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In LA, Zoe Leonard Nails the Details

BY RICHARD CHANG | NOVEMBER 08, 2018



Installation view of Zoe Leonard, "Robert," 2001, ten suitcases, 72 7/8 x 21 1/2 x 20 in. (185 x 54.6 x 50.8 cm). (Courtesy of Museion Foundation, Bozen, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan, and Collection Enea Righi, Italy)

Since 2002, artist and photographer Zoe Leonard has been adding one vintage blue suitcase per year to her sculptural work, "1961." Each suitcase represents a year of her life; 1961 was the year of her birth.

It's that kind of painstaking, time-conscious approach that makes Leonard unique. Much of her work focuses on the framing, classifying and ordering of her life and her particular vision.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) has organized a major mid-career retrospective of the New York artist's photographs, sculptures and installations. "Zoe Leonard: Survey" had its premiere at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, March 2-

June 10, where it received quite favorable reviews. Organizers said it was the first large-scale overview of the artist's work in an American museum.

"Survey" made its West Coast premiere November 11 at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary space, a former police-car warehouse in LA's Little Tokyo district. The show runs through March 25, 2019, bringing together about 100 key works from across Leonard's career over three decades, from the mid-1980s to today.

The retrospective was organized by Bennett Simpson, senior curator at MOCA, and Rebecca Matalon, assistant curator at the museum.

“Leonard is one of the most sensitive and perceptive observers,” Simpson said in a statement. “But her work is far from objective or documentary — it is full of her piercing and profound vision as it asks us to bear witness to the details of daily life that often remain overlooked and unseen.”

Those details include, in black-and-white, gelatin-silver print: the tousle of an elder’s hair in the wind, as seen from the backseat of a car; a leather and metal specimen from what appears to be a bondage display; a scene of cumulus clouds witnessed from an airplane window; dark ocean waves from above, à la Vija Celmins; and a wax anatomical model that looks eerily human.

The survey includes works that put Leonard on the art-world map. “Tree,” 1997, consists of a tree carved into pieces and reassembled using metal plates, bolts and wires. The melancholic work questions the intersections of nature and culture. It’s on view in Los Angeles for the first time.

“The Fae Richards Photo Archive,” 1993-’96 — made for filmmaker Cheryl Dunye’s film “The Watermelon Woman,” 1996 — features 83 photographs chronicling the fictional life of a queer black singer and actress in the early 20th century. Every photograph is staged historically, printed to simulate the techniques of the era, and treated to give the appearance of time passing.

A newer sculpture, “How to Take Good Pictures,” consists of more than 1,000 copies of a Kodak manual in print between 1912 and 1995.

Leonard, a widely recognized photographer, is also known for creating works in a variety of other media. Her most famous piece may be a 1992 poem titled “I Want a President,” which starts like this: “I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn’t have a choice about getting leukemia.”

The poem was inspired by the announcement that her friend, Eileen Myles, would be running for US president in 1992 as an “openly female candidate.”

The poem was widely distributed and performed. In October 2016, one month before that fateful Election Day, High Line Art installed a gigantic version of the poem on a pillar under the Standard Hotel on the High Line in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood. A mock acceptance speech at the site by Myles in November 2016 attracted many other fellow artists and activists.

The Whitney Museum is very familiar with Leonard, including her in its 1993, 1997 and 2014 biennials of American art. Her work was also featured in Documenta IX and Documenta XII in Kassel, Germany.

The artist shuns superficiality, preferring to penetrate deep into her subject matter, no matter what that might be. In a 2012 conversation with the French art historian and journalist Élisabeth Lebovici, she said:

“Rather than any one subject or genre (landscape, portrait, still life, etc.), I was, and remain interested in engaging a simultaneous questioning of both subject and vantage point, the relation between viewer and world — in short, subjectivity and how it informs our experience of the world.”

The conversation, titled “The Politics of Contemplation,” was published on the occasion of two 2012 exhibitions, one in Venice, Italy and the other at Murray Guy gallery in New York City.

In concert with “Zoe Leonard: Survey” at MOCA, Hauser & Wirth gallery in Los Angeles is presenting “Zoe Leonard: Analogue,” consisting of 412 photographs arranged in grids and organized into 25 chapters. The exhibition reflects on issues of gentrification and the exchange of commodities in a capitalist, postcolonial world. That show runs through Jan. 20.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles is presenting “Zoe Leonard: Survey” at its Geffen Contemporary location through March 25. The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA is at 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles. More information: moca.org



Zoe Leonard, "Wax Anatomical Model with Pearls" 1990.