

Alfred Leslie | *OUR LUMINOUS PARADISE*

January 10 – March 9, 2018

Opening Reception with the artist, January 10, 2019

“For most people reality is the confirmation of their expectations. These pictures...offer alternatives”¹ wrote Alfred Leslie of his meditative body of black and white watercolors entitled *100 Views Along the Road*. Bruce Silverstein Gallery is pleased to present a selection of these elegant paintings done in grisaille as its second solo exhibition devoted to the work of Alfred Leslie.

In 1966, Leslie's New York City home and studio burned down in a tragic fire, taking the lives of twelve firefighters and years of paintings, films and other works. This left the artist to forfeit his upcoming one-man exhibition at The Whitney Museum, and completely start over. As a way to initially push aside, and then work through the tremendous grief, Leslie spent time in the Hamptons painting watercolors of the beach. After completing two of these beach scenes in 1966—which were purchased by MoMA shortly thereafter—Leslie realized they were more than mere studies for *The Killing Cycle*, and that this effort would warrant further exploration. In the late 1970s, he set out for California for another change of scene, encountering a new type of landscape to draw from. During a road trip east from Santa Barbara in 1978, Alfred's encounter with Gallup, New Mexico spurred a series of sketches that he continued to make across America, mostly from inside his car, that would serve as inspiration for *100 Views*. Although born out of tragedy, the works made during this time ultimately became the artist's vehicle for redemption.

Created between 1981 and 1983, Leslie made *100 Views* using only a drawing pad and pencil, briefly sketching vague impressions of his surroundings from the front seat of his Ford. The series would develop into a complete entity that captures the “movement, atmosphere, and especially light” of the American landscape. Some locations get more than one view, showcasing the sequence of light as the sun shifts over the ocean in California, or how the full moon appears in Oklahoma. Formally, Leslie achieves incredible depth and luminosity through his use of black, white and greyscale. Black is used not to depict the absence of color, but all of the colors at once; it is both receptor and refractor of light. Each work is also marked by a thick white band at the bottom of the paper, which Leslie identifies as the “earth not in view but as a given. The ground you know you are standing on as you look ahead. Earth as ground, ground as ground, base, surface of the paper”. Through the balance of carefully crafted black and white space, Leslie explores the Japanese concept of *nōtan*. This principle proposes that “there can be an eternal unchanging response to the certain beauty of just so much white to just so much black”.

The title *100 Views Along the Road* alludes to the rich historical series of narrative images by Hiroshige, *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. Like the Japanese ukiyo-e master, Leslie has channeled scenes that are somewhat recognizable, though not entirely renowned, and has quietly undermined this familiarity through a series of bold formal devices. Apart from the technical profundity of this work, *100 Views* is, at its emotional center, “about being on the road, in the fast lane, not about this or that place, dawn or night, rain or snow, so much as about being in a car and going”. The watercolors are less about being true to the actual site, as they were for Hiroshige's scenes of Edo, and more about translating the feeling of a place, a moment, an experience. The road has long held a mythic place in the American psyche, which connects everyone who has traversed the American highway behind the wheel and wondered at the definitive landscape surrounding them.

In 2018, Leslie was given the Lee Krasner Award in recognition of a lifetime of artist achievement, granted by The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Working across mediums of painting, photography, and film, Leslie's work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally. Works are included in the permanent collections of numerous institutions, including The Art Institute of Chicago, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., The Saint Louis Art Museum, The Walker Art Center, and The Whitney Museum of American Art.

¹ Leslie, Alfred, *100 Views Along the Road: Watercolors by Alfred Leslie*, Timken Publishers, Inc., New York, 1988.

