

Unlocking Leonard Rosenfeld

by Paul Laster

"I have found the key to success—but I can't find the lock it fits." — Leonard Rosenfeld.

Leonard Rosenfeld was not your typical artist, at least not by today's "where you went to school" standards. Basically self-taught, other than some classes at the Art Students League of New York, which was one of the go-to-places for art education in the 1950s, Rosenfeld learned his trade by experimentation. Over his 82 years, which were filled with struggles and success, Rosenfeld crafted a body of work that should be better known.

Born in Brooklyn in 1926 to immigrant parents from Austria and Ukraine, Len—as his friends knew him—was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II and served on Guam and the Philippines, where he renewed his childhood interest in drawing. But as an adult he leaned towards pornographic illustrations of women, which eventually made him popular with both his commanders and his peers.

Attending classes at the Art Students League of New York on the G.I. Bill, Len started frequenting galleries and nearby bars haunted by artists in Midtown Manhattan and soon found his way to the art mecca of the moment, the Cedar Tavern in the heart of Greenwich Village. There he befriended Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, and Franz Kline—the three main cornerstones of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Although he loved to hang out with these creative cats—who would each soon become American artistic legends in their own right—Len followed his own instincts in making work, which at that time consisted of dynamic drawings of New York City subway lines and railroad yards. While realistic in nature, they drew on the graphic energy of his abstract, avant-garde pals. Three of these powerful pieces were eventually shown at the edgy Martha Jackson Gallery in the '60s—the same gallery where Christo, Jim Dine, and John Chamberlain got their start.

Len married the artist Jean Alexander, had two daughters, and found odd jobs as an art framer and deliveryman before landing a loft studio on Forsyth Street on New York's Lower East Side. During the 1960s he made oil paintings of astronauts that relied more on Expressionism than Pop Art, which was the dominant style at the time. He continued the space-related theme in the 1970s with a series of *Rocket* paintings, one of which depicted a helmeted, Captain America-style Len ready to blast off to the stars. He embellished the cartoon-like canvas with the commentary "To all the American art dealers who shot me down again. And this time almost got me..." He made these engaging works, which were in step with the news of the time—if not the artistic trends of the moment—but didn't have the opportunity to show them.

Len's biggest art world breakthrough came in 1980, when Ivan Karp of OK Harris Gallery showed his radically fresh *Rag* paintings, in which he fetishistically wrapped bits of painted canvas around the stretcher bars while leaving the rest of the painting field open to the wall. Minimal in nature and totally new in the way that painting was addressed, which made it sculptural at the same time, Len's *Rag* paintings opened the door to more experimentation.

While simultaneously painting a provocative series of prostitutes and pimps that lingered on and around his Lower East Side doorstep, Len began to use the stripped-down stretchers as a frame to convey the energy of his urban jungle with found, cobbled-together electrical wire and crushed aerosol paint cans. These works were not only inventive; they also captured the zeitgeist of the city in both intuitive and cultural ways. At a time when Primitivism was being addressed in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Rosenfeld was giving new life to these aesthetic concerns in his downtown studio.

Karp rightly recognized the *Wrap* paintings, but missed the boat on the *Wire* and *Can* pieces that followed—leaving Len high and dry. While the *Wrap* works gave a new platform for the notion of what a painting is, the later works took the concept of painting further into a hybrid realm, where nothing like them had previously been seen. The travesty, however, is that these works were not exhibited until a group show at SoHo's Simone Gallery in 1984 and not fully displayed until 2009, when they were resurrected in a solo show that included 30 of the powerful pieces at Salomon Arts Gallery in New York.

This is Len at his experimental best. *MX Chief* (1983,) which measures nearly six-feet high and four-feet wide, shows a regal figure of a tribal leader constructed from black-and-white wire and tacks splayed down the center of the stretcher bars—hovering over a similarly made portrayal of a Volkswagen and patterned field. Likewise, *Blues Man* (1983-84) depicts a black musician's head—with two actual harmonicas defining his mouth—attached to the body of a guitar that's floating above a smoking locomotive. Freeform and imaginative, it looks as if the contents of the piece dreamed up their own surroundings.

Chinatown – Year of the Fish (1983-85) captures a male figure (looking a lot like Len) holding a fan while wielding chopsticks to pick at a plated fish dinner, whimsically hovering above a house with a couple eating, dancing, and copulating—all made from colored wires tacked to stretcher bars. Floating down an expanded middle bar of the stretcher, this self-reflective narrative is surrounded by feather-like forms that encompass the outer edges of the rectangular structure. Similarly, the massive *Gunga Din Meets King Kong* (1986) mixes wire-made likenesses of the Indian hero and giant ape with airplanes and owls.

Len shifts the focus on the figure from the center to side with *Luego caballo* (1985-86,) a wire piece that rivals any Jean-Michel Basquiat canvases of the day in its colorful portrayal of a skeletal figure, which morphs into an upside-down alien, resembling the movie character *ET*, that's enveloped with black-and-white, abstract wire patterns. Equally pushing the boundaries of form and movie sci-fi, *Star Wars – The Chief's Dream* (1986) cuts and expands the stretcher bars—seemingly anticipating Fabian Marcaccio's radical use of painting's form in the 1990s, in its ragtag depiction of an Indian chief.

Without any demand for his work and few exhibition possibilities, Len kept pushing the boundaries of what art could be. Moving on from the *Wire* works, he started incorporating sensual drawings of nudes with smashed spray paint cans, abandoned in the streets by graffiti artists, into his open stretcher pieces. Drawing hookers and johns in graphite on plain wooden planks, framed by colorful flattened cans, Len now merged Expressionism with Pop Art and remnants of graffiti to make works reminiscent of the object-oriented nudes of Tom Wesselmann and the stoic, profiled figures of Richard Lindner.

Pray (1990) captures the naked, lower torso of a woman floating above her muddied, facial image in a stylish striped hat drawn on a large piece of pine that's framed by paint cans hammered flat by Len and inventively attached to the stretcher bars to define the parameters

of the piece. Countering it, *Self-Portrait (Spilt Pecker,)* 1990 presents the bust of a male soldier above his profiled, naked lower torso surrounded by Krylon and other paint cans to construct a magical portal into a sexual realm once commonly found on urban streets.

Masato, the artist's 1990 representation of a young Japanese woman in the nude, is a marvelous mash-up of smashed cans, illustrative wire, and graphite rendering of the figure, while *Channel Zero* (1991) puts the nudes on a simulated TV screen above pasted paintings on paper of soldiers from the first Gulf War. Floating in a field of painted cans, Army surplus gear, and wire illustrations on the stretcher bars, the mediated imagery lay dormant in Len's work until his last significant body of work, which was inspired by the Iraq War.

Len married his second wife, international trade attorney Janet Hoffman, in 1991 and they moved to a loft on Broadway in Lower Manhattan, where he eventually relocated his studio. He and Janet traveled the world, spending annual holidays in Mexico, where he exhibited and made colorful drawings and watercolors that reflected his new, carefree life. However, upon witnessing the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, Len was inspired to make works in response to the tragedy. Three years later, he was making work in response to the wars that were spawned by the terrorist attack.

Images of soldiers and terrorists complete Len's full circle as a WWII fighter-turned-artist from 2004 to 2008. Inspired by a newspaper review of a book about the war in Iraq, Len painted helmeted soldiers, veiled terrorists, and a staggering range of weapons, along with the occasional Minnie Mouse, in abstract fields and grids. Painted mainly in shades of pink, the subjects were Rosenfeld's largest and last body of work in oil on canvas. Haunting in their portrayal of death, they permeate the spirit of humanity that's visible in all of this remarkable artist's work.

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About the Writer

Paul Laster is an editor, writer, independent curator, and artist. He is editor of A+, a Blog by Artspace, and a contributing editor at Flavorpill.com, ArtBahrain.org, and *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine. He was the founding editor of bkyn, an online journal of the arts, first art editor of Flavorpill.com, and last art editor of Russell Simmons' *OneWorld* magazine and Artkrush.com. He has been a frequent contributor to *Time Out New York*, *Art in America*, *Modern Painters*, *New York Observer*, *ArtPulse*, *Tema Celeste*, *amNew York*, TheDailyBeast.com, Whitehot.com, ArtInfo.com, and Artnet.com.