


A Testament of Blossoms and Bones

By Robert W. Duffy
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A sure tip-off that the man is audacious is that big, bold, in-your-face L with the circle around it.

Were this Wyoming rather than Washington Boulevard, were Herefords roaming the Grandel range rather than gallery-goers, theater patrons and music lovers, were this a time before marketeers gained control of the concept, that majuscule L would be called a brand.  And the expectation would be, once such a brand were burnt into our consciousnesses, that that big loopy L would be emphatic proof that Leslie J. Laskey made this thing, whatever it might be, and by marking it so indelibly, proclaimed to be good.

Who knows where such audacity came from?

Maybe it was war. Laskey enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor, and came ashore into occupied France in the Allied invasion of the Normandy beaches on June 6, 1944.

Fifty years later, he told veteran newsman Harry Levins of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "My combat engineer unit landed at Omaha Beach early on D-Day, but my most vivid memory is of a few nights later. We were moving inland through an orchard, and the apple trees were in full and fragrant blossom. We stopped near a church that the Germans had used until they were bombed out. Now the Germans were bombing back, and the bombs were literally raising the dead from the churchyard cemetery. I still remember it as The Night Of Blossoms And Bones."

There are various ways of coping with the experience of having almost been shot dead on a beach or in the midst of the disinterred dead. One response is perpetual fear. Another is ineradicable audacity.

But perhaps it was not this brush with morbidity but with Weimar-era utopianism, and a sense that art has ineluctable, redemptive power, the power to remove us to places of greater meaning and a more thoroughgoing humanity. These qualities could have been instilled in him when he worked with the genius László Moholy-Nagy, who was no slacker in the department of courage and conviction.

In the 1930s, Moholy-Nagy carried the Bauhaus banner from Berlin to the south side of Chicago, and associated himself with what is now the Illinois Institute of Technology. Laskey was a student at I.I.T. and the spirit of the Bauhaus was very much alive in his day.

It could have been bits and pieces of all of this, intricately wired into the mind of a man possessed of a keen sense of self, one whose DNA disposes him toward fearlessness, a man from whom both negative criticism and approbation roll like water off of the back of a duck.

All this toughness of intellect, all this emotional and psychological complexity and assurance, all this muscle, is in the work, and in the 40 or so years I have known him, it always has been.

I came in contact with Laskey during my student days at Washington University in the 1960s, and recall hearing the stories about his being difficult and scary and brilliant and uncompromising and so on and so forth.

I regarded him first from afar with a sense of awe. Later the dynamics of his image making and the web of visual connections he wove into the work, whatever it might be, captivated me.

Later I was invited into the Wunderkammer that is his house, and the sensations veered off from awe toward enchantment.

But being physically present in Laskey's private world, while intoxicating, was not a prerequisite to appreciating his art.

If you were willing to take the time to look hard and to permit the transportive process to occur, you found yourself in leaping from Japan into the magical world of Paul Klee or into shadowy places constructed by the likes of the modernist Merlin Marcel Duchamp.

Although this laundry list of influences may summon up dismissives such as derivative or inconsistent, in Laskey's work it suggests exploration, investigation and absorption, coupled with an allegiance to modernism and its persuasive abstractionist traditions.

While largely non-representational, it grows directly from roots set deep in the natural world and history. Soil, vegetation, the horizon, light, shadow, inky darkness, symbols, colors in concert and in conflict, clues, geometries, all are there together in various conspiracies.

The prints, drawings, sculptures, lighting fixtures; the juxtapositions of objects; the arrangements of spaces and volumes; the understanding of materials; the surprises and the follies; the wit and the irony -- all inform and elevate this work.

All art is infested with enigma or mystery. If one can say with any conviction he or she knows what a work of art "is," that's a sure sign it isn't much good. Every critic, philosopher, artist or poet from Plato forward has understood that the more accurate the representation the less consequential it is. There has to be more, and the more resides in the artist's ability to invest the work with the ineffable. That is what separates them from the great unwashed, untalented us.

"The imagination here is the residence of truth," Sir Joshua Reynolds said.

And so it goes with Laskey.

If ever a man dwelled in such a residence, it is he. How fortunate we are he furnished it with shapes and forms and shadows and colors in eternal orbits and in perpetual motion, and marked it audaciously with such a lyrical letter, an L apparently without end.

*St. Louisan Robert W. Duffy is associate editor of the **Saint Louis Platform** and former cultural news editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. This essay is one in a series of introductions to the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.*