

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

The Visual Artist Who Thinks of Herself as a Dancer or an Aviator

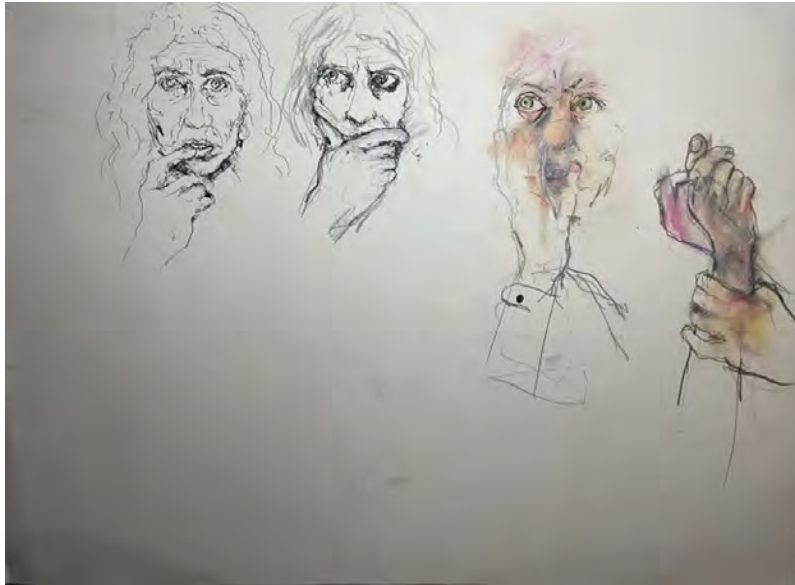
At 93, June Leaf is still fascinated by bodies and machines in motion, and still working every day.

By Gillian Brassil

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Over a career spanning more than seven decades, the 93-year-old artist June Leaf has stubbornly resisted art-world trends and easy categorization. In her paintings, drawings and sculptures, she describes a dreamlike world of bodies and machines in motion: people dragging themselves up staircases, a winged woman whose torso is the frame of an antique sewing machine, figures painted on a fabric scroll that can be turned with a hand-built crank. “I think of myself as a dancer making art,” Leaf said in a recent interview at her home in New York. “Or an aviator making art.” She recalled, as a teenager in Tucson, Ariz., seeing a performance by the mime artist Angna Enters, in which “she danced and painted on the stage. I remember thinking, ‘That’s what I’m going to do.’”

Born in Chicago in 1929, Leaf briefly studied at the city’s Institute of Design (founded as the New Bauhaus by the Hungarian painter László Moholy-Nagy) and came of age in a local postwar scene known as the Monster Roster. She and fellow Chicagoans like Leon Golub and Nancy Spero bucked the dominant abstraction of the day, instead focusing on figurative works with existential and psychological themes. Some of Leaf’s paintings from this time, of brightly colored people reflected in mirrors, evoke a carnival fun house with a sinister edge.



Leaf's "Untitled (Sketch for Self-Portrait)" (circa early 1970s), part of her soon-to-open show at Ortuzar Projects in New York. © June Leaf, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York

In 1958, Leaf received a Fulbright grant to study art in Paris. (There, she painted a portrait of her mother that now hangs in Leaf’s home: “You can see, when I asked if I could paint her, how depressed she got.”) She then moved to New York, where her scope expanded to include theatrical tableaus featuring larger-than-life characters painted on wood and other three-dimensional works. In one, 1965’s “The Vermeer Box,” a mirrored woman sits in a miniature Dutch room, a sort of diorama of domesticity. Later that decade, Leaf met Robert Frank, already a star photographer, in what she described as a coup de foudre: “I saw him, and I said, ‘There he is.’ And that was true.” The two married in 1975.

One day in the early ’70s, Leaf returned from a walk and was greeted with a surprising request from Frank: “I’m sending you to Nova Scotia. You have to find us a place for the summer.” Though Leaf knew nothing about the area, she went alone, in March, to the tiny fishing village of Mabou, and immediately felt at home. “My parents had a tavern in Chicago,” she said, “and growing up, I got to know these Irish people at the bar. When I got to Mabou, the people reminded me of those people. They were Scottish, but it was the same thing. I understood them. We got along just like that.” Frank and Leaf bought a weathered house on a hill and lived in Mabou full time for several years, then spent summers there until Frank’s death in 2019.





Leaf was married to the photographer Robert Frank for over 40 years, until he died, at the age of 94, in 2019. Chase Middleton



Many of Leaf's sculptures feature moving parts, and she once took a class on auto mechanics. Chase Middleton

In Nova Scotia, Leaf started producing hand-held metal sculptures that move at the pull of a trigger: A hand shoots out from a woman's heart. A man climbs stairs. A woman walks. Her drawings, too, revealed a deepening interest in the mechanical, depicting cyborgian heads with interior scaffolding or bodies coursing with highway-like networks. Other pieces explored the act of creation itself — Leaf often sketches or paints her works in progress, sometimes including herself as a pair of hands or a figure kneeling in front of her art.

Whenever Leaf and Frank returned to New York, they stayed in a three-story building just off the Bowery where they'd first rented a room around 1970 to use for storage. At that time, Leaf said, "it was a sort of flophouse," with no water and a shared bathroom. Eventually, another couple helped them buy the building "for a very, very ridiculously reasonable price," Leaf said, and later she and Frank came to own the whole thing outright. "We never in a million years would've considered it since we'd immigrated to Mabou, so that was a big shock." Leaf's studio now occupies the storefront level, and she lives above it, in a tidy no-frills apartment with photographs and mementos stacked to the walls.



Leaf's "Scroll with Figures (Family on a Raft)" (2008). Credit...© June Leaf, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York

Throughout her career, Leaf has enjoyed steady exhibitions of her work and praise from critics, but she has managed to avoid the kind of mainstream celebrity that might have disrupted her dedication to daily creation. In 2016, the Whitney organized a show of her drawings, titled "June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite," and last month, the Inverness County Centre for the Arts in Nova Scotia opened an exhibition focused on her time spent there, which Leaf found unexpectedly moving. "It's quite a wonderful experience, for a person from a big city to have had to adjust to a rural community," she says. "I knew they had an impact on Robert and me, but I didn't realize what an impact we had on them." The artist's recent output, including wire sculptures and shadowy drawings of bodies in flight, will be the subject of a solo show at New York's Ortuzar Projects opening Nov. 4. While Leaf's palette has gradually grown more muted, certain images — wings, hobby horses, sewing machines — have stayed with her across the decades, as has her sense of wit and exploration. Each day, she rises and keeps making art. As Leaf put it, "I'm still dancing."



Leaf said that making art "wears my brain out. I start out with a brain, and then I work, and then I just collapse, as the brain seems to have been lost along the way." Chase Middleton

Here, Leaf answers T's Artist's Questionnaire.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep?

What a funny question. Well, we'll start with: Nobody knows how much they sleep. That's the first answer.

What is your work schedule?

I work until I have no more energy.

What time do you wake up?

At 7:30, something like that. I have breakfast, then I work, usually in the morning.

Then what do you do in the evenings?

I just recover from the day.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Oh, that goes on 24 hours.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

What's the first piece of art I ever *made*? What a stupid question. Oh, it's such a stupid question.

In other interviews you've talked about a drawing you made when you were in third grade, of Joseph and his brothers, from the Bible.

That's true, Joseph and his brothers. It's nice to think about it now — I did love that betrayal by his brothers. Then he meets them again, and he's a very important personage, and they don't recognize him as the brother. They thought they killed him, and he forgives them. It's a beautiful, beautiful image in the Bible.

Do you remember the feeling of wanting to draw it?

Yes, I guess I just saw it. I see them now, even. I see him looking at them, and them not knowing who he is. It's a very beautiful moment. I'm sure if I drew it, it would've been [*moving her hand across her desk*] a smear of my first attempts at making imagery. I see it now, but I couldn't have drawn it then.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

People didn't think like that then. People didn't think about selling art. There was a very small community and, no, you didn't think about that. You were just grateful there was a small community.



"Every day is a workday," Leaf said. She has never used assistants. Chase Middleton



Leaf's "Untitled (Shoreline with Figures)" (circa 1980s). © June Leaf, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step of making something new?

Who thought of these questions? I can't answer that. Silence.

How do you know when you're done with a piece?

Done? It's never done. *I'm* done! That's the answer, I'm done. Then the next day is, you know, unknown.

Are you bingeing any TV shows right now? Do you watch TV at all?

Yeah, the news, and whatever — doesn't matter. There are so many commercials that it sort of demolishes just about everything you watch. But I love this [Ken Burns] series about America and the Holocaust. They've had it on now for about 10 days; I like that.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

What a funny question! Why would they ask that? What kind of a person is that, that makes up questions like that? Forget it, forget it.

How often do you talk to other artists?

How often do you talk to other artists?

I never talk to them.

What about your friends?

We don't talk about art. We're getting too old for all that.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

What does that mean? I don't understand that question. I work, and then I collapse, and I work, and then I collapse, and that's how it is.



Leaf's "Figure Descending Staircase" (2010). © June Leaf, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York



Leaf's "Man with Coattails Climbing a Staircase" (2018). © June Leaf, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York

What's the last thing that made you cry?

If something makes you cry, why would you talk about it?

What do your windows look out on?

People walking. I like to watch people walking.

Do you exercise?

I have a [stationary] bike. But I had pneumonia about 10 days ago, so I stopped using it. I'm only now doing 10 minutes a day. I was doing 10 in the morning and 15 in the evening; I have to get back to that.

What are you reading right now?

I'm reading a book by a friend of mine, Nicky Dawidoff — "The Other Side of Prospect" (2022). It's a record of an injustice [done] to a young man near New Haven. A very difficult book to read, but I like it very much.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

"The Last Supper."

What's your worst habit?

I don't have any bad habits.

What embarrasses you?

These questions.

This interview has been edited and condensed.