



June Leaf: *Head*, 1975, pen and ink and colored pencil on paper, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.

All images this article courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Precision Drawing and Useless Categories

by Dan Nadel

THERE WAS A provisional quality to June Leaf's remarkable solo exhibition on view this summer at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In a small gallery off the lobby, more than 130 of Leaf's expressive figurative drawings were affixed to the walls with magnets. The individual works on paper, hung together in dense clusters, showed signs of rough handling, as if they had been stored in piles for years. The groupings were chronological, with a sweep around the room covering seven decades. Yet because motifs and forms repeat from drawing to drawing, it was easy to imagine how the entire installation could have been reordered to highlight recurring imagery, or to underscore the sense of kinetic energy that pulses through her oeuvre, animating her loosely rendered impressions of urban envi-

ronments from the 1960s and bringing to life her machine-like figures of the late '70s.

"June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite" showcased the work of a skilled draftsman who has been relentlessly tinkering with ideas for decades, turning over concepts, testing hypotheses. The apt title, borrowed from that of a 1975 drawing, evokes Leaf's inventive visual metaphors for the mind. These are most explicit in a group of drawings from the mid-1970s in which a human head, sometimes appearing with the top of the skull flipped open like a car hood, is portrayed as a vessel for various kinds of speculative activities. A geodesic dome rises above a tranquil face (*Head*, 1975); tiny humanoids dance around a face exploding with bright abstract forms (*Figures Coming Out of Hand and Head*, 1976); a figure sews

DAN NADEL is a writer and publisher based in New York.

View of the exhibition "June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite," 2016, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Bill Orcutt.



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or knits her own head together (*Findings*, 1975); a wide-eyed face appears to be in motion, spinning on a bizarre mechanical device (*Mother/Ballroom*, ca. 1978).

Many of the works are adorned with marginalia, stray marks, and the occasional inscription, and none could be characterized as an individual "masterpiece." There's a searching, probing quality to the selection, as if Leaf were constantly testing the parameters of her own practice. Early on she was trained in technical drawing, and her precise lines can delineate complex machine parts. Some of the drawings on view can be read as schematic diagrams for the metal kinetic sculptures she has been constructing since the 1980s, a small group of which were arranged on a table in the center of the gallery. But Leaf also can go to another extreme with equal confidence, as she does in numerous drawn vignettes, such as *If You Take Too Much You Will Be*

Punished! (ca. 1962–63), which employs the loosest of crayon lines to give life to a cranky taskmaster figure.

In this sense, Leaf's modest but ambitious work exemplifies what critic Manny Farber called Termite Art, in which artists convey idiosyncratic visions seemingly without concern for dominant aesthetic trends. As Farber wrote, such work "feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement."¹ Termite Art doesn't strive for grand statements—or at least not ones that are legible in terms of fixed art historical categories—and that may be one reason why it doesn't often appear as the subject of a museum exhibition.

Leaf's Whitney retrospective arrived at a time when her work, and that of her termite peers, is being rediscovered, though there are reasons to be wary of such a narrative. Many of these "rediscoveries" are female artists who received little recognition, much less financial support, during the most active periods in their careers. It's a dubious claim to make about Leaf (b. 1929), an artist who never went away. In the late 1940s, and again in the 1950s, she studied at Chicago's Institute of Design, formerly the New Bauhaus. The work she produced during this period, such as the ink drawing *Woman Machines* (1949–50), in which bulbous forms balloon outward



Figures Coming Out of Hand and Head, 1976, acrylic, pen and ink, and graphite on paper, 18 by 24 inches.



Study for Woman Monument, 1975, pen and ink, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 17 by 14 inches.

from sharp, spindly legs, contain the aesthetic kernels she would develop for the next sixty-five years in drawings that meld mechanical precision with expressive, and sometimes grotesque, figures. Leaf began showing publicly in 1948, and she participated in Chicago's famed Exhibition Momentum, a series of juried shows in the 1950s organized to counter the Art Institute of Chicago's stuffy regional surveys. Her colleagues in Chicago included figurative artists such as Seymour Rosofsky, Leon Golub, and Nancy Spero. As their careers developed in the Chicago art world they were dubbed the "Monster Roster," a term propagated by critic Franz Schulze in 1959 to describe artists working with expressive, surface-heavy, Surrealist-inflected figuration.

Most of the artists under this umbrella have long chafed at the term—which is really more like a marketing slogan—and Whitney curator Carter E. Foster studiously avoids it in his thoughtful essay accompanying the Leaf retrospective. But Schulze's label persists, providing the intellectual framework for this past winter's "Monster Roster: Existential Art in Postwar Chicago," at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art. Schulze's label had a pop appeal, equating the bodily distortions envisioned by certain painters heavily inspired by Dubuffet with horror films and the Chicago Bears, who were known as the Monsters of the Midway. To this vernacular mix, Schulze added a dubious grab bag of philosophical ideas, blending tenets of Surreal-

Robert Enters the Room, 1973, acrylic, collage, gelatin silver prints, and pen and ink on paper, 22 by 28 inches.



ism and Existentialism. In an area of art history that has generated little scholarship, the Monster Roster moniker continues to dominate.

Foster's decision to marginalize the term also makes sense because, in any case, Leaf's affiliation with the Chicago group accounts for a very brief portion of her career. After a stay in Paris, she settled in New York, where she later married photographer Robert Frank. It was in New York in the 1960s that she started to define the range of her work, the boundaries of her art that she would constantly chew up, as it were. The city itself proved to be a rich subject. In *Coney Island* (1968), she corralled a tense, active line into a scene of calm and repose: a realistic depiction of spectators watching a carousel at the amusement park. Art historical references also became more explicit in Leaf's work of the '60s, with Vermeer providing a model for a psychedelic interior scene, *After Vermeer* (ca. 1965).

One subject that remained consistent throughout her career, spanning the 1940s through the present, is the female body. As the inscription on one 1975 drawing exhorts: WOMEN SHOULD BUILD A MONUMENT FOR THEMSELVES. Leaf produced dozens of works on this theme in the mid-1970s. These ambiguous images, which might be interpreted as speculative sketches for public sculptures, offer nuanced and sometimes contradictory depictions of femininity and

gender. *Woman Monument* (1975), rendered in hot yellows and reds, depicts a seated humanoid, apparently genderless, reaching out to the viewer. *Study for Woman Monument* (1975) portrays a metal torsolike form with broken stovepipe legs. Another study envisions jets of water pouring out of a female figure's head. Here, as in most of her drawings, machine imagery has a double valence. It suggests a sharp criticism of fixed social roles—the woman as automaton—while simultaneously demonstrating the artist's own detailed draftsmanship.

Leaf's drawings refuse an easy summation, and they can't be located in a single passing moment in which Surrealism, Pop, or Minimalism defined what art can be. Her oeuvre embodies a certain kind of grit, and Leaf undoubtedly remained true to her own project no matter what was happening in the broader art world. This quality is likely what makes Leaf's body of work attractive today. It suggests an art historical counter-narrative in which personal, idiosyncratic, maximalist aesthetics thrived during the cool 1960s and Conceptual '70s. Here we have work that was made on its own terms, developing, changing, expanding, and thriving in a way that seems potentially endless. ○

1. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, New York, Praeger, 1971, p. 135.