



Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992–97, orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels; thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, trim wax. Installation view. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Zoe Leonard

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Rachel Churner

THE TITLE of Zoe Leonard's exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Survey," immediately positions both her practice and this presentation as elusive and defiant. Even the word itself freely slips between noun and verb. Organized by Bennet Simpson with Rebecca Matalon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and debuting at the Whitney under the guidance of Elisabeth Sherman, the show is billed as the "first large-scale overview of the artist's work in an American museum." In both its austerity and its refusal of chronological order, the installation suggests that this is not a retrospective, which of course it still seems to be. "Survey" begins with aerial photographs Leonard made in the late 1980s and moves through decades of her work, ending with several rephotographed family snapshots from *In the Wake*, 2015-16; a sumptuous catalogue details the art of her career and includes essays on works that aren't on view. The exhibition, like Leonard's artworks, is permeated by ambiguity-like the provocative equivocation of a raised eyebrow or a half smile-offering gravitas but never confessing where it is located.

For almost forty years, Leonard has grappled with big questions using remarkably meager means and focusing on mundane subject matter: Grainy black-and-white photos show clouds outside a plane window, tree trunks growing through iron fences; color shots depict closed storefronts, bricked-up windows. Her sculptures consist of found objects, such as the vintage blue suitcases she lines up to create *1961, 2002-*, adding a new one every year so that their number reflects her age. Although the contemporary resonance of her work is palpable, her choices are often made with an eye to the past, as insistent reflections on the condition of morality. Her motivations are also political. A statement Leonard wrote in 1992 when poet Eileen Myles ran for president against George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perrot, begins, "I want a dyke for president," and continues with gathering force and breathtaking vulnerability: "...a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmV, at the welfare office, and has been unemployed and laid off and sexually harassed and gaybashed and deported." her text was presented in 2016 by High Line Arts as a thirty-foot-tall poster on the wall of downtown New York's Standard Hotel near the Whitney, but here a facsimile of her original typewritten version is on display. Its relevance is achingly clear. The stacked books that comprise *Tipping Point*, 2016, fifty-three first editions of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), comprising two explosive essays on being black in America, are equally discomfiting as a measure of how far the country has and has not come regarding race and reconciliation since then.

Strange Fruit, 1992-97, on view for the first time since 2001, when it was displayed as a part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection, is Leonard's expansive meditation on loss inspired in part by her friend David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992. (An exhibition of Wojnarowicz's work opens at the Whitney this summer.) It is easily the most powerful piece in the show. For five years, Leonard reassembled the peels of hundreds of pieces of fruit— oranges, lemons, grapefruits, bananas, even an avocado or two— sewing together the empty skins with thread and sinew and adorning them with zippers, buttons, and cloth. The rinds have withered and blackened, but their Dole and Chiquita stickers remain vibrant, as do the gold wires, the zigzagging threads, and the swatches of fabric. The color that remains alongside the decay is astounding, and asserts that lives, like memories, take much longer to fade than we might expect.

Leonard collaborated with a conservator in Germany for a year and a half to prevent the disintegration of *Strange Fruit* before deciding that she wanted the peels to decompose and the work to experience its own death. These kinds of "shoot first, think later" moments are common in Leonard lore. One of the artist's champions, Douglas Crimp, lovingly recalls the "disarray and carelessness" that he encountered when first visiting her studio, and which he later understood as evidence of her thoughtful deliberation before choosing which of her images would become artworks. The artist herself tells a story of arriving at Dia: Beacon to plan a site-specific commission, bringing with her a box of vintage postcards of Niagara Falls "as filler" then deciding to use thousands of them as the materials to create her stunning *You see I am here after all*, 2008. Apocryphal or not, these anecdotes are critical, because they give the apparent indeterminacy of a sense of purpose. The ease of her uncropped photographs, her seeming acceptance of scratches and dust and other flaws that acknowledge the spontaneity and

idiosyncrasy in her choice of subjects- all of this transforms Leonard's work into an intimate exchange between viewer and artist. Yet walking through the WHitney's impeccable galleries, there are times when the preciousness of the artist's installations thickens the air. Leonard has always worked with restraint and asceticism- apparent, for example, in her insistence that her photographs be shown beneath the pieces of glass held to the wall with L-pins rather than framed- but here in the museum, the heaviness of this kind of control undermines the subtlety of her process, and stifles its generous dialogue.