The Houston Review

Weighing in on a Few Postmodern Fantasies: The Enigmatic Landing of Bonny Leibowitz’s Solo Exhibition, Conditional Constructs, at Forum 6 in Houston

-Matthew Eric Mendez

Bonny Leibowitz, *The Unraveling*, 42” x 58” x 12”, dyed, semi-rigid poly foam, 2018

I spoke with Dallas-based artist Bonny Leibowitz about her new exhibition, opening Saturday, September 8th, which turned philosophical, and we got into shop-talk of substrates and such - but I first wanted to share her most lucid summary replies, then my thoughts, and lastly, our formal repartee. Welcome to the matrices of delusion and hope in our colliding sociotechnical worlds. Bonny sends up imperative webs of ethical implications and semiotic props of abundant obsolescence:

“With the objects, I came to the shapes and patterns in a way that very much speaks to the gestures in the paintings-on-paper pieces I do. In those, you'll find elements of the work that are cut out and elements which are woven and intertwined.

“I like the contrast of work that appears as thin atmospheric slices and heavy, bulky, dense objects - these juxtapositions speak to the paradoxical qualities of all thought and life.”
“The forms seemed to me as heavy and dense, yet appear to float as they hang from clear wires. I like the dichotomy. In walking around the piece, one will find it’s open in larger areas that allow one to peer into the emptiness.”

“Looking through the work via cut outs lends itself toward breakthroughs, seeing another side, and glimpses of other realities.” - Bonny Leibowitz

The postmodern literary theorist, Linda Hutcheon says irony depends upon interpretation; it happens in the tricky, unpredictable space between expression and understanding. [Irony's Edge is her study of the myriad forms and the effects of irony.]

That irony and the dialectic are two great forces in Plato. There is an irony that is only a stimulus for activation and in turn is itself the terminus striven for. There is a dialectic in perpetual movement, defying entrapment in a singular understanding, that prolongs resolution.

This is the mythical and metaphorical, sustained anticipation, like a transitional situation, a confinium [intervening border], that actually belongs to neither.

Q + A time with Bonny:

What does your work aim to say or work through?
I’m particularly interested in concepts surrounding transition and perception. Oftentimes, our perceptions of a situation, a thought we cling to, a quality we impose on a thing or bring to an interaction, is just that, a perception and I’m interested in how that shifts over time in new circumstances or with new ways of looking. I prefer to leave works undetermined, broad and suggestive, mystical without answers, just like in real life, where we just don’t know - but the questions around the subject can open the mind. A piece might suggest deterioration, weightlessness, depth, etc. to some, and evoke different meanings to another viewer. I find the dialogue and diverse meanings, that are assigned by individual viewers, to be useful.

Is your work informed by certain concepts or themes from your cultural heritage?
Concepts in my cultural heritage, Judaism, are manifest through the work in ways that are not overt, explicit or obvious. For several years, I took a dive into the teachings of Kabbalah, the more mystical components of Judaism which embrace much of what I’m drawing on at this time as well, in my studies on what is now being termed Secular Buddhism: connection, consciousness and mindfulness etc. Additionally, I’m interested in brain science, neurology and psychology.

Looking at your educational background, which experience contributes most to your evolution as an artist?
The most important experience for me, is just making the work, building on what is. Looking and delving into the work of others, is also a very big part of my life. Having said that, some of the most educational moments have been critiques from artists I respect. I find it incredibly important to have smart eyes, critical feedback, and a rich dialogue, on occasion, to help me “see” where I am and help define the essences of what the work is about.

What’s been the strongest epiphany during your practice of art?
The biggest epiphany for me was how to work with transitions. I learned to stay curious, understanding I am in concert with materials and concepts, and that there’s a flow state which won’t always adhere to constructs that one previously devised. That shift in thinking allowed me a lot of freedom - to make new
associations, work 3-d or 2-d, and do installation all at once, if the work calls for it; the idea manifests by whatever the work needs. I would say it’s a personal trajectory with overtones of "woman" and feminism, though I recently came to an interesting thought experiment where I would ask myself, "How would a man approach the making of this piece?" I considered how I would realize my work in a new way, not to say there is one way a man would be, but what if I were to place myself in such an identity.

**What is your most important artist tool or material and when did you begin using it?**

Two of my faves right now are Tyvek heated and inked because it can take on so many different qualities, often times a very natural organic feel yet it’s not natural at all and Monotypes on paper because the process is so accessible and can be so freeing. The use of Tyvek came in several years ago when an artist friend showed me on a very small 6"x6" square, the effects of ironing the material; how it bends and breaks up and wrinkles. I loved it and from there I ended up using yards of it in a subsequent series called Suspended Beliefs. I had no idea it would later become so significant to me as a material. I recently found my way back to it again and used in in one of the main pieces in the Conditional Constructs exhibition. It's titled The Earth has a Soul.

**What keeps you going and why do you what you do?**

What keeps me going with my work is curiosity, the inherent drive to make, see where the work wants to go and to see new potential. I love the moments when something unexpected and revelatory occurs. I’m interested in both how the materials and process can be manipulated to best support concepts and how, through the use of materials and processes, concepts emerge.

**What’s your dream achievement for your art?**

One of my missions, is for the work to become increasingly strong and refined. Recognition for the work, exhibitions, representation, critical reviews, and acquisitions are all a part of the big dream. I could see the work installed in a variety of situations from big white cube to an Anselm Keifer warehouse, or a castle. I could even imagine it outdoors in a park. Though each scenario would take on significantly new meaning.

**Is there something you can’t live without in your studio?**

I love my studio. It’s crammed with tools, materials, and equipment. Other than that, it’s always important to have coffee, podcasts, and my comfy couch.

Bonny Leibowitz - Conditional Constructs
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Continues through October 6th
11-5:30 Tue-Sat, 1824 Spring Street #227
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