

Alfred Leslie's One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader

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When Alfred Leslie—fit, energetic and intensely focused at 90—greeted you at the door to his basement studio in New York's East Village, he ushered you in briskly then ducks away to turn down the soundtrack to the classic movie cable channel that is his constant workplace companion. In the minute or so it takes him to reach the volume control, it is impossible to resist the pull of disembodied Hollywood dialogue. Images of heroes, heroines and villains immediately populate the mind, reminding us what an inextricable part of memory the stories we consume over our lifetimes can become. That Leslie's creative space is shared with an endless procession of imaginary characters should be no surprise. After all, his most recent body of work, *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader*, consists of digitally painted images of famous and obscure protagonists from the last two centuries of world literature—from "The Last of the Mohicans" Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper's nineteenth-century epic *The Leatherstocking Tales* to navy diver Anna Kerrigan in Jennifer Egan's 2017 World War II novel *Manhattan Beach*.

Part of an as yet to be completed series of 100, the 63 portraits currently comprising the series are drawn from an eclectic and international range of sources.¹ The fictional characters inspiring Leslie include Amelia Caminha, the young woman pregnant by a corrupt priest in José Maria de Eça de Queiros's 1875 Portuguese anti-Catholic novel *The Crime of Father Amaro*; Paul Bäumer, the German World War I soldier Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 German anti-war classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*; and Johnny Perry, the gangster antihero of Chester Himes's 1952 masterpiece of African American pulp fiction *The Crazy Kill*. Leslie has described himself as an artist with "octopussarian tendencies," and *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader* showcases the full range of his high and popular-culture interests. Teeming with vibrant colors, a plethora of iconographic details and an intoxicating mix of different styles and effects—often jostling each other in the same image—the works present a dazzling, occasionally disconcerting parade of fanciful personalities. They represent the full range of Leslie's skills and imaginative powers and the myriad ways his lifelong love of reading has inspired him.



Johnny Perry, 2013-18, digital C-print

These imaginary portraits are painted and drawn using the stylus tool in the Photoshop photo editing and illustration program and are a subset of a larger group of computer-crafted figurative works Leslie calls Pixel Scores because, like musical compositions, they must be interpreted when printers transform them from computer files into two-dimensional images. He first experimented with Photoshop in the mid-2000s while using film editing software based

on similar principles. The program appealed to him because its system of revisable “layers,” which recalls the physical structure of a painting. He uses its many functions to create every element of his images from scratch without, he says, importing any photographs or other preexisting components. Printed using a dye sublimation process and laminated on Plexiglas, the images approach the saturated colors and light-reflective depth of oil paintings.

As Barbara Rose outlines in her essay accompanying this exhibition, *Alfred Leslie: A Humanist in a Technological Age*, the artist has had a long career as an arbiter of American culture. First achieving success in the early 1950s as an Abstract Expressionist painter, he has repeatedly reinvented himself: as a Beat-Generation avant-garde filmmaker, a photographer, a publisher of the “one shot” literary review *The Hasty Papers*, and—in the early 1960s, in one of the twentieth century’s most daring stylistic about-faces—a representational painter and drawer pioneering new ways of seeing the human form. Bucking prevailing trends toward abstraction, this breakthrough paved the way for other American figurative artists, including Chuck Close, Philip Pearlstein, and Alex Katz. Although he has avoided a career-defining signature style, Leslie has always been guided by a deep, personal investment in understanding and rethinking the ways we construct images and tell stories.

A bookworm (and an ardent cinephile) since childhood, Leslie, who calls himself “pretty much an autodidact,” cites reading as the mainstay of his self-styled education.² As a young boy, he borrowed his older brother’s library card and headed straight for the adult section. “I chose the thinnest, smallest book on the shelf,” he says. “It was *Hunger* by Knudt Hamsun, a Norwegian.”³ This avant-garde novel from 1890, renowned as a foundational work for modernist fiction in the twentieth century—was strong stuff and a good introduction to advanced and experimental art. Later, while still in high school, Leslie met Dr. Saul Colin, the former assistant to Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello whose 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, became a touchstone for Leslie and the inspiration for the title of this exhibition. In this absurdist play-about-a-play, the author, actors and unfinished characters compete for stage time. “Pirandello was a fixation because of his concept of the Theater of the Absurd,” says Leslie. “He introduced me to the idea that art could work on multiple levels, historical and psychological, and introduced me to the idea of compositing that runs through all of my work.” Colin, a professor at New York’s New School of Social Research, allowed Leslie to audit his course on world theater and introduced him to his colleague Erwin Piscator.

With Bertolt Brecht, Piscator was the originator of Epic Theater, a confrontational mode focused on contemporary social issues. Its central concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* also was an important early influence on Leslie. This “alienation effect” incorporated jarring antinaturalistic elements such as plot-spoiling interjections to undermine dramatic tension and illuminate the human plight from a Marxist perspective. These early experiences set the stage

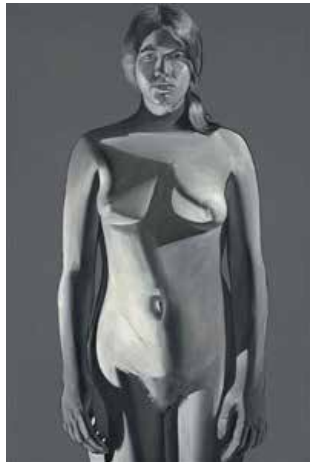


Morning Light, 1980/89, oil on canvas

for the confrontational, artificial and socially engaged aspects running through Leslie's work. "Ours is a moral landscape. We breathe deeply, crowded with values," reads a painted quote from poet Frank O'Hara beneath one of Leslie's well-known landscape images, a mist-shrouded cemetery that is a late addition to the Killing Cycle series discussed later in this essay.⁴ All of his figurative work reflects his ethical and perceptual concerns:

Perception—how do people see things? What do they see? If I can make a convincing picture of a person, will that influence how people will conduct their lives? How can you make a picture that's a public work to influence the conduct of people? I'm always trying to bring things together to make sense of the world.

Additionally, he understands that the "modernist breach" pioneered by avant-garde artists and writers of all stripes at the beginning of the 20th century "opened up a vast cultural territory for the world," allowing all artists to access all realms of thought and perception. It is in this humanistic field, described so well in Barbara Rose's essay, that Leslie operates.



Diana Kurt, 1966, oil on canvas

The group of imaginary portraits in this exhibition are the latest iteration of a long line of figure-based works that traces its beginnings to 1955, when the artist received a Polaroid camera as a gift and began taking mugshot-style snapshots of visitors to his studio. In the early 1960s, when he felt that pure abstraction was losing its cultural traction, he turned to these photographs. Inspired by his collection of black-and-white Polaroid portraits, which he had arranged in a grid on his studio wall, he began a series of portraits in *grisaille*, shades of white, black and gray. The resulting paintings had a strong sculptural presence, he said: "They were meant to have the feel of polished lead, with great bulk and weight—structures that would physically crowd the viewer."⁵ And by establishing a clear process for himself—making an extended series of *grisaille* portraits—he defined a working method:

I'm a formalist. If you look, you see that my figures have multiple vanishing points and lighting sources. They aren't 'Realism.' They're something more. In the end, I'm only concerned about making a beautiful picture. But in my process-driven approach, I learn what I know and the significance of the image is unlocked."

Described by the artist as "confrontational portraits," they were appropriate for the beginning of the 1960s, that countercultural decade. As critic David Elliott notes, Leslie heightened the artificiality and tension in the facial expressions and body language of his subjects in order to lend the works a theatricality and a symbolic gravitas: "People were changing their lives., questioning the racial, sexual, and political status quo of America. There was a tremendous impulse to locate oneself with and toward others. The *grisailles* propose such a location."⁶

On October 17, 1966, a devastating fire swept through Leslie's home and studio building, destroying almost all of his life's work and killing 12 firefighters. From that point, Leslie structured his personal narrative like a work of modernist fiction. He would, he said, live in two directions: one moving forward and discovering new themes, the other looking backward and recouping earlier work and ideas. *The Killing Cycle* of 1969-70—his famous nine-part painted chronicle of the death of his close friend and filmic collaborator, poet and museum curator Frank O'Hara, in a beach taxi accident on Fire Island—also began as a means to mourn a profound loss. Reminiscent of history paintings depicting important events, the cycle of large-scale images looks to earlier forms of art to infuse biographical and representational art with moral weight. Borrowing the moody lighting and dramatic compositions of Old Masters like Caravaggio, Rubens, Gericault, and Poussin, Leslie depicted O'Hara's death, which he did not witness, as a tragedy of the highest order and, in the process, publicly acknowledged himself as one of visual art's first "postmodernists"—someone unafraid to reach for the forms and ideas of powerful predecessors and traditions in order to access strong emotions and upset prevailing doctrines.⁷

The breadth and span of history and geography, the "timeless world itself," Leslie says, is the purview of *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader*. The diverse retinue of fictional characters comprising draw inspiration from the countless books he has consumed over his lifetime and also showcase his bold experiments with representation and signification in a new, digital medium. They are drawn from all corners of the literary world—epic, historical novels, hard-boiled detective stories, rags-to-riches tales and a plethora of narratives spinning out spiritual, psychological and social aspirations and obsessions. They contain of well-known protagonists from classics of world literature: Rosasharn Joad from John Steinbeck's 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath*; Tatyana Larina from Alexander Pushkin's 1833 *Eugene Onegin*, 1933; "Little



Kay Arnold, 2016, dye sublimation print on aluminum

Nell" Trent from Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1840-41, to name just a few. Mostly, though, the sources for *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader* are obscure or offbeat works currently receiving little critical attention. Additionally, as Barbara Rose notes, Leslie's choice of subjects skews toward the outcast, the scoundrel and the underdog. Fitting these categories are the characters Louise Girard from the politically charged damsels-in-distress melodrama *Les deux orphelines*, a 1874 play by Adolphe d'Ennery and Eugène Cormon (adapted as the 1921 film *Orphans of the Storm*); Kay Arnold a good-hearted, working-class "party girl" who becomes involved with a railroad tycoon's son in Milton Herbert Gropper's 1924 play *Ladies of the Evening* (later adapted for the 1930 film *Ladies of Leisure* starring Barbara Stanwyck); and Jacques Lantier, the murderous railroad man of Émile Zola's 1890 *La Bête Humaine*.

Teeming with powerful personalities and dramatic digital effects, the series is challenging to process visually and intellectually. The exuberant cacophony of Leslie's influences—the multitude of stories, narrative structures and cultural histories he's assimilated over a literary

lifetime—is echoed in a thrilling, occasionally woozying visual overload. The colors beneath the images’ smooth printed surfaces are electric—bright and often unmixed. A plethora of different styles of representation jostle for attention, often in the same image—from intricately detailed near-photorealism to schematic sketches. Pictorial space, perspective and the relationship of figure and setting, is often confounding. Some characters exist as carefully modeled flesh-and-blood beings in recognizable environments. Others appear as flat cutouts in a depthless void. Illumination ranges from dramatic candlelight to garish uplighting. Some faces are painstakingly rendered, from the iris in an eye to the freckle on a cheek. Others are gauzy masks. Cotton-candy clouds float in from of lurid sunsets. Vestiges of the proscenium stage, a framing device Leslie has used throughout his figurative images, recur again and again. High-definition details, Hershey Bars, cigarettes and cigarette packages, and photographs create myriad mini *mise en abymes*. Fragments of text, on name tags, bottles and background billboards provide clues to a character’s world. Caricaturing, cartoonish, stereotypical and naturalistic mode are all deployed in Leslie’s attempts to move his subjects from their native realm of language into the visual field. A few examples of portraits from the still-growing series hint at the breadth and scope of Leslie’s ambitious project.



Florence Atwater, 2014, dye sublimation print on aluminum

Many of the One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader images are intricate, fully imagined portraits. They include clothing, context-setting backdrops and other attributes that suggest their times, places, occupations and states of mind. For example, *Lolita*, 2016, the gamine at the heart of Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 depicts its subject as a goofy, grinning girl surrounded by candy, cake, magazines and a phonograph, with little hint the sexual obsession at the heart of the story. *Florence Atwater*, 2014, the mischievous Indiana girl in Booth Tarkington’s 1922 romantic comedy *Gentle Julia*, stands in a nighttime back yard clutching a cupcake and an apple while, echoing her own eavesdropping predilections, being watched by a figure peering out of a window. And the character Curzio Malaparte in *Curzio Malaparte and Jack Hamilton*, 2017–18, which depicts a corrupt Italian liason officer and his American superior from the 1949 novel *The Skin* by the author of the same name becomes a blaring emblem of the treachery and squalor of allied-occupied Naples at the end of the Second World War. His face is bedecked with black-market cigarettes, and he is equipped with a dagger and sickle and draped in billowing American, English, Italian and Nazi flags.

Other single-figure images rely primarily on Leslie's painterly skills and sense of theatricality for characterization. *Gustav von Aschenbach*, 2014, the author entranced by a beautiful young boy in Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice* is seen seated holding his hat and a pencil. Only his shifting eyes and half-agape mouth and the sheet of paper falling from the arm of his chair hint at his all-consuming obsession. *Zeno Cosini*, 2018, the narrator of Italo Svevo's 1923 psychological picaresque *Zeno's Conscience*, is illuminated from below like many of the artist's earlier painted portraits, lending him a ghoulish air appropriate for this diary-format tale of addiction, love, and capitalism at the outbreak of the First World War. And both *Miss Wonderly*, 2014, the duplicitous artefact-smuggler in Dashiell Hammet's *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930, and *Alamena Perry*, 2013–18, the loyal and lethal first wife of gangster Johnny Perry in Chester Himes's 1952 *The Crazy Kill*, are depicted as mysterious ingénues, each equipped with an enigmatic smile against a panoramic New York City backdrop, downtown and Harlem, respectively.



Zeno Cosini, 2018, dye sublimation print

Another group of works feels provisional or unfinished. In *Orlando*, 2017-18, from Virginia



Orlando, 2017-18, dye sublimation print

Woolf's gender-swapping romance *Orlando: A Biography*, 1928, and *Marty Piletti*, 2017-18, from Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay for the 1953 TV drama of lovelorn wallflowers, *Marty*, background and clothing elements appear as line drawings. *Countess Geschwitz and Lulu*, 2015-16, a lesbian noblewoman and an alluring grifter from Alban Berg's 1937 opera *Lulu*, of which is based on the play *Pandora's Box* of 1904 by Frank Wedekind, appear flattened, much like paper cutouts, detailed only provisionally in their faces and the buttons of the Countess's mannish tuxedo. And *Shosho*, 2016, a highly stylized image of a Chinese nightclub dancer in the 1929 silent film *Piccadilly* written by Arnold Bennett is only treated realistically in her face, which sits underneath a solid black swoosh of a hat and above a white fur collar that resembles smoke more than any solid material.

Alfred Leslie has led a courageous, adventuresome life on the cutting edge of culture for far more than half a century. That he should conceive of his career, the sweep of which rivals a vast American chronicle like John dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, in literary terms is hardly surprising. As his wife Mary d'Agostino observes, "Everything that happens to him becomes a story."⁸ In fact, the very act of reading, psychologists now believe, may be integral to leading a conscious life. Fiction can serve as an important preparation and rehearsal for life, Dr. Keith Oatley of the University of Toronto says,

[It] is a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect. Just as a computer simulations can help us get to grips with complex problems

such as flying a plane or forecasting the weather, so novels, stories and dramas can help us understand the complexities of life.⁹

We all imagine alternative selves inspired by fictional characters: the astronaut, the dancer, the private detective. They manifest themselves fleetingly in daydreams or nightmares, but they mostly remain vague doppelgangers. For Leslie, though, they are present forces, brought to life via his great perception as an artist and reader. He speaks of his subjects and their various predicaments with great compassion, as if they were fellow travelers through the vicissitudes of life and fate. “Writers, not politicians, are the most important people in society,” he says. “It’s taken me my entire work life to fuse literature and pictures of people, abstraction and the currents of history. How do you file them together to make sense of the world? For me, fictional characters are the key.”

Leslie once wrote in a manifesto “To move is to LIVE! To STATICIZE is to die.”¹⁰ Through the exquisite and strange portraits in *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader*, he has found a means to reinvent himself yet again. By giving visual form to a personal pantheon of imaginary heroes and antiheroes, he presents the thrilling possibility of escaping the curse of solipsism and living one hundred lives in one. It is his hope that his characters will be successful in their search for readers—of fiction and of faces—willing to join him on his quest to “make sense of the world” through stories and pictures.

¹ In 1983, Leslie published a book entitled *100 Views Along the Road* (New York: Oil and Steel Gallery) featuring a series of watercolor landscape paintings made on a cross-country road trip. Working serially and toward a goal is central to his process-driven approach because it “unlocks” what he knows.

² Leslie attended New York University for 19 months until his G.I. Bill tuition funding earned serving in the Coast Guard at the end of the Second World War ran out. Conversation with the artist, May 3, 2018. Telephone conversation with the artist, April 4, 2018

³ Quotations and information with sources not otherwise acknowledged are from a series of conversations I had with Alfred Leslie between September 9, 2017, and May 22, 2018, while preparing this essay

⁴ *Morning Light*, 1980/89, Oil on canvas, 72 x 192 in., a late addition to the series *The Killing Cycle* based on the death of Frank O’Hara, which is discussed later in this essay.

⁵ Alfred Leslie in Judith Stein, “Alfred Leslie: An Interview with Judith Stein,” *Art in America* 97, no. 10 (January 2009), 93.

⁶ David Elliott, “The Radical Theater of Alfred Leslie,” *The Radical Theater of Alfred Leslie*, exh. Cat. (New York: Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art, 2007), 7.

⁷ See David Elliott, 4-5.

⁸ Mary D’Agostino quoted in a telephone conversation with Alfred Leslie, March 6, 2018.

⁹ Dr. Keith Oatley quoted in Anne Murphy Paul, “Your Brain on Fiction,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html> (Accessed May 14, 2018)

¹⁰ Alfred Leslie quoted in Judith Stein, “Alfred Leslie: An Interview with Judith Stein,” *Art in America* 97, no. 10 (January 2009), 95.