

# HECTOR LEONARDI

## *Transmission of Light and the Intimate Vision*

Robert C. Morgan



*San Franciscan* Acrylic on canvas 2008 (36 x 36 inches)

Current Exhibition:

### **HECTOR LEONARDI: RECENT PAINTINGS**

August 25 through September 29, 2009

**Opening Reception for the Artist | Thursday September 10th 6 – 8 PM**

Dillon Gallery 555 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 212.727.8585 [www.dillongallery.com](http://www.dillongallery.com)

Hector Leonardi is an exemplary painter, a raconteur of subliminal form, and an empiricist whose eye and brain function implicitly in relation to the visual field. Like the Rouen Cathedrals of Monet or the stone quarries of Cezanne, Leonardi's paintings are abundant with light. By saturating the surface with pigment, he creates an exuberant tactility through his evenly controlled and carefully attenuated brushwork. His painterly approach suggests a deeply personal vision, fully concentrated on the surface, often utilizing strips and patches of peeled "paint film" layered onto the composition, which are mixed with delicate modulations of color on the canvas. There is an indelible and ineffable quality about these paintings, a chromatic intensity, an effervescence, and a focus that gives credibility to each nuance of the brush. Leonardi's ability to adhere to the color spectrum suggests a potential reservoir of restrained exuberance. His expertise is based on years of study and attention to the pursuit of chromatic values, augmented during his apprenticeship at Yale in the mid-fifties with Ad Reinhardt and the Bauhaus master, Josef Albers.

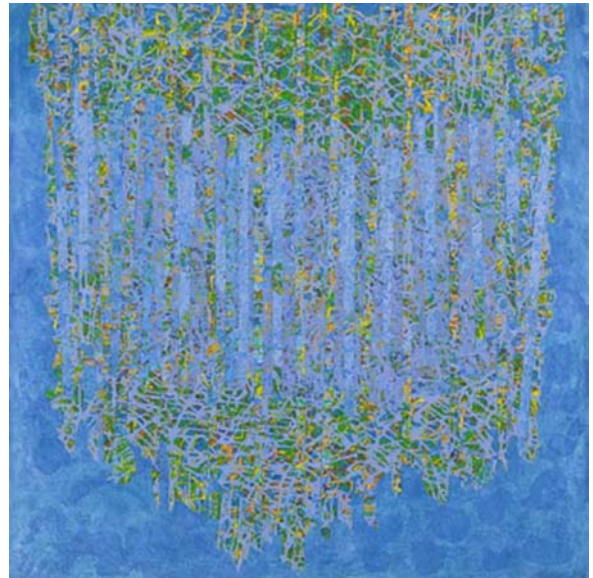
Over the years, Leonardi's method always begins with a systemic discovery. Painting becomes an adventure whereby he locates the exact hue, the precise module of pigment, the evenly saturated value that corresponds in part to the overall surface. These discoveries are relentlessly applied to his paintings. He is a constructive painter in the sense that his surfaces are built-up step by step over a duration of time. These paintings do not happen quickly. Every mark is there for a purpose, and every color is given a specific place, an accurate accountability.

This is not to suggest that Leonardi is oblivious to accidental encounters in his work, but quite the opposite. The accidents contribute to the structure as a whole, and therefore, give the structure a vitality that sustains the richness of the painterly surface. Given the artist's attention of parts to the whole, Leonardi paints in a manner that suggests a desire to return painting to another era -- what might be called the era of heroic painting, in which the subject matter, albeit abstract, carries the romance and alacrity of a living presence. By transporting the traditional vestiges of painting from the Venetian Renaissance through Kandinsky, and Kupka into a present-day perspective, Leonardi reignites the complexity of the pictorial surface for his viewing audience.

This complexity does not become an end in itself but a signifier of recognition whereby the informed viewer comes to terms with a deeply refined understanding of color and form made possible by a perceptual intelligence that supports these qualities. Leonardi is less a Color Field painter – as was known in the early sixties – than a master of original color applications. Through his intuitive mixing and layering of carefully selected hues and values, shown in the blue/green regal splendor of *Colmar* to the blustering autumn colors laminated against the organic geometry of *Vercours*, Hector Leonardi reveals an unpredictable chromatic articulation virtually unparalleled in painting today.



*Vercours* (Acrylic on canvas 48 x 60 inches)



*Colmar* (Acrylic on canvas 48 x 48 inches)

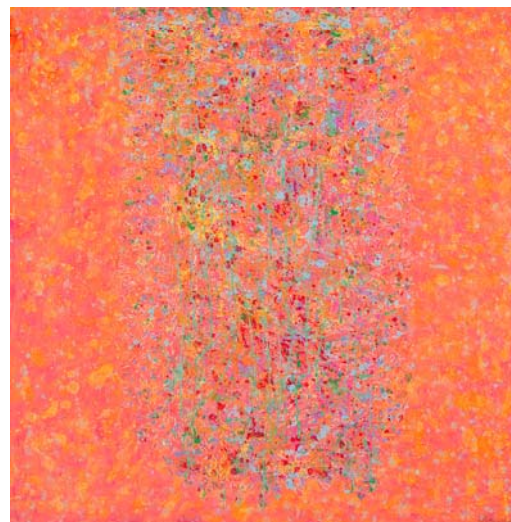
Recognizing that painting is a much a material affair as one that involves optical feeling, contingent on making intelligent decisions, he gives an immense body of understanding to his work – what the poet Williams Carlos Williams once called “an embodiment of knowledge.” Even so, the artist fully understands that a painted surface



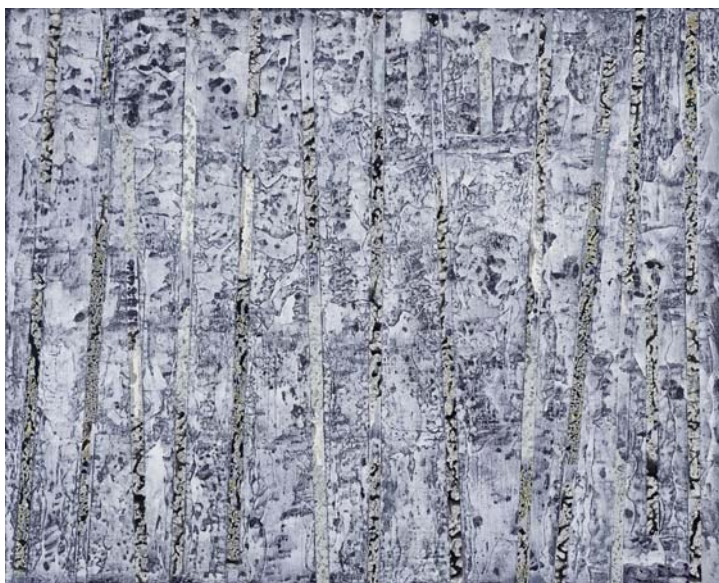
alone is not enough to support sustained significance. For an abstract painting to become successful, it must communicate both elegance and mystery to the viewer. The trick is how to produce a work where the material, the intellect, and the emotions converge and finally become an unmistakable fact. But for this to happen the painterly surface must acquire something more than a literal presence.

There are several examples in Leonardi's recent work to support this claim, paintings, such as *Lorrain* and *Iseré*, in which the surface exceeds its literal presence and enters into a feeling of the sublime. To describe this phenomenon in words is not to prove it, because aesthetic experience cannot be proven. It can only be sustained by understanding the viability of the experience that we attribute to paintings that extend the purpose of living in a world that persistently argues against the quality of life. *Lorrain* is a square painting that measures 48 x 48 inches. It is primarily orange in its optical composition. In *Lorrain* I am reminded of the seventeenth-century painter Claude who followed the lead of Poussin but applied it to the landscape outside of France, specifically the landscape surrounding Rome. Indeed, Leonardi appears to recognize the variety of hues and effervescent light that results from these surroundings. Another work, titled *Iseré*, is a smaller square painting by some twelve inches. Yet the all-over surface is still present through a speckled dark and light veneer as one surface enfolds upon another. The surface is flat but this does not discount the multitude of layers that give the paradoxical impression of an optical flatness.

In view of these effects, there are other paintings worth mentioning in relation to Leonardi's on going achievement that involve both the intricacies of color and a highly operative ability to perceive details within form. In *Iseré*, the details become refined and systemized into rich tactile patterns, thus offering grandeur to the transformation of nature often by-passed in the treadmill of urban life. Another horizontal painting, titled *Gateau-Battu*, reveals a different color patterning than what appears in either *Lorrain* or *Iseré*.



*Lorrain* (In Private Collection)

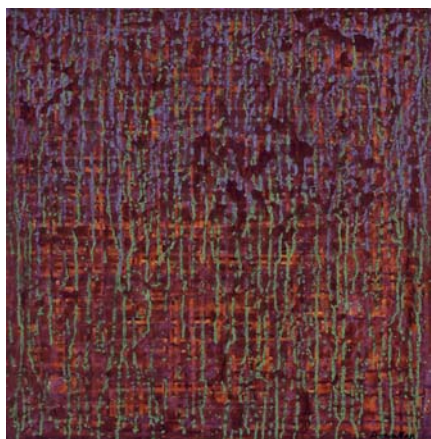


*Gateau-Battu* (Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches)



*Iseré* (Acrylic on canvas 36 x 36 inches)

Here the brilliant hues values are muted through the application of small, densely painted black and white brushstrokes mixed in gray tonalities. The rhythm of the horizontal surface is intensified through a sequence of tilted strips of paint, cut and removed from a plastic panel. Their placement on the surface recalls the well-known painting by Jackson Pollock, entitled “Blue Poles,” arguably the artist’s last significant painting, completed in 1952. In contrast to the Pollock, Leonardi does not pour paint over the dowels that are later removed. Rather he carefully integrates the strips of pigment into the surface, giving the surface a more complete sense of elasticity. The viewer’s eye does not simply move in one direction from left to right, but moves to all parts of the painting, which, in effect, resemble a snowy landscape. The reference to nature in each of these paintings makes clear the sources of Leonardi’s project. Despite the bold intensity of his colors in paintings, such as *Valence* or *Grenoble*, there is a certain expressive distance in the work that further suggests humility with regard to nature. To some extent, this carries an aura of Eastern thought, the Taoist fluctuation and harmonious tension between creative and destructive forces. Somehow this idea seems perfectly consistent with these paintings. One may sense that they belong to a distance place where the mind goes in search of profound feeling and solace.



*Valence* (Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches)

*Grenoble* (Pictured right, In Private Collection)



One last point worth mentioning-- the invention of color in painting is only possible through an understanding of the possibilities of syntax, a thought not far removed from the later lectures of the philosopher Wittgenstein. It was the task of twentieth-century philosophy to analyze color in terms of language, a task that followed where Goethe left off more than a century earlier. The point is that color does not appear original in isolation of other forms of subject matter. What Leonardi brings to painting is a high level syntax where thinking and feeling are not separate but inextricably bound to the phenomenon of seeing. Originality is a matter of syntax, and the syntax is the gift of perceptual intelligence that Hector Leonardi brings to abstract painting in the twenty-first century.

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Robert C. Morgan is an artist, critic, writer, and curator. He earned a MFA degree in Sculpture prior to receiving his Ph.D. in contemporary art history. He currently teaches in the graduate fine art program at Pratt Institute and at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Author of many books, catalogs, essays, and monographs, he has been translated into eighteen languages. In 1999, he received the first Arcale award in international art criticism from the Municipality of Salamanca, Spain. He is the first American critic to be invited to speak in the Islamic Republic of Iran in thirty years.