

# **Alfred Leslie: A Humanist in a Technological Age**

Barbara Rose

*Gallery copy. Please do not remove.*

## Alfred Leslie: A Humanist in a Technological Age

Barbara Rose

© The author and Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, 2018  
Images © and courtesy Alfred Leslie

*With the multiple horizons and unjustified light I democratize the body. The person I paint doesn't exist; the body is a reflection of process and randomness, a composite of sittings. By the time I'm through, the only "there" that's there is the "there" I have made.*

-Alfred Leslie, 2009<sup>1</sup>

This year, the unpredictable and prolific painter, photographer, film maker, set designer, and writer Alfred Leslie will be ninety-one. Still an *enfant terrible*, whose wall-size Abstract Expressionist paintings of the fifties and early sixties took the concept of the portable mural literally, he has not slowed down or lost his capacity to surprise. In the current series of dye sublimation prints and digital C-prints, *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader*, a subset of works he calls the Pixel Scores, Leslie is still determined to make an impact, this time with powerful images of characters drawn from literary sources.

These intense, colorful works depicting famous and obscure characters from the thousands of books Leslie has read over his lifetime are created not with paint on canvas, but with Photoshop, a digital photo editing and illustration program employing a system of layering images, which he discovered in the mid-2000s. Utilizing the wide-ranging flexibility of Photoshop, which permits a vast gamut of painterly effects, overlays and revisions, Leslie is able to synthesize his multitude of skills in photography, film, painting and stage design. They also showcase his passionate interest in world literature, with its store of human values and self-reflections.

After serving in the Coast Guard during World War II, Bronx-born Leslie took advantage of the G. I. Bill to study a variety of subjects at New York University. A handsome, perfectly proportioned body builder and skilled gymnast, Leslie earned money as an artist's model, posing nude for Reginald Marsh and others at the Art Students League and Hans Hofmann's school, as well as at Pratt Institute. This early attention to the human body is reflected in his later figurative works depicting larger than life nudes, which are seen at various stages in life that may be interpreted as corresponding to the artist's own aging process.

At a critical stage in his young life, while participating in the avant-garde intellectual milieu of postwar New York and its New School for Social Research, he met German émigré playwright and director Erwin Piscator, a pioneer of interdisciplinary theater, and his secretary Saul Colin, who had been Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello's assistant. Leslie never forgot Pirandello's classic modern play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a model for modern absurdist

playwriting, which gave him an early insight into the manifold means by which art could reflect life and defy logic—and also the inspiration for the title of the series *One Hundred Characters in Search of a Reader*.

Written and first performed in Rome in 1921, Pirandello's play ran off Broadway in New York for the entire year of 1963, coincidentally the year Leslie began painting portraits, which, at the time, were from life, not of imagined characters. Five decades later, in the *Pixel Scores*, the real models Leslie used for his past portraits have been replaced by fanciful characters based on literary sources. These starkly isolated figures suggest flattened poster cut outs, which often merge with their variegated backgrounds, confusing the viewer regarding the place and time these scenarios take place.

Pirandello creates a confusion between the author and the director of the play, who may or may not be the same; between the unfinished characters and the actors; between fiction and reality and between the stage and the audience. Ultimately, we realize this theater is taking place in the mind of the great playwright, just as we know the characters and stories projected by the *Pixel Scores* are in Leslie's imagination and the interpretation of the public. The possible plots involve incest, suicide and other *louche* low-life scenarios.

Pirandello's characters may be imaginary, but they talk back. They would be at home in Leslie's rogues' gallery of the *Pixel* portraits. Their bizarre personalities are reminiscent of the hellzapoppin atmosphere of Leslie's studio at the time, which became a gathering place for members of the Beat Generation. That creative Bohemia, which Frank O'Hara described in his poem *Messy Lives*, is by now long gone. But its excitement, unpredictability and creative distress are recalled in the characters who enliven the *Pixel Scores*.

Leslie's partial deafness, due to a childhood illness, originally isolated him in his own world, determining the solitary path he would take as an ambitious, determined, and self-directed mature artist. Leslie admits his hearing loss shaped aspects of his personality: "I always found myself functioning in a multilayered way with people, as it was hard to keep on top of most situations. My strategies were to talk preemptively, interrupt, catch up or keep one step ahead."<sup>2</sup>



#62, 1959, oil on canvas

In the early fifties, Leslie, always precocious, was showing his paintings and was already a regular at Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning's hangout, the notorious Cedar Bar. His huge abstract painting was shown in the famous 1951 Ninth Street Show, which established the roster of Abstract Expressionist painters. As a 24-year-old *wunderkind*, Leslie had his first one-man show in 1952 organized by John Bernard Myers at the Tibor

de Nagy gallery, which showed the future stars of the so-called second generation of the New York School like his friends Helen Frankenthaler, Larry Rivers and Robert Goodenough. At the time, Leslie was living on the Hoboken waterfront in a flop house. To come up with the \$250 to cover printing and mailing costs. Leslie, always resourceful, earned the money by winning a TV quiz show prize.

In this first exhibition was the notorious *The Bed-Sheet Painting*, a huge 12-by-16 feet work painted on unsized canvas. It had a black, scumbled surface and a painted white bar leaning in the lower left corner and hung, unstretched, on the main wall on nails poking through grommets. Needless to say, it made an impression—as did a later eight-foot-high sculpture of Christ with an erection.

Myers, a talkative, indefatigable discoverer of new talent, was a puppeteer involved in theater and poetry as well as art. The gallery, a hotbed of invention, encouraged collaborations. Soon Leslie was collaborating with artists in other fields like poet Frank O'Hara and photographer Robert Frank. One of his collaborations with Frank, the film *Pull My Daisy*—which also featured Beatnik novelist Jack Kerouac; French movie star Delphine Seyrig, wife of painter Jack Youngerman; art dealer Dick Bellamy; and jazz singer Anita Ellis—became an underground classic.

Leslie, photographing since childhood, began making films as a teenager. Around 1955, a collector who made a fortune buying the company's stock gave him a Polaroid camera. He recalls he must have shot hundreds of portraits of visitors to his studio. His approach was straightforward. He sat friends down and told them to look straight into the lens—long before Warhol exploited the new process in his Polaroids of celebrities.

Like Warhol's factory, the loft Leslie eventually rented was a meeting place for all kinds of artists and writers (and also the set for *Pull My Daisy*), but never for the fashion crowd or the empty headed. Leslie was passionately involved in art and he expected his friends to be as well. No amount of fame or money could gain you entry. On the other hand, friends and collaborators were always welcome and frequently shanghaied into performing.



Stills from film *Pull My Daisy*, 1959

In 1957, Leslie began to organize his close-up Polaroid headshots of friends, hanging them in a grid on his studio wall. At the time, he was an abstract painter and sometime filmmaker, as well as the publisher of *The Hasty Papers*, a "one-shot" literary review which included contributions by Jean Paul Sartre, Alan Ginsburg and Fidel Castro as well as poetry, short stories and political

observations. Its tabloid format and eclectic contents became an inspiration for the current *Brooklyn Rail*, according to its publisher Phong Bui.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the complex process and experiences of Leslie's Pixel Scores, as well as their humanistic content, one needs to follow the path that led him to create these characters of his own personal theater. Leslie's decision to give up abstraction for figuration in 1962 was an unexpected, indeed shocking break with his past. He felt abstraction was played out and had nothing more to communicate except formally. In other words, it lacked content, in which he was becoming ever more interested. However, his foundation as an abstract artist accounts for the solid organizational structure of his compositions. In addition to renouncing abstraction, he also gave up color at this point to paint huge portraits in *grisaille*, or shades of gray.



*Self-Portrait, 1966–67, oil on canvas*

He explained this decision in a 1985 interview with Stephen Westfall in *Art in America* stating that “The adversarial position of 20th-century painting, which was what so attracted me in 1946, seemed to have disappeared by 1960. And it seemed to me that within the framework of figuration there was a way to renew painting.”<sup>4</sup> Leslie was perhaps the only New York School artist who could have made such a decision since he was blessed by an extraordinary ability as a draftsman as well as an original color sense that is intuitive rather than learned. In the historic combat between drawing and painting, *desegno* and *colore*, he did not have to choose sides. Although an autodidact, Leslie spent years studying art history, especially the paintings of Baroque masters such as Caravaggio and Georges de la Tour, whose dramatic

lighting and compositions inspire his later work. Perhaps because of his early training as a gymnast, Leslie was always acutely aware of the body and its anatomy, including its transformation through aging and pregnancy, the latter being a subject of longstanding interest for the artist.

In the summer of 1966, Leslie's good friend and collaborator, the poet Frank O'Hara, was killed by a beach taxi in a freak accident on Fire Island. O'Hara was a much beloved curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and his death shocked the art world. Then, that fall, on October 17, while Leslie was preparing to have a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art another tragedy struck.

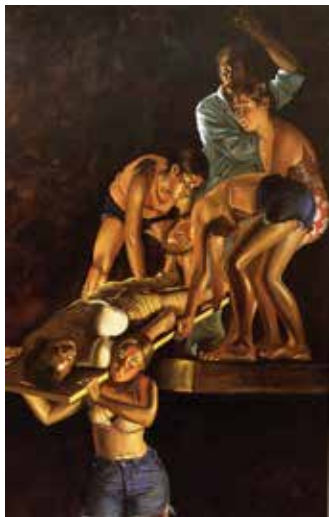
After a summer grieving for his friend, a devastating fire destroyed the contents of his home and studio in Lower Manhattan, killing a dozen firefighters. He lost not only his unpublished writings, film masters and equipment, but also over fifty *grisaille* paintings and drawings awaiting curatorial review for an upcoming show at the Whitney Museum of American Art,

which was subsequently cancelled. After the fire that destroyed his *grisaille* portraits as well as so much else of his art and life, reclaiming the past in films, archives or recreating the images themselves became a major pastime.

The *grisaille* portraits lead to the series of two dozen other works depicting women he made from 1968 to 1986 titled *The Lives of Some Women*. The women stare out at the viewer, half lengths in a variety of poses, whose frontality and unswerving contact with the spectator's gaze reminds one of the blank stare of the barmaid who confronts the viewer with shocking directness and intimacy in Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergeres*.

Leslie's background in theater accounts for the importance of dramatic stage lighting, which became prominent once he becomes a figurative painter in the mid-sixties. The characters he creates in the Pixel Scores, like Pirandello's characters, seem to inhabit the shallow space of the proscenium stage. In the original play, the six characters who interrupt the scene are looking for an author to finish their story. One might say something similar of the personages Leslie, a lifelong reader, plucks from their literary contexts to populate his own personal theater.

The dual tragedies of O'Hara's death and the studio fire profoundly affected Leslie. He set about expressing his sense of loss in the series of monumental paintings titled *The Killing Cycle*, begun in 1966, which, it should be remembered, was the height of the Vietnam War. In August, 1966 Lyndon Johnson called for an increase in American Military personnel to 500,000 and for



*The Loading Pier, 1975, oil on canvas*

more bombing of North Vietnam. By October, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara admitted the war was going badly for the U.S. The U.S. response was to increase the troops and the bombs. In New York, this carnage was met with horror, especially in the art world and was the historical context for Leslie's new paintings. In the *The Killing Cycle*, the point of view changes as it might in a film, and we see the tragedy from various points of view. Their relationship to the intense drama of Baroque art, which abstraction can never convey, is obvious. *The Loading Pier*, for example, is a clear reference to Caravaggio's *Deposition*. Caravaggio was also much in the news in 1966, the year of his great retrospective at the Louvre which was covered by all the art magazines.

Like Caravaggio, Leslie brought real people and real objects into his studio as models. He even brought in a jeep in order to draw and paint from it. The parallels with Caravaggio, as well as his use of light and shadow to create illusions of powerful three dimensionality projecting into the spectator's space, are clear. Caravaggio, of course, was the original bad boy of art. He was not only wanted for murder, but he was also rejected by many because he had ordinary people

pose as lofty religious figures. His barefoot Madonna in the *Dormition of the Virgin*, 1604-06, for example, was clearly a local prostitute whose dirty feet were as shocking as Leslie's shamelessly nude monumental pregnant women. Both artists use shock value to overturn academic ideals of beauty and decorum.

From the outset of his career, Leslie has always been, above all, a subversive, challenging bourgeois taste. The political dimension is there, but the narration is in the mind of the viewer who must invent the plot for which Leslie supplies the character. The compressed space of Leslie's figurative paintings, which pushes figures aggressively toward the spectator, reminds one also of Georges de la Tour's awareness of the frame, a device into which he barely fits his figures. The more tender, simplified portraits of the earliest Pixel Scores reminds one of De la Tour's fondness for candle light and repose in a painting like the 1645 *Lamentation over St. Sebastian*.

Clearly Leslie attempts to communicate the same complex emotions of Old Master paintings in his computer-generated printed images. The spectator is jolted by Leslie's extreme contrasts in a sense analogous to Caravaggio's bold use of *chiaroscuro* and foreshortening to create the illusion that the figures were actually three dimensional and entering the viewers' space. This is also the effect of Leslie's figurative works in which the painter augments the illusionistic effect with intense theatrical lighting, which he mastered as a result of his early interest in theater.

From 1992–98, Leslie painted a series of standing nudes titled *Ten People*, each seven feet high, which was first shown at New York's American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2006 and is part of this exhibition. The figures are lit from below, which gives them a ghostly presence.

Reminiscent of the Greek Orthodox iconostasis presentation of the Apostles, each panel represents a different figure, although in Leslie's version one does not know if they are saints or sinners. What is obvious, however, is that they are vulnerable humans in an age growing increasingly dehumanized. They are, to paraphrase Kenneth Clark, "naked" rather than "nude" in their confrontational attitudes. Unlike the nude, which Clark called a form rather than a subject of art, Leslie's figures, in their nakedness, are all too human and vulnerable.



*Ten People*, 1992–98, oil on canvas

This monumentality and confrontational spirit is also present in the *Pixel Scores*, although now the figures are elaborately costumed in colorful outfits invented by the artist. The series no longer depicts real people but imaginary characters, often unsavory, from literature that intrigue Leslie. They do not use any elements borrowed from photographs, but rather are constructed of bits of images Leslie himself creates on the computer. "I like to think of everything as automatic artifice," he says. "From images greatly disproportionate in scale to

kitschy images of marshmallow clouds and whatnot, it's all intermingled in these *Pixel Scores*. It's all complete artifice, bound together—I hope—by first-class formal attributes."<sup>5</sup>

The layering of the *Pixel Scores* is presaged in a preceding series, *The Lives of Some Women*, in which Leslie first used the layering, semi-erasures and collage-making properties of digital image making. He found that he could reuse digital files recombining them at will on the computer. However, he was not ready to give up the illusion of depth even when using technological means to create his images. "I had to show pixel depth," he told writer Teri Tynes in an interview.<sup>6</sup> To create depth of color, he devised a system of layering based on ordering and reordering of pixels as they appeared on the computer screen, and which he can rearrange by moving a stylus on a touch-sensitive pad. Photoshop uses "layers" to build images in a way that parallels Old Master oil painting. This is a very different from the repeated marks that make up the photorealistic images of Chuck Close, whose technique recalls the visible dabs of post-Impressionism.

To get the quality and fidelity he wanted on a large scale, Leslie realized he had to use professional printers to realize his images in physical form using the dye sublimation process, which suffuses a support surface with pigment instead of just spraying it onto paper as with most digital prints. Leslie's skill with and understanding of paint allow him to pull off the tonal washes, layering, and undertones that uncannily present themselves in this novel medium. "I reach for content but it's only as I apply the formal structure, that everything falls into place...every time."<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning of his long career Alfred Leslie has never worked to please the crowd. It is clear from the weird bizarre but all too human characters of the *Pixel Scores* that he is not about to begin now. Early on, Fairfield Porter called him a reckless expressionist, and Irving Sandler wrote that his paintings were rough, even ugly. That suited Leslie fine because he sought truth, not beauty in the conventional sense. "For me, art is not biology, progression is afterthought, what happens is what becomes, history is the unexpected footprint."<sup>8</sup> At times lurid, squalid, vulgar or marginal, his literary characters can compete with the cast of a TV miniseries like *Boardwalk Empire*, 2010-14, set in Atlantic City. Jostling meanings combine and recombine so the interpretation depends not on the artist but on the spectator, creating a lively dialogue with the character depicted. When Phong Bui asked him if he considered the *Pixel Scores* as the start of his late phase, Leslie, always contentious, answered "I'm anti 'late phase' or any other form of labeling. What I'm interested in is living long enough to do what I don't even know about yet."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Leslie in Judith Stein, "Alfred Leslie: An Interview with Judith E. Stein," *Art in America* 97, no. 1 (January 2009), 93–94.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie in Stein, 95.



---

<sup>3</sup> Phong Bui, "Alfred Leslie with Phong Bui," *The Brooklyn Rail*, <https://brooklynrail.org/2015/10/art/alfred-leslie-with-phong-bui>, (October 5, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Leslie in Stephen Westfall, "Then and Now: Six of the New York School Look Back" *Art in America* 73, no. 6 (June 1985), 112–13

<sup>5</sup> Leslie quoted in Bui.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Leslie in Teri Tynes, "A Conversation with Alfred Leslie on 'The Lives of Some Women'," <https://walkingoffthebigapple.blogspot.com/2012/07/conversation-with-alfred-leslie-onthe.html> (July 3, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Leslie in Tynes.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie in Stein, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie quoted in Bui.