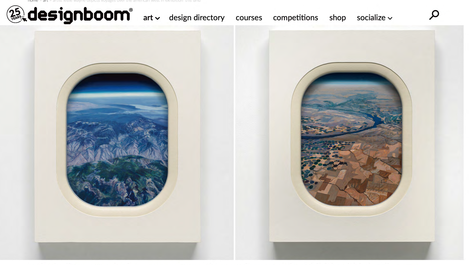

artist leslie wayne depicts voyages over the american west in exhibition 'this land'

art 290 shares connections: +130

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In a recent interview with designboom, Leslie Wayne shared insights into her artistic process and the personal and cultural narratives embedded in her work, on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, from June 4th through August 2nd, 2024.

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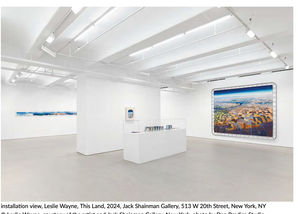
A DIALOGUE WITH ARTIST LESLIE WAYNE

designboom (DB): Your exhibition 'This Land' is said to explore the American west through perception and memory. Can you elaborate on how these two elements influence your artistic process?

Leslie Wayne (LW): Perception is just an interpretation really, of what one sees, and while the paintings in 'This Land is Your Land' series were made directly from the photographs I took on a flight to the Pacific Northwest, they are infused with the feelings and memories I hold dear of my childhood. I've lived in New York since 1982, but I grew up in California and I still have a very strong attachment to the West Coast and to the geology and geography of the West. Even the abstract work in which I am manipulating thick layers of paint, I am drawing on those sensations I remember having of being in nature where the tectonic and geologic forces are right there for one to see and feel -- millions of years of layered strata, of compression and subduction, of gravity and erosion, and certainly of the shifting plates that cause earthquakes.



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LW: I remember thinking of this song as we were flying over the Rockies and I started taking photographs. It was a spontaneous response to the majesty of what was unfolding below. But later as this project started to develop in my mind, I began thinking about the lyrics and what they meant when Guthrie wrote them in 1940 as an anti-war protest, and what they might mean today in a moment of reckoning about who we are as a nation, and whose land we have colonized and occupied.

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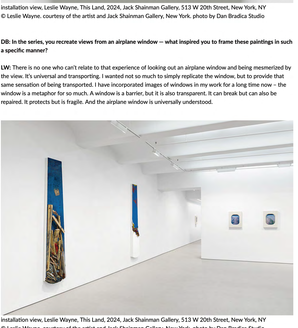

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DB: How do you navigate the balance between two modes of representation — abstraction and figuration — in your depiction of the American West?

LW: I simply accept them as two facets of myself that have legitimacy and agency. I began as a young plein air landscape painter and turned to abstraction in my late twenties when I moved to New York. While artists naturally develop their signature style, my own compulsion is to follow an idea as it develops out of each body of work and trust that my 'hand' will be evident in each iteration.

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DB: It's mentioned that 'heimat,' a German term that conveys a deep connection to one's homeland, is a significant concept in your exhibition. How does this idea manifest in your exploration of the American landscape?

LW: I am reminded of something Simon Schama wrote in his book, 'Landscape and Memory,' where he quotes his mentor saying to him that, 'our sense of place is determined by the archives of our feet.' I always like to say that wherever you grew up is bred in the bone. It's not something you can intellectualize. I have that for the American West. Everyone recognizes the view of that place which speaks to them in that way, and what I hope is that these images I have painted will trigger a similar response from each viewer, if not actual recognition of the place, then at least that universal recognition of the experience.

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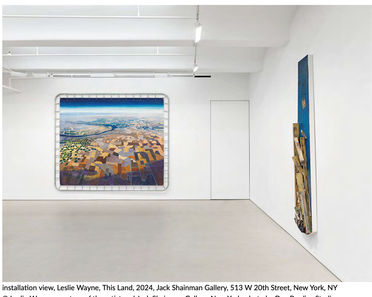
DB: 'High Dive' employs a canvas stretched over coiled springs to evoke a skydiver's view. What led you to incorporate such unconventional materials, and how do they enhance the viewer's experience?

LW: While the airplane windows give you that micro view of looking out a small porthole, I wanted to make a painting that could also give you a macro view, as if you were unconstrained by a window inside an airplane and were flying free like a bird. The trampoline idea just came to me as a way of giving another dimension to that experience of skydiving – that you could also then bounce back up into the air. It doesn't really make any sense, but it does feel pretty great.



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DB: You've described the exhibition as a contemporary vision of Manifest Destiny. How do you address the historical and cultural implications of this concept in your work?

LW: This goes back to the title of Guthrie's song, 'This Land is Your Land.' I simply thought to myself, well, whose land is this really? Who has the right to take land from one group of people and declare it their own? Whether we are talking about the Spanish conquering the Mayans, the Portuguese invading Brazil, the British colonizing India, or the early settlers killing and displacing the Indigenous Americans. We are in a particularly heightened moment of self-reflection and divided ideology about who we are as a nation and a country. Regarding our landscape as a magnificent treasure that should be cherished and safeguarded and shared equitably by all is one small but powerful way to think about our destiny and how we manifest that idea for future generations.

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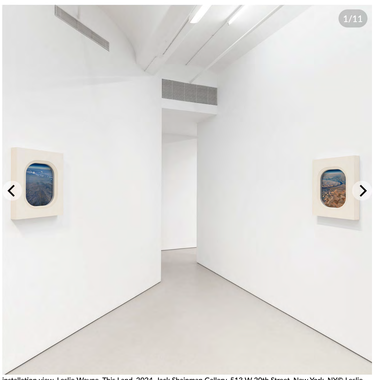

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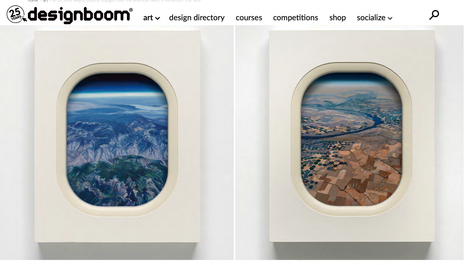
project info:

exhibition title: This Land
artist: Leslie Wayne | @waynepercaro
gallery: Jack Shainman Gallery | @jackshainman
location: 513 West 20th Street, New York, NY
on view: June 4th — August 2nd, 2024
photography: © Dan Bradica Studio



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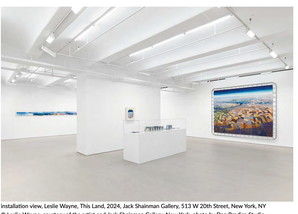

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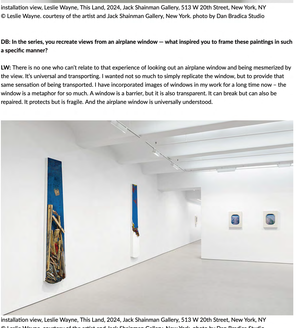

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