



JUDITH LEIGHTON

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
FINEART

JUDITH LEIGHTON

Retrospective

JUNE 21–JULY 20, 2017

Essay by Carl Little



Small Blue Interior, pastel, 11.5 x 9.5 inches

COVER *Protection*, detail, 2007, pastel, 27 x 21 inches

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
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Let's Talk, detail, 1999, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



JUDITH LEIGHTON



Vase I, 2007, pastel, 23.5 x 19.5 inches



Woman Seated and Fleurs, 2001, pastel, 23 x 17.5 inches

JUDITH LEIGHTON

A Personal Vision by Carl Little



Pink Poppies, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches

Seated in armchairs, on settees, at tables, or standing with crossed arms or holding a dog, cat or bird, Judith Leighton's women appear inquisitive, relaxed, determined, and sophisticated. While not self-portraits, these stylized renderings of women from another era offer a glimpse into the soul of this petite, passionate woman determined to make art, surround herself by art, and to live a life full of joy.

The long, shapeless dresses worn by Leighton's female figures echo the costumes of an earlier era, their stripes and dots sometimes recalling the patterned costumes worn by Matisse's women. Their visages, rendered with the sparest of lines, might bring Picasso to mind. The pale heart-shaped faces feature a single line for the nose, small cupid lips, and large wide eyes, often with a touch of blush on the cheeks.

These worldly women bring to mind a description of the artist written by her friend Sean Morrissey:

"I remember her sitting sipping her morning coffee/reading Colette/listening to Edith Piaf/a white room filled with plants/many shades, hues, and colors green/her dog laying at her feet/French doors open wide/bright sunny summer morning (Erik Satie, gymnopédies) her favorite room/her time of day."¹

OPPOSITE *Protection*, 2007, pastel, 27 x 21 inches





Red on Red, 2007, pastel, 11 x 8.5 inches



Studio, pastel, 13 x 10.5 inches



Blue Hill, pastel, 11 x 9 inches

Leighton's landscapes are also acts of imagination. She renders a spare countryside under a waxing moon, dark fields accented with glacial erratics, low-lying hills with a few trees. The color scheme often surprises in the same way Milton Avery's does, with a sudden patch of blue or swath of green.

At the time of her death in 2011, Leighton had reached a new level of expressiveness in her landscapes. To fellow painter Brita Holmquist, she had "taken off like a hawk flying up and up"; she was the "dragon flying in Chinese landscapes."²

Born in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1929, Judith Leighton grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended Washington University, graduating in 1951 with a dual major in art and archaeology and English literature. Leighton began

painting with watercolors in the 1950s, gaining notice for her work by the 1960s, receiving first prize in the annual Skinker DeBaliviere Community Council Art Fair in St. Louis in May, 1968.

Watercolor painting came easy to Leighton, but she eventually switched to dry pastels for their richness and the challenges they presented. She began painting simplified all-over compositions, her treatment of each subject reflecting a modernist sensibility. Even her more representational work had an out-of-the-ordinary feel, as if the object of her attention—a vase of flowers, a line of trees, a room with chairs and table—were a prompt to creative interpretation.

In 1970 Leighton moved to Belfast, Maine, where she set up a studio and gallery. She soon became a fixture of the



Blue Interior with White Chairs, 2001, pastel, 27 x 21 inches

Maine art scene. She was chair of Belfast's first Street Festival and was included in juried shows, including the 1973 Bangor Sidewalk Art Festival where she won best in show. She took part in art festivals organized by the Women's League of the Jewish Community Center in Bangor, exhibiting alongside George Daniell, Dahlov Ipcar, Vincent Hartgen, Stell Shevis, Chenoweth Hall, Margaret Manter, and Denny Winters.³ She continued to develop artistically and studied privately with Leonard Craig and Susan Groce.⁴

From 1980 until her death, Leighton ran—curated is really a more fitting verb—one of most engaging and exciting galleries in all of New England, first in Castine and then on Parker Point Road in Blue Hill.⁵ She showed daring to set up shop in a small coastal village in Maine.⁶

That Blue Hill space became a place of annual pilgrimage for many. The three-floor barn with its art-filled alcoves offered work by a remarkably diverse roster of artists. The cards announcing each new show were eagerly scanned by art lovers across the downeast region and beyond. Jill Hoy, William Irvine, Stephen Pace—the stable was stellar.

“I didn't want to show what everyone else was showing, as far as the Maine local scene,” Leighton told the *Ellsworth American* on the occasion of the gallery's thirtieth anniversary in 2010.⁷ Her eclectic taste ranged from Leonard Baskin, Ragna Bruno, Francis Hamabe, Paul Alexandre John, and Philip Barter to Meg Brown Payson, Jacque Rochester, Wendy Lewis, Robert Shetterly, and Alice Spencer. Her gallery was also one of the few Maine venues to show serious sculpture, including work by Melita Westerlund, Eliot Sweet, Leonard Greco, Elizabeth Ostrander, Lise Becu, Bernard Langlais, and Anne Weber.



Landscape II, 2011, pastel, 23 x 17 inches

Entering the gallery, one spied, off to the right of the entrance beyond a makeshift office, a selection of Leighton's own work. The consummate gallerist with her welcoming smile rarely drew attention to her paintings; her artists came first. Yet her landscapes and figures, still lifes and interiors, set the aesthetic tone for what lay beyond: adventures of the imagination.

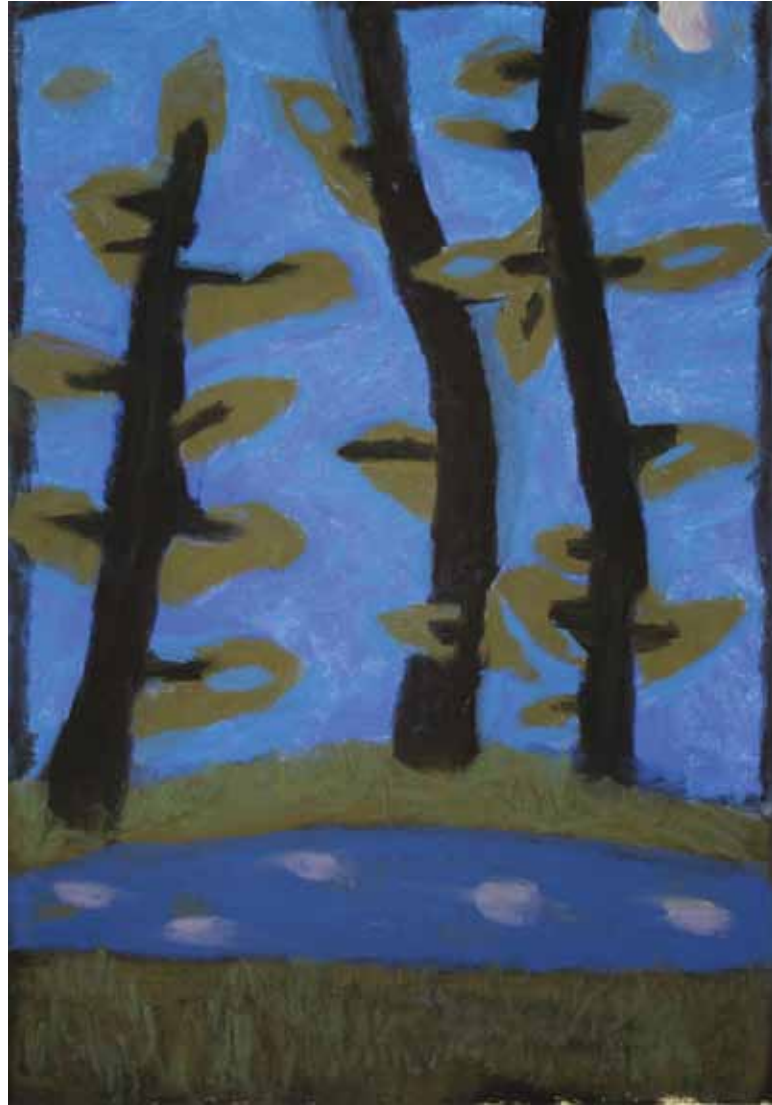
Leighton's journey as a painter and fine art dealer is all the more remarkable when one considers the demons she managed to overcome. As Edgar Allen Beem noted in his fine tribute to her in *Maine Times* in 1991, at the time she opened her gallery, Leighton was at “the nadir of her life.”⁸ She had been, Beem wrote, “suffocating in an extremely unhappy marriage, addicted to alcohol, Valium and sleeping pills, and better off unconscious than not.”⁹

Leighton reinvented herself and built a new life based on art—her own and others.' “In spite of all that's gone on in my life,” she told Beem, “I like to celebrate life.” The gallery and the paintings she made over the final thirty-plus years of her life were part and parcel of her recovery—a period of sobriety and happiness that, in her son Peter Leighton's words, “provided as much punch as the earlier challenges to her perceptions.”¹⁰

When asked what she looked for in the artists she selected for her gallery, Leighton once said that along with professionalism, she searched for soul, “a personal vision without slickness.” She felt that it took “a real artist most of a lifetime to get in touch with this personal vision.”¹¹ Leighton's life in art is a testament to her own search for that vision—singular, celebratory and, in the end, deeply fulfilling to all concerned.



Blueberry Barren, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Copse, pastel, 26 x 19 inches



Woman in Stripped Dress, 2007, pastel, 27 x 21.5 inches



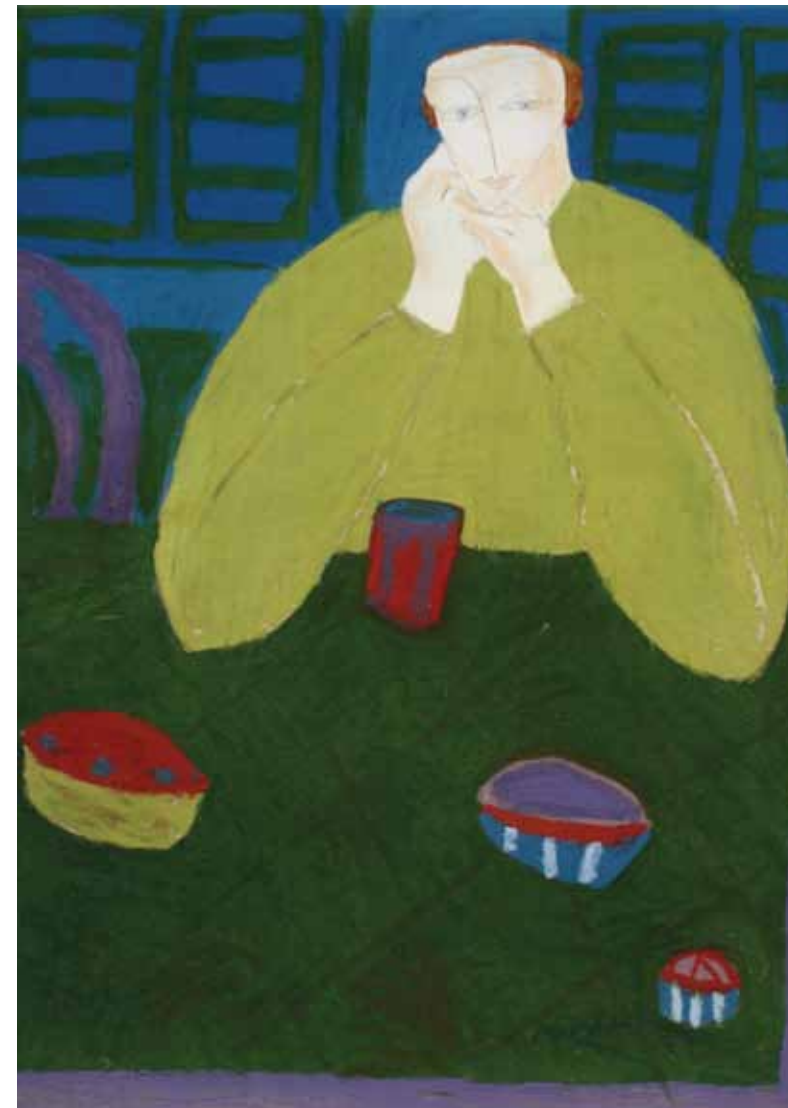
Out for a Walk, 2006, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Seven Trees, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Grove, 2011, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Cakes and Ale, pastel, 25.5 x 18 inches



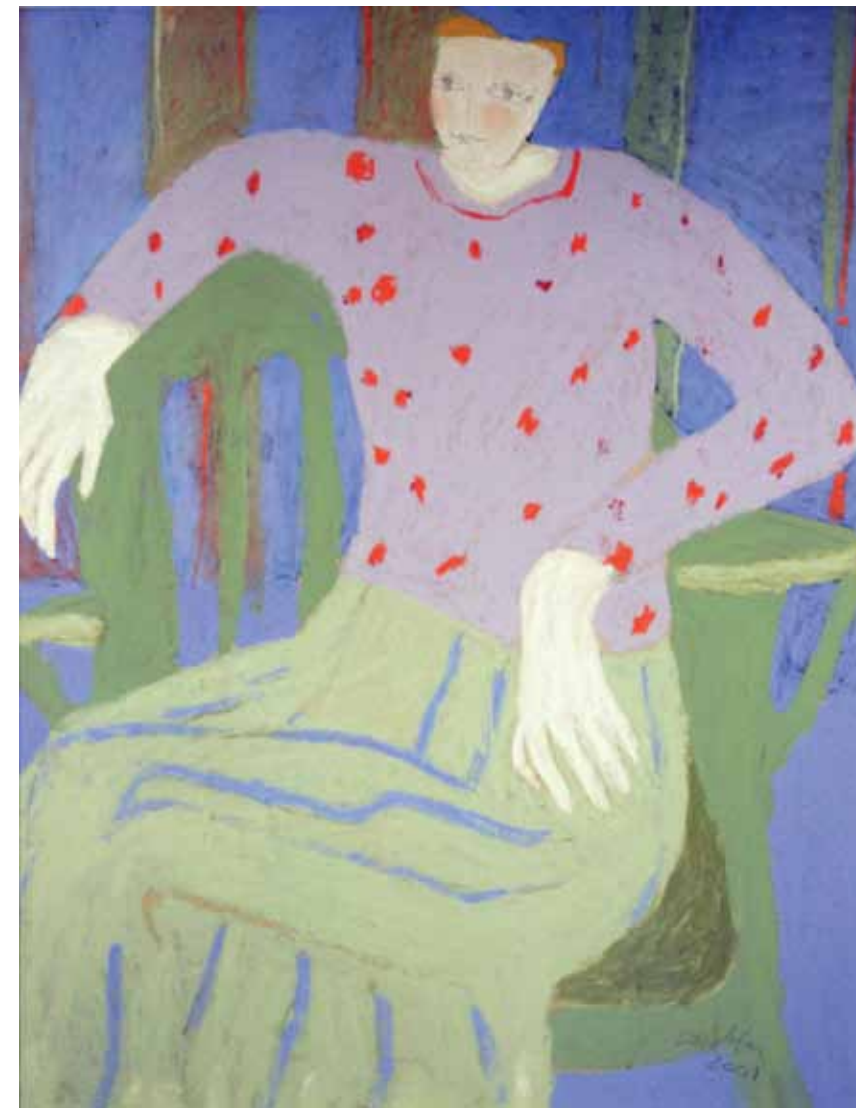
Persistent Trees, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Hurricane Winds, 2001, pastel, 23 x 17.5



Blue Green Interior III, 2010, pastel, 23 x 17.5 inches



Woman in Green Chair, 2001, pastel, 26 x 21 inches



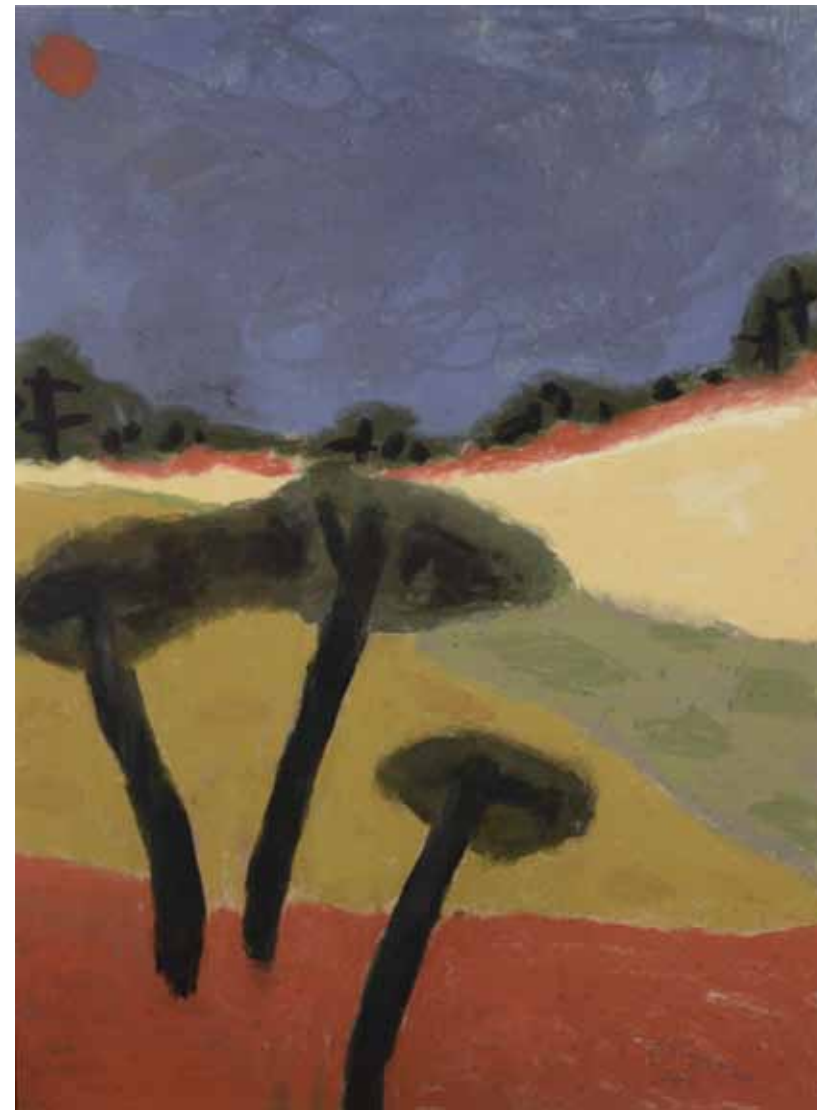
Yellow Interior with Blue Table, 2009, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches



Woman with Flower, 2000, pastel, 26 x 21 inches



Between Seasons, 2011, pastel, 22.5 x 21.5 inches



Summer Landscape, 2011, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



Table for Two, 2009, pastel, 24 x 18 inches



Serve it Forth, 1999, pastel, 26.5 x 20.5 inches



FOOTNOTES

1. Sean R. Morrissey, "Portrait of Judith Leighton—1930–2011 (A woman who loved all things French)," May, 2011 Leighton showed Morrissey's painted furniture in the gallery.
2. Brita Holmquist, letter to Peter Leighton, May 18, 2011.
3. Leighton knew Winters and admired her work. She mounted a major show of her work following her death in March, 1985. Robert H. Newall, "Tribute to friend to be initial show at Blue Hill Gallery." *Bangor Daily News* clipping, 1985.
4. Leonard Craig (1926–2010) taught at Unity College. Susan Groce is a professor of art at the University of Maine.
5. The Leighton Gallery was located on Main Street in Castine for four years prior to moving to Blue Hill. "The Leighton Gallery is owned and operated by Judith Leighton Gay, who counts herself a Maine artist since moving to Castine from St. Louis. She takes respectful pleasure in the work of Maine artists she exhibits, inviting passers-by in to look and talk about the work by setting flowers on the walkway and up the stairs." Sali Ann Kriegsman, "The Castine Calm: A Month in Maine." *Washington Post*, July 22, 1984.

6. "'What have I done to myself this time?' Judy Leighton says she wailed—in the process of shaping a falling-down barn into an art gallery. 'Coastal cameos were what had sold in town up until then,' Leighton explains, 'and I was on a side street.'" *Boston Globe* clipping, 1980s.

7. James Straub. "Judith Leighton, Blue Hill Art Scene Mainstay, Dies at 81." *Ellsworth American*, April 25, 2011.

8. Edgar Allen Beem, "Best art gallery: Judith Leighton's gallery celebrates life." *Maine Times*, 1991. *Maine Times* readers voted the gallery the best in the state in 1991.

9. Ibid. One of the Leighton scrapbooks includes a voided check on which she wrote: "This is a check I tried to write + couldn't—because of addictions!" The scrapbook also includes a brochure on "Phobic & Panic Disorders: Getting Help."

10. Email from Peter Leighton to Karin Wilkes, April 6, 2017.

11. Robert H. Newall, "Tribute to friend to be initial show at Blue Hill Gallery." *Bangor Daily News* clipping, 1985.

Carl Little's most recent book is *Philip Barter: Forever Maine* (Marshall Wilkes).



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