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 NYT Critic's Pick

By **HOLLAND COTTER** MARCH 8, 2018



Zoe Leonard's "Strange Fruit" (1992-97), an installation of dozens of discarded and sewn fruit skins at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She was a vocal AIDS activist and this work recalls the death of her friend David Wojnarowicz. *George Etheredge for The New York Times*

Some shows cast a spell you don't forget. Zoe Leonard's 1995 solo with Paula

Cooper Gallery did that for me. And her spare, reverberant [retrospective](#) now at the Whitney Museum of American Art time-traveled me straight back to it.

The Cooper show wasn't in a gallery; it was [in Ms. Leonard's studio](#), an old two-room walk-up on the Lower East Side. And I had it to myself. There wasn't even a gallery attendant around to keep watch. Not that there was much to steal. A few unframed black-and-white photographs dotted the walls: one of a bare city tree, another of a woman's tousled head seen from behind, a third of graffiti reading "Gay + Proud + Dead." The windowsills and a long shelf were lined with empty, wizened fruit skins, each stitched closed with needle and thread.

Physically, the show was, to say the least, modest. Atmospherically it was rich, wired into its time and place. AIDS was stalking the city; an immigrant neighborhood was gentrifying; the art world was on the edge of a huge shift: the first Armory Show had debuted the year before. Ms. Leonard's work felt like a tight-lipped lament.

That mood is hard to recapture in as public a setting as the Whitney, but "Zoe Leonard: Survey" comes very close. The installation is ultra-austere, all white walls and window with a fiercely edited selection of photographs. Most were taken in midair: shots of clouds from airplane windows, aerial views of sea and earth far below. A twisting river gleams like a vein of silver; a vast city looks as dark and indistinct as a swatch of nubby fabric.



Untitled photographs from an airplane window at Ms. Leonard's retrospective, "Survey," at the Whitney Museum.
George Etheredge for The New York Times

The entire group could fit in a suitcase, and there are several of them — 56 to be exact — in different shades of blue, lined up across the gallery floor forming a sculpture titled "1961," the year Ms. Leonard was born in upstate New York. The number of suitcases corresponds to her current age. Since first assembling the piece in 2002, she's been adding one a year, extending a theme of travel in her art — through memory, space, and time — into the future.

For this artist, time — ductile and emotionally loaded — seems as important a medium as photography or sculpture. Many of her photographs carry two dates: the year the picture was shot and the year, as much as a decade later, when it was printed. Materials she uses in sculptures and installations — suitcases, fruit skins, vintage postcards — comes with prior, but unknown histories, creating intricate traffic patterns between present and past in her

work.



An installation of suitcases, in different shades of blue, are lined up across the gallery floor forming a sculpture titled “1961,” the year Ms. Leonard was born in New York.

George Etheredge for The New York Times

The Whitney show itself — organized by Bennett Simpson, a senior curator, with Rebecca Matalon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Elisabeth Sherman of the Whitney — follows a linear route, but an elastic one, shaped in part by what’s left out. Notably but unavoidably absent, for example, is a 1992 piece that put Ms. Leonard on the international map.

In Kassel, Germany, as a participant in Documenta, she designed an installation for one of that city’s venerable fine arts museum. She cleared a few galleries of everything but 18th-century pictures of women, and interspersed them with images of her own: 19 close-up photographs of female genitals, for which friends and lovers had served as models. With its cool but startling blend of aesthetics and politics, art history and

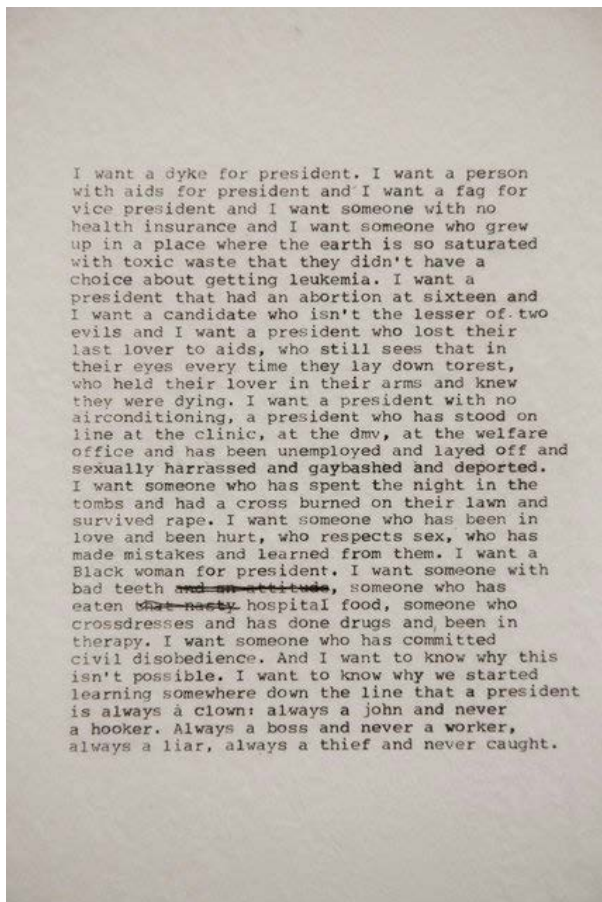
autobiography, the piece was an instant landmark in queer feminist art.

It was also site-specific and probably era-specific, and impossible to reconstitute in its original form. Without some equivalent of its shock-effect gesture in the Whitney, there's a danger that a visitor might miss the activist impulse in Ms. Leonard's art, but it's absolutely there.



"Wax Anatomical Model," from 1990. Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Hauser & Wirth, New York

A series of 1990 photographs, shot in medical museums, of anatomical wax models of women, seems to have laid the groundwork for the Kassel piece. An installation of dozens of sewn fruit skins scattered across the gallery floor not only recalls Ms. Leonard's 1995 solo but also her life at the time. She was a member of Act Up (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). She dedicated that show to the artist David Wojnarowicz, a close friend who had died of complications from AIDS in 1992.



“I Want a President,” 1992.

George Etheredge for The New York Times

In the year of his death, which was also a presidential election year, she produced her most flat-out polemical work, a 300-word anti-authoritarian statement, part manifesto, part embittered cri de coeur, demanding radical change. The original typewriter-written version, on a single sheet of onionskin paper with ink corrections, is in the retrospective. It begins: “I want a dyke for president,” and continues:

I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying.

Never published, the statement circulated in various forms over the years. Basically, “I Want a President” was a form of participatory public art,

completed by being passed from hand-to-hand. Then in 2016 it went big time. In the run-up to the election it was posted billboard-size on the High Line, not far from the Whitney, and became a social media hit.

Ms. Leonard's art often has a collaborative dimension. In a 1993 project with the filmmaker [Cheryl Dunye](#), the sharing was direct. Ms. Dunye was working on a film called "[Watermelon Woman.](#)" partly about the life of a black lesbian Hollywood actress named Fae Richards, whose career had been thwarted by racism. Ms. Leonard created what amounted to an elaborate archival storyboard for the film, photo-documenting the actress's life.

In fact, Fae Richards is an invented character. And, although her "life" is more than plausible, Ms. Leonard's documentation of it, on display at the Whitney, is entirely staged. As a pictorial narrative — a film made from stills — the piece is a tour de force. It reveals this artist to be not only a gifted storyteller, but a virtuoso of photographic technology.

Some of that technology became obsolete even as Ms. Leonard was using it. And the idea of obsolescence — of the present slipping irretrievably into the past — haunts her recent work. A series of pictures called "The Analogue Portfolio," dated 1998-2009 — and made with a now-discontinued dye-transfer process — records the facades of small storefront shops on the Lower East Side, and in countries she's visited: Cuba, Mexico, Uganda. Many of the New York shops she shot a decade and more ago are now gone, wiped out by high rents and globalization. Chances are their equivalents elsewhere are too.

If Ms. Leonard has strong ideas or feelings about this, they aren't spelled out in individual pictures. Her art isn't expressive that way: the opposite, really. It sometimes suggests the point-and-shoot blankness of tourist photography. Evidence of her investment tends to lie in how she returns to a subject or theme.



The survey's largest work, "You see I am here after all" (2008), consists of nearly 4,000 souvenir postcard views of Niagara Falls arranged on the wall as a giant, gridded collage. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Only when you see the "Analogue" images over their entire span do you begin to hear the expressive score they're set to: a slow, plangent bass note. The stack of books in a 2016 sculpture called "Tipping Point" is just a stack of books until you see that they're all the same book, James Baldwin's 1963 eschatological tract, "The Fire Next Time." Suddenly, the stack becomes an exclamation point: Read this!

And the survey's largest work, titled "[You see I am here after all.](#)" from [2008](#), takes repetition to an exhaustive extreme. The piece consists of nearly 4,000 souvenir postcard views of Niagara Falls arranged on the wall as a giant, gridded collage, with tiny modifications in otherwise identical scenes indicating advances over time in printing technology and color photography. The title quotes a handwritten message found on one of the cards, a little message of triumph felt at a "here" reached. Yet you have to wonder, in the context of all this mass-produced sameness, how personal that "here" can feel.



Detail of "You see I am here after all."
George Etheredge for The New York Times

Some of us ask similar questions about photography in the era of smartphones. For increasing numbers of digital shutterbugs, reality is not real unless it is photographed. Which means that unmediated modes of seeing — of seeing art, among other things — are becoming obsolete. We shoot, send, or store, and move on, rarely revisiting, never mind lingering over, the images we've made.

I don't know Ms. Leonard's thoughts on all this, but I'm glad she makes art that is not natural Instagram fodder. I'm glad she makes us linger, makes us ask "what's going on here?" And I'm glad her survey ends with personal images rescued from the past. They're snapshots of her mother and grandmother taken in the late 1940s when they left their native Poland for America. We see them on shipboard in midocean, then in New York Harbor posing with the Statue of Liberty.

They're just family photos. But, as she does with the images of other things in the world she cares about, Ms. Leonard makes them her own through repetition, by looking, then looking again. What we're seeing here are pictures of pictures. The artist laid the old ones on her studio floor and photographed them, small and distant, from above, to make new pictures in which a still just-reachable past and a speeding-by present are united: both precious, both keepers.

Zoe Leonard: Survey
Through June 10 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street,
Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.