

Opinion

# Bathing the Form in Light

BY JENNIFER LANDES

To enter the world of Maryam Eisler, as luxuriously displayed at Harper's Books in East Hampton, is to experience a heightened sense of reality within a mythic view of the world. Along plum-painted walls in the front gallery and the white walls in back and upstairs, three worlds and stories unfold, all related to her notion of the "Sublime Feminine," which is also the name of the show.

After some decades of discomfort with feminist essentialism, female artists began to rethink and look again at artists such as Hannah Wilke, who used her own body in her artwork in what she saw as an empowering way. Her seizure of the gaze back from the male artists of centuries past to concoct her own notion of the feminine gaze has been highlighted in exhibitions and essays over the past decade.

Such re-examination has inspired a new generation of artists to continue this work, including Ms. Eisler, who uses female models, predominantly nude, to explore notions of Eve, the first mother, and other mother figures and temptresses as well, "as set against the grandeur of nature."

Ms. Eisler's travels have taken her to New Mexico to walk in the footsteps of Georgia O'Keeffe, an artist who early on telegraphed the feminine form in her portrayal of flowers and was the object and subject of Alfred Stieglitz's mythologizing photographic portraits.

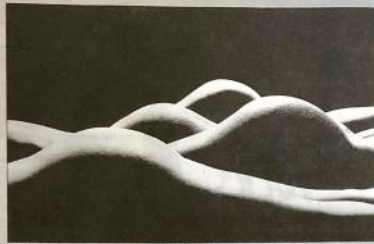
Among the rough-hewn, rocky landscape in "Atria," Ms. Eisler inserts a female figure practically indistinguishable

from her surroundings, until you spot her, a curvilinear form among the "barren, harsh, tense, and hostile" environment, as the artist characterized it in a call from London last week. Once seen, the contrast is obvious. The figure becomes just another form in an activated landscape of tall, spindly outcroppings, and her pose imitates the one just behind her to the right. How lovely and unified is this world she creates for us!

In the softer light of Provence in France, she found an underground world of basaltic caves and the soft pink light of the fields above. In the caves, the light was controlled and magical. "The Divine Feminine" places a seated figure on a rock with a cloud of dust imbuing her with a seemingly magical force. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice came to her only after the shoot, but, "I then saw the whole story unveiling in front of me."

The series became "Eurydice in Provence." It includes a woman in a field of wheat, something she did as a contrast with the underworld of the caves and to evoke the feeling of what the prickly wheat would feel like on soft skin. A woman in a cave in Provence is also part of the apocalyptic Mary Magdalene story, in which she set off for Provence after the death of Jesus to spread the new religion. Her relics are said to be in a church there. Such an allusion evokes the "love and loss, passion, temptation, and unrequited passions" Ms. Eisler said she addresses through her work.

Also evident is the echo of early modern practitioners of art photography such



"Peaks and Troughs," left, and "The Divine Feminine" are good examples of how Maryam Eisler uses light to dissolve figures into forms in her photography.

as Man Ray, Edward Weston, and even Andre Kertesz. A figure lying in a contorted pile on an Arts and Crafts bed set under a spare staircase with other black-and-white photos hung about could be one of Weston's peppers or female forms.

The figure is starkly lighted and stands out from her surroundings as much as the figure in New Mexico is shrouded by her background. Ms. Eisler now shoots digitally, but she learned and developed her craft on film cameras and in the dark room. "I'm shooting with light," she said. Using black and white as a format "forces you to pin yourself down to bare essentials. With color you would see too much visual noise."

There is very little postproduction work involved in these digital prints. "If I can't get what I want shooting in natural light, I won't do it," Ms. Eisler said

she moves around a lot, using one camera with three different fixed lenses, which gets her closer to her subject and the light than zooming in would.

Having spent some years in the cosmetics and beauty industry, she is sensitive to what that world portrays and what she is trying to say with her work. "These are questions of identification and self-identification regarding the role of women in the universe and in society." Whether powerful temptress or Mother Nature, it's an exploration of roles that differs from the way she said males view her work.

"I don't denigrate that. Art is very subjective. Everyone has an opinion and those opinions diverge widely," she said. "I welcome both the male and female response. Together it makes it complete."



# The Art Scene

BY MARK SEGAL

Hector Leonardi

The Drawing Room in East Hampton will present "Chromatic Journeys," a solo exhibition of paintings by Hector Leonardi, from tomorrow through July 15.

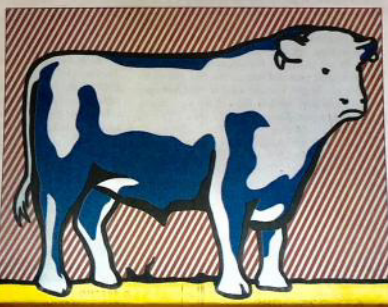
Mr. Leonardi, who studied at Yale with Josef Albers in the 1950s, builds up his canvases over time, layering acrylic paint in what he has called a conversation with the painting. He often affixes strips of dried acrylic paint to the abstract canvases, adding both depth to the surfaces as well as what the critic Robert C. Morgan has called "an unpredictable chromatic articulation virtually unparalleled in painting today."

An illustrated caption will accompany

work by Herbert August, Isabel Pavao, and Bob Rothstein from today through July 5. An opening reception will be held on Saturday from 5 to 6:30 p.m.

Mr. August's abstract paintings, which explore color, shape, and texture, often begin with a reference to nature. The mixed-media works in Ms. Pavao's ongoing "Impressions" series draw inspiration from her natural surroundings and combine organic forms with geometric structures. Mr. Rothstein's mixed-media pieces have moved closer toward abstraction than his previous work, incorporating seemingly unrelated elements.

From *Reinstate at BID*



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