

LEISURE & ARTS

A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | With Mark Leonard

Conservator Restored

By DANIEL GRANT

At the interview for his first job as an art conservator—at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the late 1970s—Mark Leonard brought his résumé and other papers that indicated he knew how to restore paintings, but he also brought his painting portfolio. Mr. Leonard had gone to Oberlin College with thoughts of being an artist, but in 1976 he earned a bachelor of arts degree in a multidisciplinary program involving studio art, art history and chemistry. From there, he earned a master's in art history and art conservation at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. A lot of art conservators have a studio-arts background—helpful because you might have to fill in an area where the paint has fallen off, for instance, or know how to mix paints to get a certain color. John M. Brealey, who was in charge of paintings conservation at the Met, took a look at the portfolio and pronounced the work “very good.” But then he told the young applicant, “You can be a paintings restorer or a painter, but you can't do both.”

For close to 30 years, Mr. Leonard followed Mr. Brealey's advice. But more recently he has proved his old boss wrong. Five or so years ago, Mr. Leonard started painting again, and last year he had a solo exhibition at Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood, Calif., at which 26 of the 28 drawings and paintings on display were sold. Come this December, other paintings will be on view at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. And, starting July 2, Mr. Leonard will start his new job as chief conservator at the Dallas Museum of Art, which he now refers to as his “day job.”

“Brealey was right in his advice to me,” Mr. Leonard said. “I was only able to follow one passion completely, and I wouldn't have been able to enjoy it as much if I had been pursuing another career at the same time.” The job of a conservator “is to disappear, to humble yourself to the voice of the artist” whose work needs cleaning or mending, while the work of an artist is to “make your ego as visible as possible.”

Mr. Leonard left the Met in 1983, joining and eventually heading the paintings conservation department at the J. Paul



Ken Fallin

Getty Museum in Los Angeles, from which he retired in 2010 to devote himself to full-time painting. During his last years at the Getty, “I became more comfortable with the back-and-forth of having another artist's work in my hands and then doing my own painting.”

His own painting is geometric abstraction, with precious little resemblance to the Old Masters that had been the focus of his career. Well, maybe there is some resemblance. “From time to time, I've taken a photographic detail from an Old Master, say the

clouds that were done in the early 1820s by the British landscape artist John Constable. Mr. Leonard was very familiar with the Yale Center, as he had done conservation work on paintings in the overall collection while at the Met and the Getty. The Constables, which were donated to the Yale Center by philanthropist Paul Mellon, were intended to be studies rather than artworks to sell. “Constable was told that his clouds weren't realistic-looking,” Mr. Leonard said, “so he spent a couple of summers in Hampstead . . . just painting clouds.”

The job of a conservator is to disappear, while the artist makes his ego as visible as possible.

sleeve on a figure in a 17th-century Dutch painting, and blown it up, and what you see is a geometric abstraction,” he said.

Still, his “weavings”—drawings and paintings consisting of criss-crossing lines on a grid in a range of colors, which were exhibited at Louis Stern Fine Arts—are quite unrelated to the stitching on any Dutchman's coat or shirt. To Mr. Leonard, the woven elements reflect things loved and lost in life, and one of those losses was a partner who died of AIDS in the 1980s.

The paintings that will be on display at the Yale Center for British Art were inspired by a series of 200 *plein-air* paintings of

Mr. Leonard's paintings, which bear titles such as “Constable Study IV” and “Constable Study IX,” are still abstract geometric shapes that wouldn't be confused with Constable's own work, although the colors used are the same. “Mark's paintings look very different than Constable's,” said Cassandra Albinson, the Yale Center's curator of paintings and sculpture, “but Mark was able to see an intensely structured element to Constable's paintings of clouds, which he has picked up on and used in his work.”

“I was very taken by these cloud studies,” Mr. Leonard said. And after he left the Getty, the

director of the Yale Center, Amy Meyers, “invited me to do a body of work that related to the conservation work I had been doing there. I spent a week as an artist-in-residence last October, doing a series of sketches and color studies that are a direct response to Constable's compositions and color patterns.”

There is another way in which his work as a conservator has influenced his painting: “I paint with the same materials I use in conservation, because they are the most stable materials I can get my hands on.” Mr. Leonard happened to have formulated that particular type of synthetic retouching paint along with National Gallery of Art conservator René de la Rie, and it is now manufactured by Gamblin Colors, an art-materials supplier based in Portland, Ore. Among the benefits of this retouching paint is that the colors do not fade as quickly.

It isn't easy to start an art career in your mid-50s (gallery owners are more interested in young artists), but Louis Stern had known Mr. Leonard through the Getty Paintings Conservation Council, which raises money to help smaller museums without conservation departments or budgets, and he was willing to exhibit Mr. Leonard's work. “Mark doesn't knock them out, but I'm happy to be patient with him, because everything he produces is a quality product,” Mr. Stern said. That patience also paid off, since almost everything from Mr. Leonard's first show found a buyer.

But, having barely started his art career, Mr. Leonard is going back to full-time museum work, starting a new conservation department at the Dallas museum, “and I guess now I'll have to be a Saturday and Sunday painter.” Part of the draw is the stimulation of trying something new (“I like to build things—in this case, a new department”) in a new city (“what's going on in Dallas in the arts is very exciting, very stimulating”), as well as the challenge of tending to the museum's sizable and growing collection of modern and contemporary art. “There wasn't much of that at the Getty,” he notes. Time for a contemporary artist to do contemporary work.

Mr. Grant is the author of “The Business of Being an Artist.”