

Leslie Hirst: Excursions through Clovered Landscapes

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Each encounter with art takes place at some historical moment or other, but as a general rule the historical background of our experiences with art is merely that, and rarely penetrates the experiences themselves. By contrast my first and, for some considerable while, my only experience of Leslie Hirst's work occurred in the dark uncertain days shortly after 9/11, when that cataclysmic disaster colored nearly everything – and if it did not, then that said something not quite to its credit about whatever resisted it. It was, for example, on that same visit to Baltimore on which Leslie took my wife and me to see her piece in a faculty show at the Maryland Institute College of Art in early October, 2001 – a day on which Homeland Security issued a terror alert of some highly alarming color - that a witty student declared, in a seminar I conducted there, that the work of the German photographer, Andreas Gursky, much discussed at the time, was so 9/10. That could not have been said of Leslie's piece, the majesty, the scale, solemnity and beauty of which, seemed to project some reassuring message, almost as if it had been created for the terrible time we were living through – though given the prolonged industry required to realize any of her slowly achieved works, it was hardly thinkable that it had been created to help us through what had taken place scarcely weeks before. The time if anything intensified the art.

Since *Four: Circle*, to give it its name, is the earliest piece in this show, it has somehow the significance of what in craft guild times would have been a masterpiece – a work presented by the artist for the purpose of demonstrating mastery by the guild's highest criteria, showing her readiness to execute the highest commissions. Except that Leslie had invented the form that *Four: Circle* exemplified, and was the sole member of a guild that she qualified herself to represent, prepared now to produce other examples of an art that was entirely her own. The piece bears its arcane powers on its face, or in its transluminous depth, since it is a circle in a square – or rather a nest of circles in a golden square, the outermost one of which touches all four midpoints of the square's periphery. Each of the nested circles, except the innermost circle, which is solid, are wreaths of a sort, and all are made to heighten the magic, of the four-leafed clovers that are its elements. The innermost circle is a circle of seven concentric circles, surrounding what must be a remarkable quatrefoil, like a Trinity augmented by one into a Quaternity, what or whoever the fourth Person may be. It was a numinous presence from another sphere, bringing light to our darker sphere. Who expected that?

The dimensions of the painting are 48 by 48 inches – and its component circles are composed of exactly 1024 four-leaf clovers. Leslie actually uses clovers as her drawing medium: she forms an overall pattern marked out with clovers. "The clovers," she writes, "are embedded within layers of paint and epoxy resin to reference the dialog between natural and artificial elements inherent in the environment." The submerged clovers in their golden medium evoke the aesthetics of Baccarat glasswork, where decorative elements are composed beneath and within a polished glass dome. But looking at the self-encircling dark green clovers in their golden element gave me the sense of some extraordinary artifact from Siena in the age of the Maiesta. The little curling stems of the clovers gave the impression of *craquelure* in a deep glaze of forgotten alchemy. There was certainly nothing else like it in contemporary art!

Let's begin with the four-leaf clovers. Leslie harvests them on a near daily basis. They serve, she says, "as a type of documentation of my existence and passage in the environment." This is an oblique way of saying that she is a committed runner, who must spend a part of each day in swift explorations of whatever part of the world she happens to be in. "The works," she writes, "read like an atlas of fantastic places, stressing the sensations of terrain, density, weather, circulation, and spirituality rather than the reality of these characteristics." She has programmed her vision "to detect the subtle rupture of a clover that has more or less than the three leaflets." My sense is that she must quickly pick the four-leaf clovers her sharp vision has singled out as she traces a path later translated, using clovers as points, into a pattern she regards as a landscape. "The most clovers with four or more leaflets that I have ever found in one day is 333." People who find just one four-leaf clover in a day consider it a noteworthy event, but Leslie could never have become the Clover Artist that she is if it were just a matter of a lucky find now and again. I recall an anecdote about Thoreau who, when someone asked where one could find Indian arrowheads, answered "Everywhere," bending down to pick one up there and then. That is how it must be with Leslie and four-leaf clovers. But she obviously has a singular visual acuity. One day, running along the edge of Riverside Park, she found a berry patch near some heavily used tennis courts, and picked enough to bake an extraordinary confection upon returning from her run. The confection was as much an atlas of her expedition as one of her paintings, but in an edible medium.

Each of the landscapes, then, is a transcription of the path she first drew with her running body, and then reproduced by means of the four-leaf clovers harvested on the fly. There is a whole industry of drying, pressing, and categorizing clovers, which become the painting's design – though "I would never put a Wyoming clover in a Baltimore painting." Each painting, that is, is generated by running, tracing, preserving a pattern with placed clovers then submerged in resin. So each work is the product of a personal encounter with nature, at a given time, under given circumstances, but transformed into something "rich and strange," to use Shakespeare's words, so that the personal has become obliterated in the final radiance, like a holy sign.

A beautiful example of this is *Four: Maze*, which Leslie tells me is not only a Baltimore painting, but "A pretty darn close likeness of the city ... one could likely find their way around by using a reproduction of that painting." Be that as it may, it has the look of a mille-trèfle tapestry, in which a path through the orderly clover fields transcribes a huge four-leaf clover in the shape of a Celtic illumination, leaving to the viewer/reader the task of interpreting the Four Persons of the Quaternity which, at least according to a "General Ecclesiastical History of 1702, was believed composed of "Ineffability, of Silence, of the Father, and of the Truth." At their finest, Hirst's works seem to celebrate mysteries like these, whatever their origins in running through clover on bright mornings in Baltimore.