

AN ARTIST WHOSE BUDDHIST AND PAINTING PRACTICES CONVERGE

Artist's Questionnaire

Leidy Churchman interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan
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Leidy Churchman's latest show encourages a focused, joyful kind of looking that feels deliberately at odds with our increasingly distracted world.

Tucked at the end of an unassuming alley in Red Hook, Brooklyn, amid 19th-century red brick houses originally built to accommodate fishermen, Leidy Churchman's studio feels like a refuge — a minimalist retreat that exudes the kind of tranquillity found in the artist's meditative paintings. The 800-square-foot space, located on the first floor of a former industrial building, is unfurnished but for a trio of stainless-steel and wood work tables, which are entirely covered with palettes, brushes and oil paints — mostly Old Holland but Churchman, who uses “they” and “them” pronouns, favors Gamblin for white and sap green. On a breezy afternoon in February, they stood surrounded by five large-scale paintings — including “Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)” (2020), a vibrant landscape populated by monkeys and bears that's based on an 18th-century Indian work by an unknown artist, and the abstract “Groundless Ground” (2020) — which they completed for “Earth Bound,” their current exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. Their dog, a black Saluki-and-Doberman mix named Sarah, sat alongside Churchman as they put the final touches on the works.

It's been six months since the artist moved into this studio — previously, they rented a space on the Lower East Side not far from their Alphabet City apartment — and working in the former port neighborhood has grown on them. “I see trucks and forklifts coming and going, I hear people fixing motors and engines. I enjoy being the only artist in this building,” they say. But now that they've finished the 21 paintings for the Matthew Marks show, they admit they're already eager to move on. “When I devour a space, I believe I am done and ready to go,” says Churchman, who spent just three years in their former studio. The sparse

furnishings in the Red Hook space are, in part, a reflection of the fact that they are just passing through.

Churchman, 40, is known for their contemplative, detailed explorations of a broad array of themes relating to memory, pop culture and art history. If they have a signature, it is perhaps the diversity of their subject matter, which has included exotic animals, Tibetan Buddhism, maps, online videos, paintings by other artists, from the French Post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau to the American Modernist Marsden Hartley, and book covers. In fact, they compare a painting to a good book, one that reveals new depths with each reading — though they often like to present multiple images within a single canvas without any clear hierarchy, as if inviting the viewer to sequence the narrative as they please. Last year, the more than 60 diverse paintings in the exhibition “Crocodile” at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, which remains the largest survey of Churchman’s career to date, especially highlighted the artist’s wide-ranging interests. One work — “Don’t Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)” (2019), a 32-foot-long collagelike painting spread across the museum’s floor — included images of a scene from the 1982 movie “E.T.,” a notecard bearing a Buddhist Lojong slogan (“Abandon Any Hope of Fruition”) and a skunk captured mid-spray. Another painting, “Disappearing Acts” (2019), was inspired by the conceptualist pioneer Bruce Nauman’s “Contrapposto Studies, I through VII” (2015-16). “There is so much detail and nuance surrounding us,” they say about the abundance of seemingly ordinary images that we have the potential to overlook.

Buddhism, which Churchman has practiced for six years, is a primary theme in their new show. “Karma Kagyu & Essex St. (Yellow Studio) (Devotion)” (2020), a large yellow-drenched painting, shows a Buddhist ceremony taking place in a room that resembles both the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in Woodstock, N.Y., which Churchman visited shortly before making it, and the artist Zoe Leonard’s former New York studio (some years after Leonard left that building, Churchman occupied the adjacent space and that connection lingered in their imagination). “Buddhadharma Fever” (2019), another vast painting in autumnal colors, is an ode to both a bedroom in Churchman’s father’s house in Maine, where they often spend time and sometimes paint in the garage, and to the same Woodstock monastery. “What I didn’t quite realize was that the monastery there is modeled after a traditional one in Tibet, and that we would actually be chanting in Tibetan,” they recall. “So much seeped in and manifested there — my yearslong Buddhadharma fever transitioned into something much roomier, an easy, breezy devotion that feels like letting go.”

Working in contrasting scales — “White Girl” (2019), which depicts a young woman on a kind of recumbent bicycle, measures just 9 by 11 inches — allows the artist to engage their viewer more actively in the practice of looking, inviting them to move closer to or farther from a canvas, an exercise they consider especially urgent in our era of iPhone snapshots that are forever an arm’s length away. “Looking

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at paintings is healthy for us,” Churchman says. The idea for “iPhone 11” (2019-20), a painting in which the device resembles a planet or spaceship floating within an infinite darkness, came to the artist while they were navigating the F.D.R. Drive en route to their studio: There, above the parkway, was a gigantic billboard promoting the phone’s three-lens technology, the positioning of which recalled a human face. Removed from their original context in Churchman’s work, those lenses seem to stare quizzically back at the viewer, all but demanding you stop and meet their concentrated gaze.

As we took shelter in the studio from the blustery day outside, Churchman made cups of espresso, opened a can of dolmades and answered T’s Artist Questionnaire.

Osman Can Yerebakan: *What is your day like? How much do you sleep? What’s your work schedule?*

Leidy Churchman: My schedule depends a lot on my dog. If I don’t bring her to the studio, I leave her with my Buddhist mentor, Gayle.

OCY: *How many hours of creative work do you think you do?*

LC: Around eight hours every day, although it depends on whether I’m working from my studio, my apartment or Maine. It’s a 10-hour drive from New York to my father’s house, so when I go, I tend to spend a good amount of time there.

OCY: *What’s the first piece of art you ever made?*

LC: I believe it was a sculpture that I made as an undergrad at Hampshire College in Massachusetts. I just took stuff — a coffee pot, for example — from all over the place and wired it together to create a human figure.

OCY: *What’s the worst studio you ever had?*

LC: Probably my Columbia University studio during grad school. It was a small space right next to the boiler with no windows. A studio with no windows can be really depressing, but this one led me to create video work, which benefits from darkness, so it turned out O.K. in the end.

OCY: *What’s the first work you ever sold, and for how much?*

LC: I had a painting in one of those coffee-shop exhibitions, and a man paid me \$100 for it in cash. This was in Amherst, Mass., in 1999, while I was in college. They kept the painting up until the exhibition was taken down, by which point I had lost his phone number. I guess he never received that painting.

OCY: *How do you know when you're finished with a work?*

LC: I believe I'm not done most of the time. But that's why we artists always have to look. If we turn around, close our eyes and then look back, we see what the painting is doing by itself. We have to closely watch what we're putting out there.

OCY: *How many assistants do you have?*

LC: I use temporary assistants once in a while. For example, I had a few people help me paint "Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)."

OCY: *Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?*

LC: I helped my friend MPA do her hair for one of her Los Angeles shows, which was in the same vein as her show "Red in View" at the Whitney in 2017. We once lived in the California desert together, and we also did a performance together, in the Netherlands in 2012.

OCY: *When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?*

LC: I don't think I feel comfortable with it. I don't like saying I'm an artist because people don't have a reference point for being an artist as a profession.

OCY: *Is there a meal you eat on repeat while you're working?*

LC: My mom bought me this water bottle that has motivational instructions on it to remind me to hydrate. I'll usually eat something on repeat for a week, and then move onto something else. This week is dolmades, as you can tell.

OCY: *What is the weirdest object in your studio?*

LC: Maybe my sun lamp. They also call them SAD lamps for people with seasonal affective disorder. I

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admit that I bought it on Amazon.

OCY: *Are you binge-watching any shows right now?*

LC: I really like “Real Time With Bill Maher.” And I was sick a couple of weeks ago and binged “Cheer.” I think I identify with Morgan the most — I loved her hair!

OCY: *How often do you talk to other artists?*

LC: I keep in touch with Nicole Eisenman; we send each other pictures of what we’re working on. Also, my mom (who is not an artist) gives me really good advice on my work.

OCY: *What is the last thing that made you cry?*

LC: Listening to the votes come in from the senators during the impeachment trial.

OCY: *What do you do when you’re procrastinating?*

LC: I text people or look at Instagram. I sometimes delete the app and come back to it.

OCY: *What do your windows look out on?*

LC: A cobblestone courtyard full of rusty junk and old vehicles.

OCY: *What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?*

LC: Granola bars and espresso pots.

OCY: *What’s your worst habit?*

LC: Vaping.

OCY: *What embarrasses you the most?*

LC: Spending too much time alone.

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OCY: *Do you exercise?*

LC: I jog with my dog in the East Village.

OCY: *What are you reading right now?*

LC: A book about two prominent teachings of Tibetan Buddhism called “Wild Awakening: The Heart of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.”

OCY: *What’s your favorite artwork by someone else?*

LC: “Monkeys and Bears in the Kishkindha Forest,” an 18th-century painting by an unknown artist from Jodhpur.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/t-magazine/leidy-churchman.html>