know what exactly they're going to turn into. There is a chaotic randomness with this material.

Do you ever find this "chaotic randomness" challenging?

Always. In the chaos of the incomplete painting, all possibilities exist. As a piece develops, paths are opened and others closed. Often, midway through, I'm not sure what it is or where it's going. There is an excitement when a few random elements come together and you realize it has all the parts to be a complete painting.

Do you have any sort of design prepared when you start a piece?

I don't have a design or sketches. There are paths of exploration that I am on that kind of guide the way. I do know where I have been, and I look for new directions through the practice of painting. To stay focused in a particular direction of interest, I will set up working parameters that allow me to work within a concept or framework.

You've talked about your paintings in relation to the binaries of order and disorder. Do you feel these concepts are inherent in your work and if so how has this influenced your perspective in art?

I can see an order and disorder in everything. It gets reflected in my work in the pattern or grid, and contrasted with the seemingly chaotic. Abstraction for me is a space where I can work in between order, disorder, reason, and emotion to enter a wormhole to another reality, where the visual elements are tooled to sync with an inner world. Like a poem, a song, a sound, a thought, visual elements represent ideas. A cacophony of visual elements and ideas will slowly give way to new work that tries to push the boundaries and find a new way. To explore your dreams and create beyond your boundaries is what it's all about.