

Photos: Roberto E. Rosales ('96 BFA, '14 MA)



Reduced to its Essence

Marietta Patricia Leis contemplates the planet in blues and greens and grays

By Leslie Linthicum

Summer visitors to the Palazzo Mora in Venice, Italy, have encountered a 60-foot-long shimmering scroll, swooping from the palazzo's beamed ceiling down two stories and draping onto a staircase landing. At first sight, the three-foot-wide drape looks like burnished steel. At closer inspection, it is revealed to be a thin sheet of polyethylene fiber, every square centimeter of which has been covered with graphite paint and burnished to a glimmering dark gray.

"The Silent Road" is the first work by Marietta Patricia Leis ('85 MA, '88 MFA) to be included in Venice's storied Arte Biennale presented by the European Cultural Center. It coincided with another international exhibition, a solo show of her art at the Mark Rothko Centre in Daugavpils, Latvia.

At a vibrant 81, Leis has never been busier. "I think artists live long because there's always something else we want to do," she says. Leis is standing at a large worktable in the modern, light-filled studio

behind her house in the Ridgecrest neighborhood of Albuquerque. Wooden salad bowls are stacked in a corner, waiting for an upcoming project that imagines a dystopian future. An easel in the corner awaits her next painting project.

And there are still remnants of Tyvek sheets from the arduous making of "The Silent Road." Leis used steel wool to burnish all 60 feet of the scroll that hangs in Venice until the end of the Biennale in November. "I didn't mind 60 feet of burnishing," she says. "I loved seeing that texture and the beauty. It was very gratifying. I like to have my hands in something — it's a quiet zen activity."

Over a career that has spanned six decades, Leis has rarely not had her hands in something. Her body of work includes photography, video installations, sculpture and an extensive series of blue, green and gray saturated paintings. Much of Leis's inspiration comes from the natural world and specifically her immersion in nature experienced in artist residencies across the world.



Infinite space

The inspiration for “The Silent Road” percolated from a residency in Iceland. After spending time in Finland during a summer, Leis sought out an opportunity to live through the dark months of a Nordic winter. “Dark matter has always interested me and I wanted to experience how the dark and light plays,” she says. She was there for about four days before she put her finger on a particular oddness: There were no trees, and she could see the curvature of the earth on the horizon, eliciting a feeling of being at the end of the earth.

When she returned to Albuquerque she began a series of graphite paintings on formed wood, channeling Iceland’s volcanic landscape and mysterious skies.

“The Silent Road” finds its direct inspiration in a photograph she made of a dark ribbon of seemingly endless highway reaching toward a moody gray sky.

Another residency — at Crater Lake in Oregon — inspired a dive into blue paintings that lasted from 2000 to 2004. “I was doing blue on paper, blue on canvas. It was blue, blue, blue,” Leis says. During those years, Leis developed what has

become her signature: deep color block paintings she achieves by a process of layering color, sanding smooth and layering again. She calls them “reductive” and the analogy of a reduced sauce comes to mind — cooked down until the concentrated essence remains.



Leis with The Silent Road
Photo: Stefan Jennings Batista

In the blue series Leis began to form the answer to a complicated question: When making a monochromatic painting, how do you know when it’s finished? “It’s a perplexing question. It takes a lot of practice. It takes years to know when to leave something alone, even when you think you could make it better. What I had to learn was to save things for the next piece. Not to feel I had to put everything into one painting.”

The paintings are deep and immersive and beautiful, for which Leis makes no apologies. “I love beautiful things,” she says.

And if beauty can entice people to think about the planet’s future, that’s all the better. “My work is about planet Earth and its sustainability,” Leis says. “But I have never been an artist that tries to be didactic and hit you over the head. I try to make my work beautiful, to seduce people. I feel if they are drawn into beauty they might contemplate other concepts. The idea is to inspire people to think about well-being of our planet — how a tree, a body of water or the air we breathe are critical to our own well-being and why it’s essential to preserve these priceless resources.”

After the blue period, Leis did a residency in northern Thailand and dived into a series of reductive green paintings. The paintings span the spectrum of green found in the natural world.

'A good place to hide'

Leis floats around her studio in tennis shoes and black track pants, her white hair hanging free. Signs that say "Stay Relaxed" hang on the knobs of doors that lead into Leis's studio and office. A tattoo on her wrist reminds her to "BREATHE."

As a child growing up in East Orange, N.J., she made art from as early as she can remember, but it was dance that captivated her. She trained from age 7 and as soon as she graduated from high school she took a bus to New York City.

"My first apartment was \$11 a month in Hell's Kitchen, a fifth floor walkup," she says. She danced and painted and took advantage of free admission to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as the gallery scene that was simmering with abstract impressionism.. "That was a very fertile time in art and a very lucky time to be in New York," she says.

Leis then moved to Los Angeles, where she acted and continued to paint and exhibit. She earned college degrees in psychology and took college classes in studio art and art history, but it wasn't until her children had grown that she considered getting a formal art degree. Drawn by

its reputation as rigorous and academic, she enrolled in UNM's art program and received an MA and MFA.

"I thought I'd just be moving through, but as it came to be, I liked New Mexico," Leis says. "It's a good place to hide out. You can be quiet about your work and you don't have to be influenced by a lot of outside activity."

Leis is represented by galleries in Denver, Albuquerque and Del Mar, Calif. She also exhibits at universities, art centers and museums throughout the U.S. and abroad.

This fall New Mexicans have the opportunity to see her work at the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe in the museum's annual "Alcoves" show. Merry Scully ('99 MFA), head of curatorial affairs at the museum, selected components of Leis's larger exhibit "Engrained: Ode to Trees," that contains photographs, sculpture and color block paintings.

"All of her work has a kind of stillness to it that, depending on the color and surface, can have different connotations," Scully says. "Even her small monochromatic paintings, they have a lot of power to them."

Leis, who spent part of the summer lecturing, participating in a U.S. Embassy-sponsored panel and teaching in Latvia and Venice, is back in her Albuquerque studio, reinvigorated, moving on to the next idea.

"Here," she says simply, "I work. It is my bliss." ❀

The artist on The Silent Road

In today's noisy world, we can become distracted, numb to our deepest natures. The road to authenticity is by its very nature traveled in solitude. It is an internal road that, with patience, can lead deep into the core of our being. As we each embark on the journey to this rich and fertile place, we can discover a common thread of the shared humanity that binds us.

The artist on her reductive style

It is in our everyday life to slow down, but I am committed to this process in creating my art. My paintings have since grown progressively reductive and more monochromatic as I pare down the concerns in my work to their essence. Restraint is a key factor in my work as I include only what is essential for the optimal taste and visual experience.

The artist on the theme of her career

Traveling and frequently immersing myself in different locations deepens my concern and love of our Earth, all of which substantially informs my work. I worry about our incredible blue and green planet's survival. The expression of these concerns frequently expands my work to installations that include other mediums such as woodcut, painting, video, photography, sculpture, drawing and poetry.

