

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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Missoulian

Cory Walsh, "Figure in Landscape: Exhibition pays tribute to late accomplished painter," *The Missoulian*, July 8, 2016

Devin Leonardi painted lands like these for years before he moved West.

After he was done working for the day, he might go for a long hike up Rock Creek or in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. In the winter, he could cross-country ski at Lolo Pass or Georgetown Lake.

The paintings were shipped to galleries in New York City or San Francisco, or to a global art fair. His work sold in France and Germany, too, where they were celebrated as technically accomplished renderings and commentaries on American history, westward expansion and the questionable march of progress.

"We talked a lot about what it was like for him to leave New York and go to Montana and how he was kind of entering the paintings he was making," said Cora Fisher, a curator and friend of Leonardi's from Cooper Union art school.

Because his work was in such high demand, he'd never exhibited in his adopted home before his took his own life in the summer of 2014 at age 33.

"In Memoriam," a sample of the work he developed, is on display now at the Missoula Art Museum, representing pieces that earned reviews in *Artforum* and other publications.

"I don't think people knew that this exceptionally talented painter lived here," said Brooke Swaney, a Montana filmmaker and friend of Leonardi's who met him in New York.

With drafting skills he learned at prestigious art schools, Leonardi used historical photographs as raw material to depict American history and its consequences, and in a separate body of work, he painted nudes that reference the dawn of photography and its usurping of painting's role as the means of creating images.



"Lookout Mountain," a 2009 Acrylic on paper by Devin Leonardi. An exhibition at the Missoula Art Museum, 'In Memoriam,' is the late artist's first showing of his work in Montana.

Because of those underpinnings, Fisher said he should be understood as a conceptual artist, who drew on history to generate more emotional resonance than someone who simply produced "sentimental Americana."

There are "tropes you can rely on, because we know that they work in a certain way," she said. He would use a sunset or a figure in the distance, but she sees an "intellectual skepticism around those gestures."

In "Lookout Mountain," an acrylic on paper from 2009, a lone traveler stands upon a high vantage point, facing away from the viewer, the entire scene bathed in deep blue for except a blanket at his feet rendered in dark, thrumming green.

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A watery sky unbroken by clouds, discernible lines or brush strokes diminishes from clean shade to a thin band of light past the horizon. It's unclear who he is, only that a journey is paused.

The painting generates an absorbing "quietude," as one of his gallerists, Claudia Altman-Siegel described it, meditative and enigmatic because intentions remain elusive, a quality that keeps the viewer coming back.

You can look at them for a long time, she said, and fall into them.



"Plains Near Anaconda," an oil on canvas on panel, was painted in 2011 after Leonardini moved to Montana from New York City.

Leonardi grew up in Chicago and started drawing at an early age. He studied at the Chicago Academy for the Arts and then attended Cooper Union, the prestigious private art college in New York City that until recently gave its art students full-ride scholarships.

He further developed his technical and conceptual skill and began showing his work at galleries his senior year.

He was working at the Museum of Modern Art when Annie Connole, a Helena native who'd moved to the city to study at the New School, walked in and asked to use the phone. They were together eight years.

He was funny, she said, a brilliant thinker and an excellent listener. "He could read people like

nobody else I've ever met," she said. He was generous. Having learned to cook when he was young, he would prepare a seven-course gourmet meal for guests. Often, three hours in the kitchen was his means of relaxing after a long day of painting.

He was a voracious reader, and consumed "In Search of Lost Time," Proust's multi-part novel that exceeds 4,000 pages, not once but three times.

Fisher said his inspirations were just as much literary and historical as visual.

Leonardi found success early, Connole said.

Three years after college, he was able to paint full-time for 12 months on his first solo exhibition. By the time he'd spent 11 years in New York, he'd found representation at Broadway 1602 and in San Francisco.

Altman-Siegel met Leonardini in spring 2008, after a recommendation from another artist whom she was seeking to represent at her new gallery in the Bay Area.

"I loved it from the second I saw it," she said in a phone interview. She admires the twin combination of the emotional weight and theoretical underpinnings, plus the "enigmatic quality" they hold.

It's an aspect noted by MAM curator Brandon Reintjes, who worked on the Missoula exhibition with Altman-Siegel, using works from her gallery and ones borrowed from private owners in San Francisco.

He said the roots in Western painting and photography make Leonardini difficult to pigeonhole:

"It slips out and defies any of those categories."

Leonardi didn't blink at the romantic and nostalgic aspects of that period's art, but used them to other ends.

Fisher, who curated Leonardini's first solo museum exhibition, held at Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, wrote in her catalogue essay that Leonardini employs "a shorthand of nostalgia" to pursue his

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larger message. "On the contrary, these images ask that we consider and contend with history in the present. His work offers a pathway to do so."

She said his paintings, including a piece called "Charleston" of ruined columns and black figures seeking shelter that was shown not long after the shootings, resonated with the public. People came back four or five times to see the show, which she began working on before Leonardi's death.

Reintjes, too, saw the usage of landscape, representation and nostalgia as a point of departure. "He's almost depicting nostalgia coldly," he said, or observing it.

On a technical level, he said, Leonardi's surfaces are complex, with thinly painted layers that reward repeated viewings. "You don't take them all in at once."

As his source material, Leonardi employed "family photos, images of popular culture, film or textbooks" Fisher noted, or sometimes pure imagination.

He "photo-collaged images from different sources by repeatedly xeroxing. The images became generational copies, increasingly degraded and abstract. He drew back onto the final collage study with pencil and then began to paint," she wrote.

Altman-Siegel recalls that a figurative painting, "Jenny Chrisman," sprung from a historical photo shot during the homesteading period. The young woman stands alone on the plain – Leonardi edited out the other family members from the picture.

His work also references the era when photography supplanted brush and oil "as the dominant method of image-making," she said. He was interested in reversing that development: taking a fast process like photography and filtering it through a time-consuming one like painting.

Many of the figurative pictures reference Thomas Eakins, the revered realist painter who also pioneered photography.

Reintjes noted that influences like Eakins, and he sees a little of Maxfield Parrish, aren't fashionable

right now – a refreshing view born of his thinking about art history.

In one interview, Leonardi asked "(W)hat is modernity anyway? We all throw the term around very causally these days. But when you say something is modern you haven't really said anything at all because the whole concept can only be defined in very limited and contradictory ways.

"Nonetheless modernity (post or otherwise) asserts itself as a pre-eminent good against which most else is bad. It's just this sense of surety that I hope to question."

In 2010, Connoles and Leonardi moved to Montana from New York after several visits, including a trip along the Hi-Line and a month's stay in Philipsburg. They lived there, too, and in Helena and spent two years in Missoula.

"Both of us were interested in exploring the landscape in a more intimate way artistically, and I think we felt we'd hit our limits in terms of being able to do that in New York," she said.

He explored his new home in myriad ways. He never had a driver's license before he moved here. He learned to cross-country ski and ride horses. He hiked for hours and loved fly fishing. He made friends in the Helena and Missoula artistic communities.

Vera Brunner-Sung, a filmmaker who lived in Missoula for a few years, said he was already a tour guide when she moved here and met him. Leonardi introduced her to the Helmsville Rodeo and the historic Washoe Theater in Anaconda.

Connoles saw a shift in his work even after the first visit in 2007, a divergence from a more romantic depiction of the West to the perspective of someone living here, "and the struggles one has when they live in such a vast landscape, and the way that time slows down, and the way you do become relatively isolated from the rest of the world."

Brunner-Sung, who like Leonardi maintained an art career outside the state, said they "talked about

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what it meant to make work in the relative isolation of Montana, how much it challenged us to be truthful with ourselves, to dig deep to create something meaningful."

Leonardi kept studios in Missoula and in Philipsburg, where he had easy access to the intense light. He had on hand books about Charlie Russell and Remington – Leonardi studied the latter's series of night paintings, and was particularly interested in capturing the moonlight, an effect out of the reach of historical photography, Connole said.

As an example of the early change, she pointed to two acrylics on paper at the MAM, "Manassas Junction" and "Millpond," both of which depict lone figures in the dusk light. In the former, a single traveler stoically pauses on the railroad tracks, gazing toward the horizon on the plains. In "Millpond," a nude is poised to reach into the water. In either piece, Leonardi has given more than half of the composition over to the night sky, one flecked with stars and one not, in an absorbing calm, or as Connole said, a silence that he tapped into upon experiencing the place in person.

"You can feel the space he started to enter. Once you get in touch with that, both the vastness in terms of physical landscape and in terms of silence, it changes you, and I think Devin was fundamentally changed by this new openness," she said.

Fisher concurred about the change in his work, and a breakthrough he experienced as he moved from acrylic into oils. In 2013, he painted "The Source is the Goal," likely developed from a historical black-and-white photo, judging from the feel of a reduced photocopy and the way the features of a woman in an ornate dress merge with the light flooding the window at which she stands.

"He said that was his favorite painting, and he did that after he moved to Montana," she said.