

THE SEMI-FINALIST

10/21/2025

THE SEMI-FINALIST IS: LESLIE ROBERTS



GERANIUM

2022, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel
approximately 16" x 12"

tied to the particularities of a specific visual history. The reference point becomes incidental and the contortion is the feature. Through an assiduous process that starts with observing the world around her and moves on to creating and following a flexible set of directions, Roberts' compositions emerge with structural solidity. Her continuous hinting at a literary format is more sail than anchor as she explores and maps an endless sea of words, phrases, numbers, and personal interests. I'm partial to the way her use of text and the grid merges into a playful contradiction: abstractions that suggest precise meaning without requiring me to have a precise understanding of them. In the same way that I don't need to know Latin to appreciate The Book of Kells, I am drawn to Roberts' paintings without fully grasping her highly customized use of lists and organizational systems. They reference language and deny decoding. They are conceptually suggestive and uncoupled from a clear visual narrative. They are also beautiful without being decorative. And as a result of all this, her paintings feel tucked into a visual universe where words don't quite cut it and the eyes are left to parse the meaning of a triangle, a line, a letter or a color. What I see and infer tells enough of the story, and ultimately I find myself enjoying something that is glowing, shimmering, coalescing. Leslie Roberts' small compositions are considerable reminders that we are all - in our own ways - filters of experience and inventors of form.

I am very happy to be able to share my interview with Leslie Roberts below. In it she describes her formative years, her interest in systems and processes, as well as some thoughts on language and color.

-David Schell (October, 2025)



Leslie Roberts in her Brooklyn, NY studio.

The Semi-Finalist: Tell me about your formative years. When I was in your studio, you mentioned Paris, figurative teachers, never taking a color theory class, feeling disconnected from the contemporary/postmodern art scene. But feel free to talk about whatever.

Leslie Roberts: In high school I lived near the Barnes Foundation outside Philadelphia. My high school art teacher knew Violette de Mazia, who taught the Barnes art theory course, and his best students were able to take that course, taught in front of the actual paintings. I no longer recall much of what Miss De Mazia said, but a lot of those paintings are burned into my visual cortex. The Barnes was where I fell in love with Matisse, and with painting that's about color. I also loved Cézanne and Seurat.

I went to college at Yale, where most of my art teachers were focused on work from observation. I think undergraduates got the teachers that the MFA program did not need. They were persuasive, though, and I was intently painting still lifes and figures. I don't ever recall being asked or encouraged to make anything abstract (though it was allowed). That now seems odd.

I worked to push color past the literal. But I felt as if I had no idea how Matisse transmuted perceived color and form into his own parallel. I knew I was missing something. A summer at the New York Studio School was partly helpful, and partly a confirmation that there were art secrets I wasn't in on.



BEFORE LEAVING

2024, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel

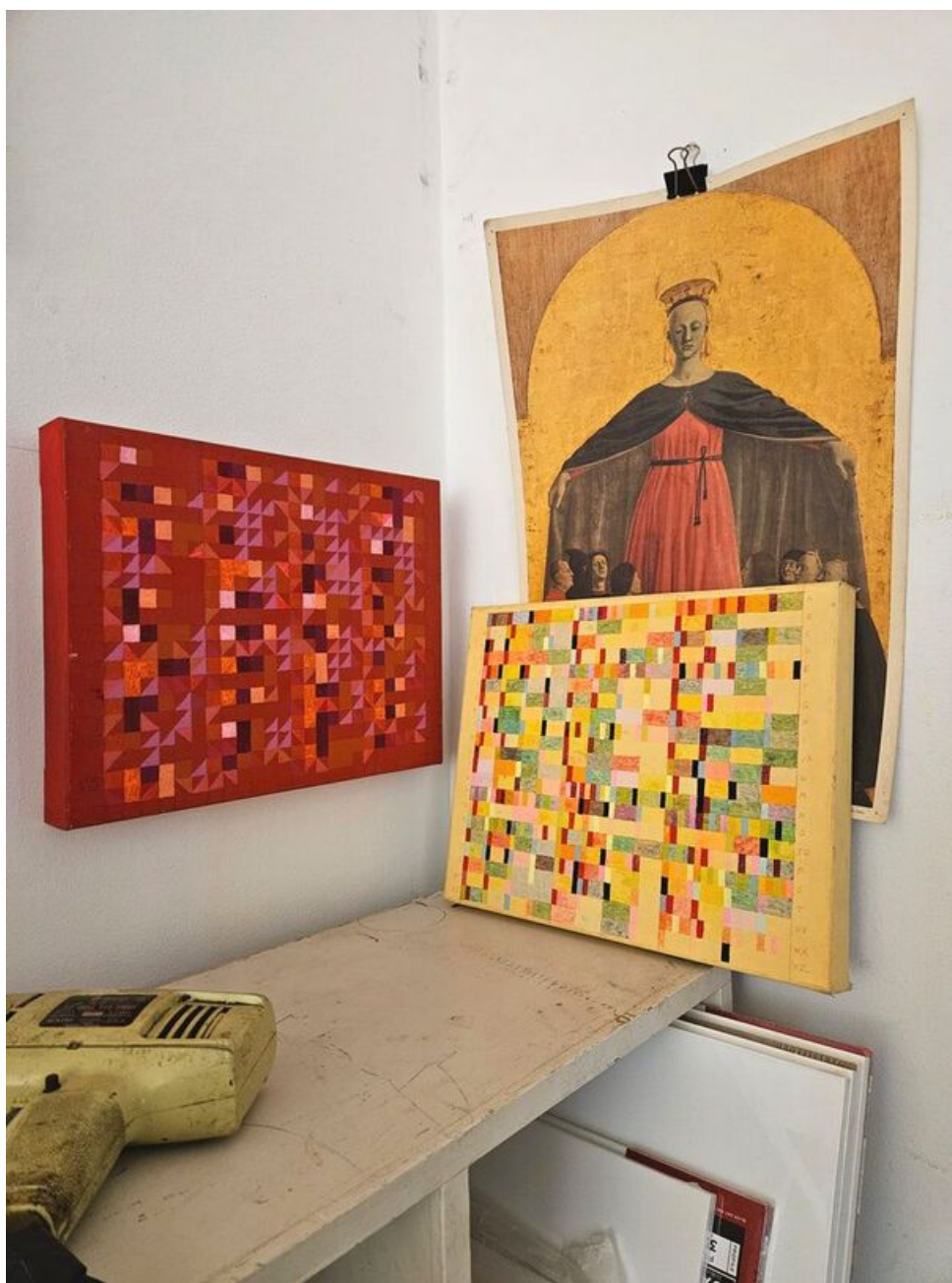
approximately 12" x 9"

After graduating, I spent most of a year in Paris on a Yale fellowship for independent work abroad. Then I moved to New York City, where I have lived ever since. My first job in the city was writing definitions for an ESL dictionary. Now that seems very apropos - writing lists upon lists.

I have always loved words. I've been reading nonstop since the age of three. I went to Yale rather than art school because I wanted to study literature and history as well as art. I supported myself for several years as a freelance editor, before I started to teach. I didn't expect to find myself using language in my paintings, however.

After a few years in Brooklyn I entered the MFA program at Queens College, CUNY. I immediately gravitated toward abstraction. Charles Cajori taught there and helped me understand Cubism and Matisse. I still love both, and still think Cubism is wonderful and playful, with still a lot in it for contemporary artists to make use of. As they very occasionally do.

Anyway, Cajori helped me grasp how one could make non-literal work from observation. partly Involving shifting points of view. Finally having that insight was so freeing. For some time, my viewing of contemporary art felt more dutiful than exciting. Then one day at the Whitney, during grad school, I came upon a piece comprised of two large, shaped, seemingly abstract canvases. After a moment I realized they depicted a broken cup spilling coffee in cartoony drops and suddenly I loved it. The title made me laugh: **Yikes**. It's the kind of informal idiom my paintings document now. I could also say the painting depicts the composed disorder of life, as I now do. It has such a sense of humor. (Also, it is essentially giant Cubism.) Elizabeth Murray became an idol and was a rare role model. In the 1980s, there were few women artists having major careers and virtually none who, like Murray, had children. There were even fewer women art professors.

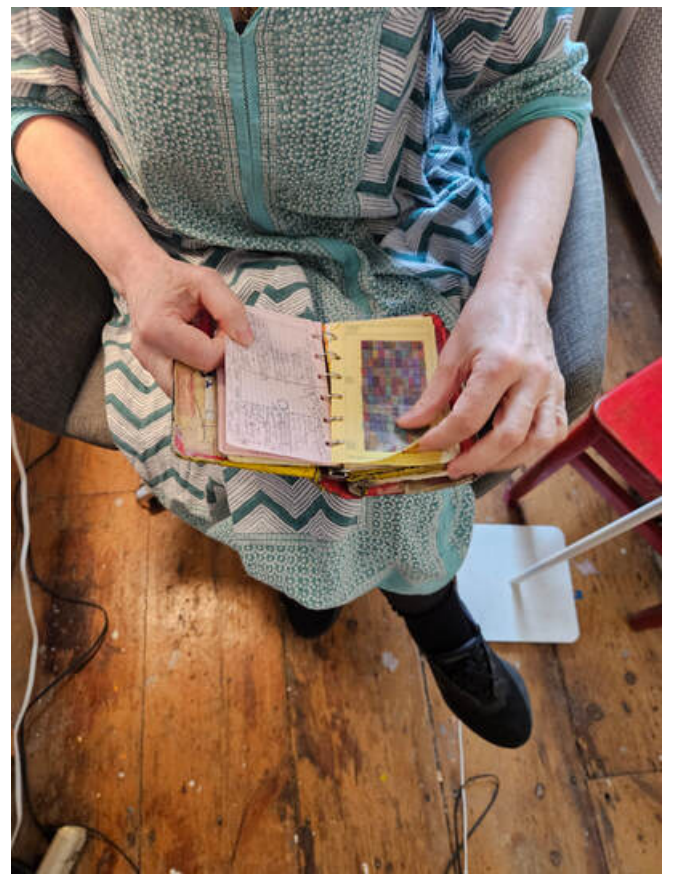


A corner of the studio.

My MFA show contained Murray-inflected paintings of bloopy organic forms. Queens awarded me a scholarship to Skowhegan, where I worked with Judy Pfaff and Bill Jensen. Post-MFA, I lived in Greenpoint, NY, and painted sinuous vertical shapes in oil on linen. I now think some of those are strong, but I never showed many.

I began teaching at Pratt Institute in 1986. (I became full time in 1996, and taught there until retiring in 2021.) I mainly taught an intensive year-long color-focused course called Foundation Light Color and Design. For some of us teachers it was a passionate color cult into which we indoctrinated students. That immersion in color certainly affected my work.

Another thing that affected my work: in 1995 I found a pile of blank jigsaw puzzles in a stationery shop. The shapes of the interlocking pieces recalled the undulant forms in my paintings. Their modular structure allowed me to devise numerous visual games. I felt I should get back to my "real" work but kept painting puzzles. When visitors to my studio were interested in the puzzle paintings, I realized I could continue. I created disrupted compositions by exchanging painted pieces between pairs of puzzles, and by randomly altering pieces before assembling. With oversized puzzle pieces, I made colorful freeform installations spreading across expanses of up to 20 feet. Joe Amrhein, who lived nearby, was just founding Pierogi Gallery, and he was very supportive of the puzzle work, including it in numerous group shows. I presented puzzle based work in my first NYC solo exhibition at PPOW's project space, then in Soho, in December 1996.

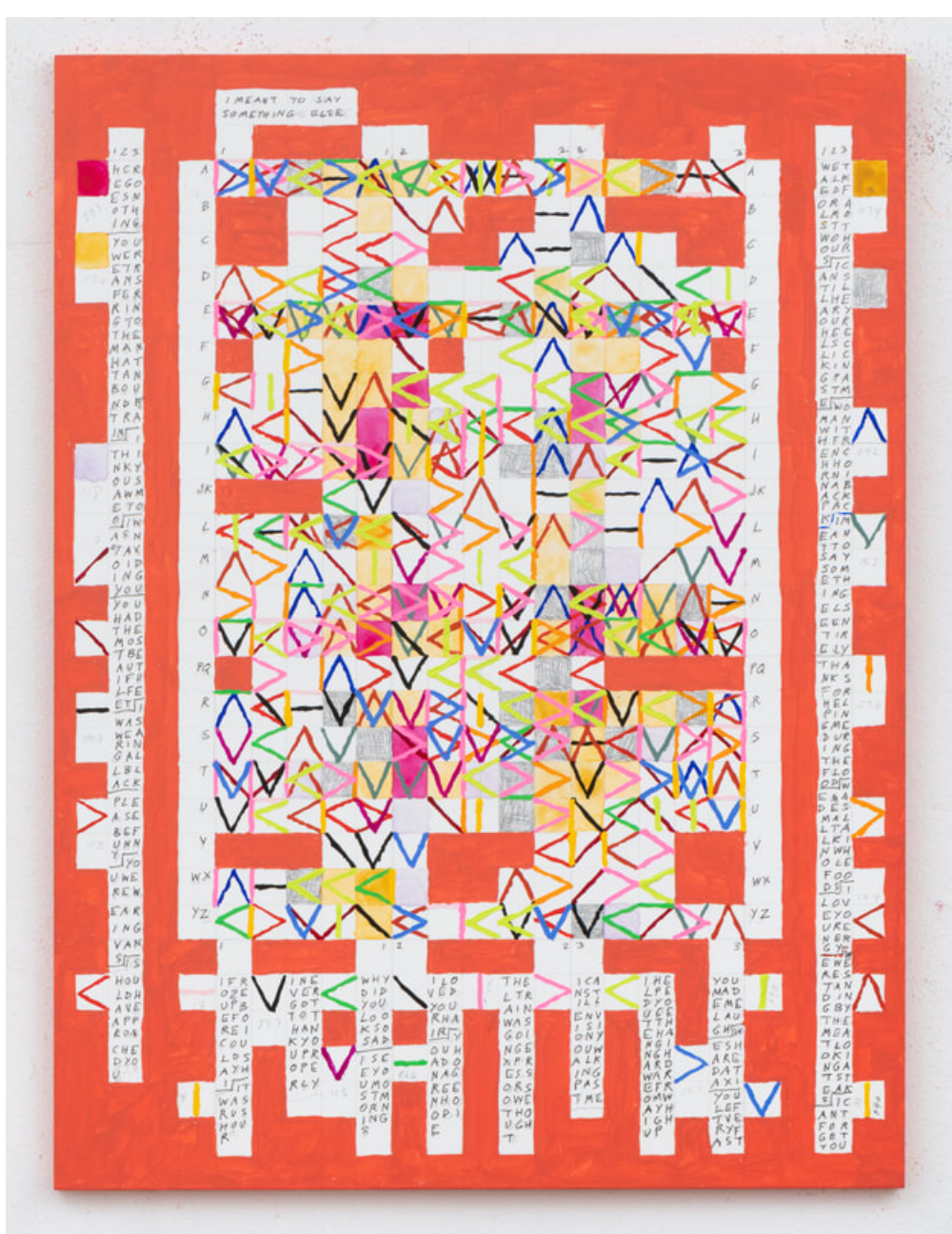


An early puzzle piece in the artist's home; a sketchbook.

S-F: You mentioned that in 1999 you started playing with rules and systems as a game or diversion while riding the subway. Can you talk about how that developed into the work you are doing now?

LR: In the late 1990s I was making small paintings and large installations out of jigsaw puzzles. Meanwhile, to entertain myself on the subway, I began small studies with colored pencils on graph paper, in my pocket-sized datebook (it has long since been replaced by my cell phone.) For these Filofax-like binders, graph papers were available in an irresistible range of colors and formats, and I acquired many. I soon felt a need to escape my habits of composing color. I invented visual games, just as I had with puzzles. I first explored rules involving randomness and numbers. Finally I devised systems for charting informal writing, like to-do lists, into numbered and lettered grids. I liked the resulting algorithmic forms, which combined pattern and asymmetry. I initially saw the graph-paper studies as diversions, not serious work. They were on gridded paper and often contained squares, rectangles, and triangles: geometry. In graduate school I had absorbed the notion that geometric art was "mere formalism." The dismissive assumption let me work unselfconsciously.

As I mentioned, I was then teaching Light Color and Design at Pratt. It was partly because I was so intensely focused on helping students see color, that I needed a break from formal visual decisions in my own studio. I was looking for some surprise.

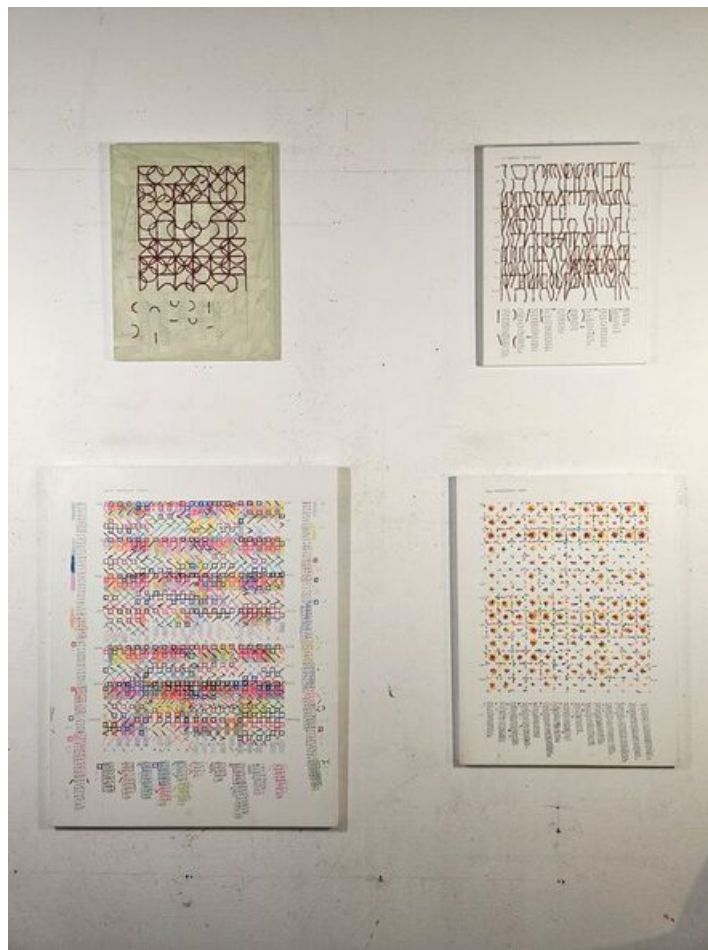


I MEANT TO SAY SOMETHING ELSE
 2021, acrylic, pencil, ink on panel, 16" x 12"

In 2001 I was blown away by an Alfred Jensen show at DIA Chelsea. Earlier I had seen but barely noticed Jensen's paintings. Now I responded instantly. They are enormous, and my graph paper works were minuscule, but I felt a kinship with their diagrammatic structures, which often contained language and numbers, but are much more visual than informative. I know Jensen alluded to and used systems and content from the Maya, the ancient Chinese, and other sources. But I don't know how to decode them, and I don't need to. It was around the time of that show that I began shifting my attention away from puzzles and toward this new gridded work full of words and color.

By the way, people often ask artists about influences, but sometimes affinities are more relevant. My work didn't originate based on Jensen's. Instead, it was after I was working in a related direction that I was able to see the power and beauty of his work.

For years I worked mainly on graph paper. Around 2013 I felt desperate to paint again. I needed a way to translate graph-paper drawings into painting. I started working on thin, 3/8-inch gessoed panels. As objects they are much like slates or tablets. They're like sheets of paper made solid. I grid surfaces with pencil lines, using a T square. I format the panels like pages, with columns of text, blocks of color, and margins. This was the beginning of my current work.



On the studio wall.

The drawings sometimes contained strings of free-associated sentences that were essentially journal entries, not meant to be seen by anyone else. The paintings I make now rarely contain anything like a journal entry, or other prose writing, by me. They contain lists of found language: lists of street names, of email subject lines, of sentences from labels and packaging, of signs seen during a subway trip . . .

Some of the writing in the works on paper had been very personal and intimate. But I had not planned to show them to anyone. I did not want to put those confessional personal narratives into paintings. I started focusing on found language. I vaguely believed that by writing down words from around me, rather than writing my own thoughts, my paintings would be less self-revealing. And maybe the paintings are less intimate: but I've realized that, no matter who originally wrote the language I use, if it is chosen by me, it is personal.



TMI

2016, acrylic, ink, graphite on gessoed panel, 14" x 11"

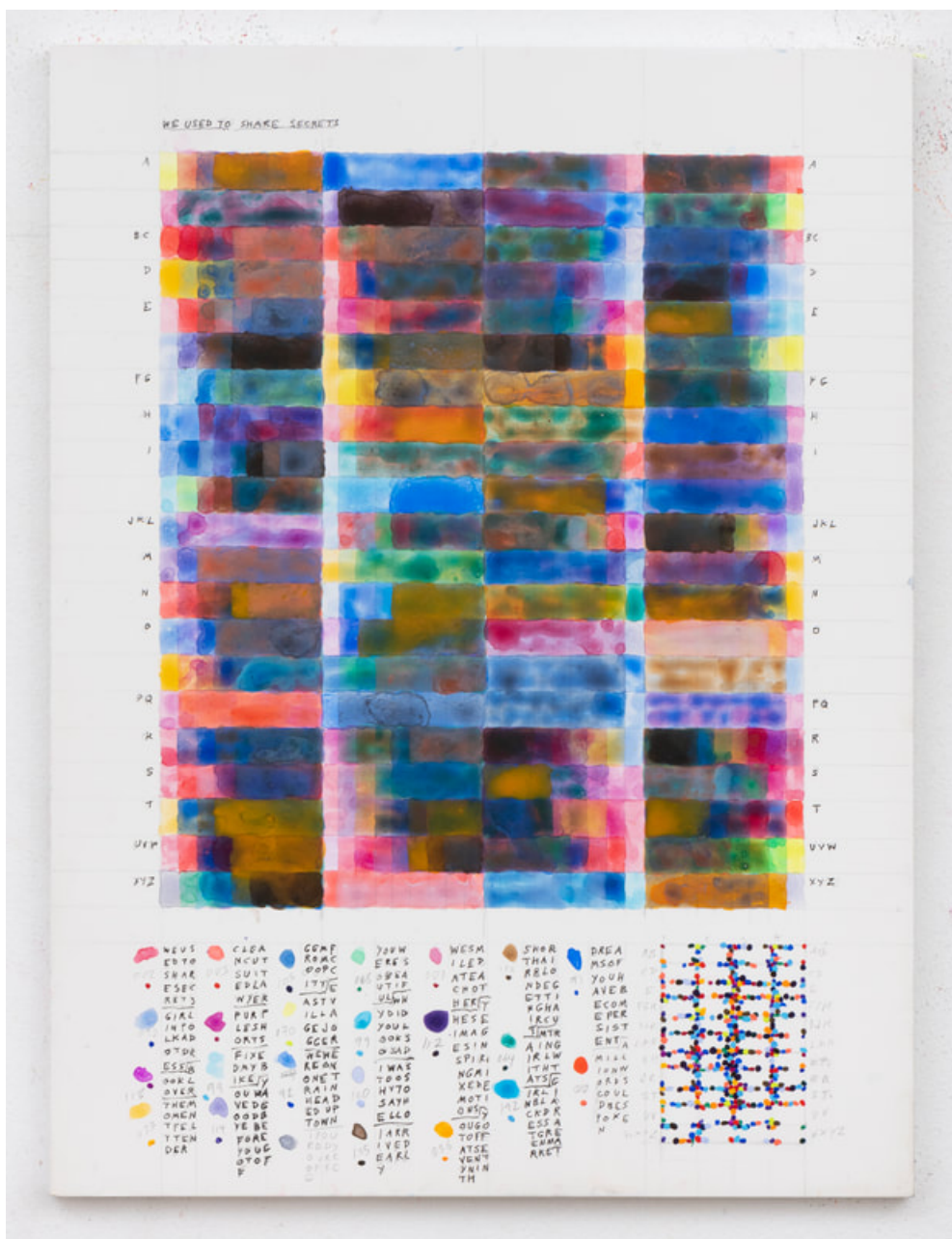
SF: In your studio, I was struck by how systems influence the way you paint, but they by no means dictate how you paint. Can you talk about how you balance structure and spontaneity in your process?

LR: In the paintings, each entry on a given list is charted into a grid as a particular color and kind of mark.

So, it is not that the letter A is always represented by red throughout a painting, for instance. The letters in one street name might be represented by a red vertical mark. The next street name might be entered as a blue diagonal mark. And so on. It's actually a pretty straightforward system. However, I am always deciding what the next color will be. There's no system for that.

I sometimes am grouped with artists who are doing a kind of data viz ([Mark Lombardi](#) for instance). But my work does not exactly record data, nor am I interested in doing that. Yes, sometimes a painting more or less documents a subway ride or a walk. But what I'm writing down is language, and I'm not necessarily writing down facts or doing research. Sometimes I am taking a lot of pleasure from the non-sequiturs that result from making a certain type of list. And nothing concrete can be learned from the painted areas of my paintings. The paint structures aren't decodable, even though my system, my "key" so to speak, is laid out right in the painting.

I'm interested in discovering the formal structures that can be derived through rules and games (much in the spirit of Oulipo writers like Perec and Queneau.) I also use my rule-based system as a way to filter my decisions, to get some distance from my habits of composing color. However, I spend a lot of time looking at paintings in progress, and I spend a lot of time deciding what color to use next, and what kind of mark. Those are completely intuitive decisions that I figure out as I make the painting. So my paintings are made systematically, yet they involve a lot of improvisation, and a lot of trust in my eye and my gut.



WE USED TO SHARE SECRETS
 2021, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel
 approximately 16" x 12"

SF: Color and negative space play such interconnected roles in your work. Tell me about how that relationship developed.

LR: This is an interesting question but I don't even know how to answer it. Color and negative space are such fundamental qualities in painting that I don't see how they could be anything but interconnected.

About the negative space--I didn't exactly "decide" to leave parts of the panel unpainted: the work evolved that way because the paintings are adaptations of work that began on paper and that had, just as manuscripts do, columns and margins. (So, you're exactly right that it corresponds to the space around written content on paper and parchment.) Each work essentially has a "page layout."

Even aside from written pages: it has always seemed "normal" to me, on paper, in a drawing, not to feel any compulsion to cover the entire page with color or marks. But when I was making "regular" abstract paintings in the early 90s, on canvas, I don't think I ever left any part of the canvas unpainted, or even let any area be pure white paint. In those works, pure white seemed like a visual hole. So I often think how odd it is to be making paintings that have such extensive white areas. I do see the "empty" parts of the panel as integrated, optically and conceptually, with the rest.

Conceptually, I would say that they indicate the fact that these works are simultaneously textual and visual. Visually, I guess it leads me to be sensitive to, and search for, integration of the white with the marks and the color.



"I do see the 'empty' parts of the panel as integrated, optically and conceptually, with the rest."
- Leslie Roberts

Above:

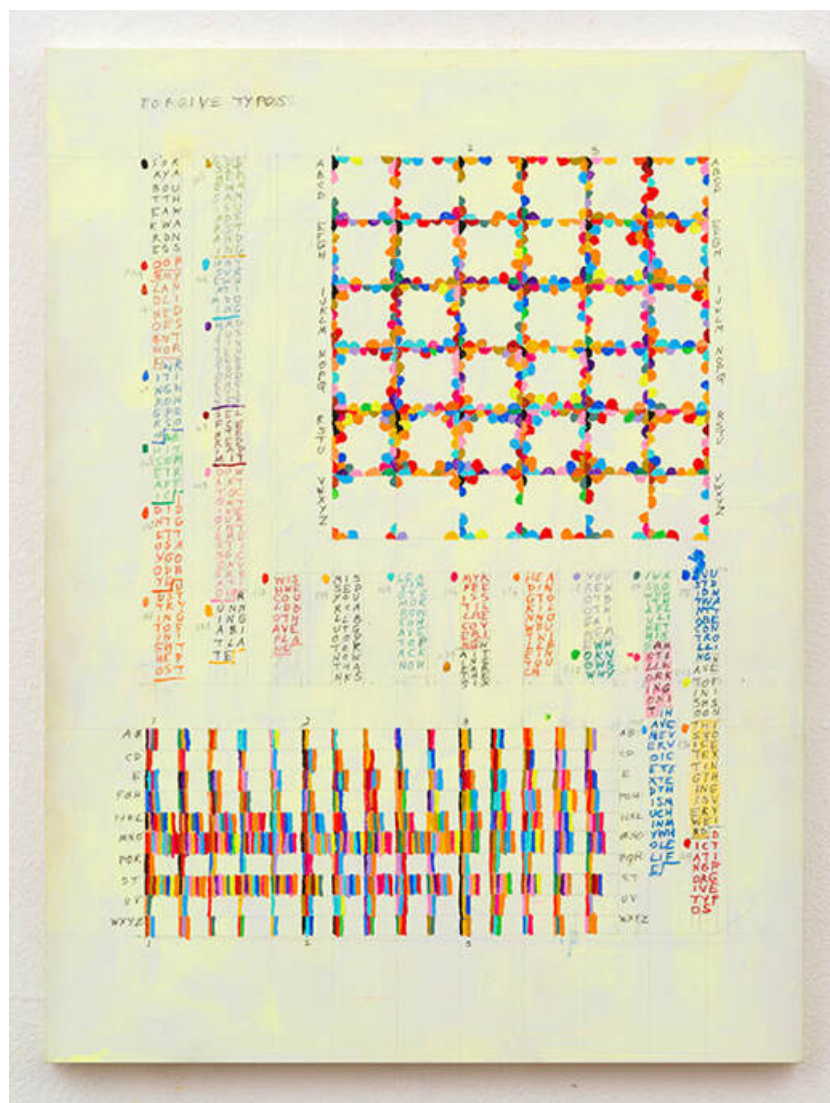
IF YOU'RE READING THIS

2022, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel, approximately 16" x 12"

Below:

FORGIVE TYPOS

2016, acrylic, graphite, colored pencil on gessoed panel, 12" x 9"

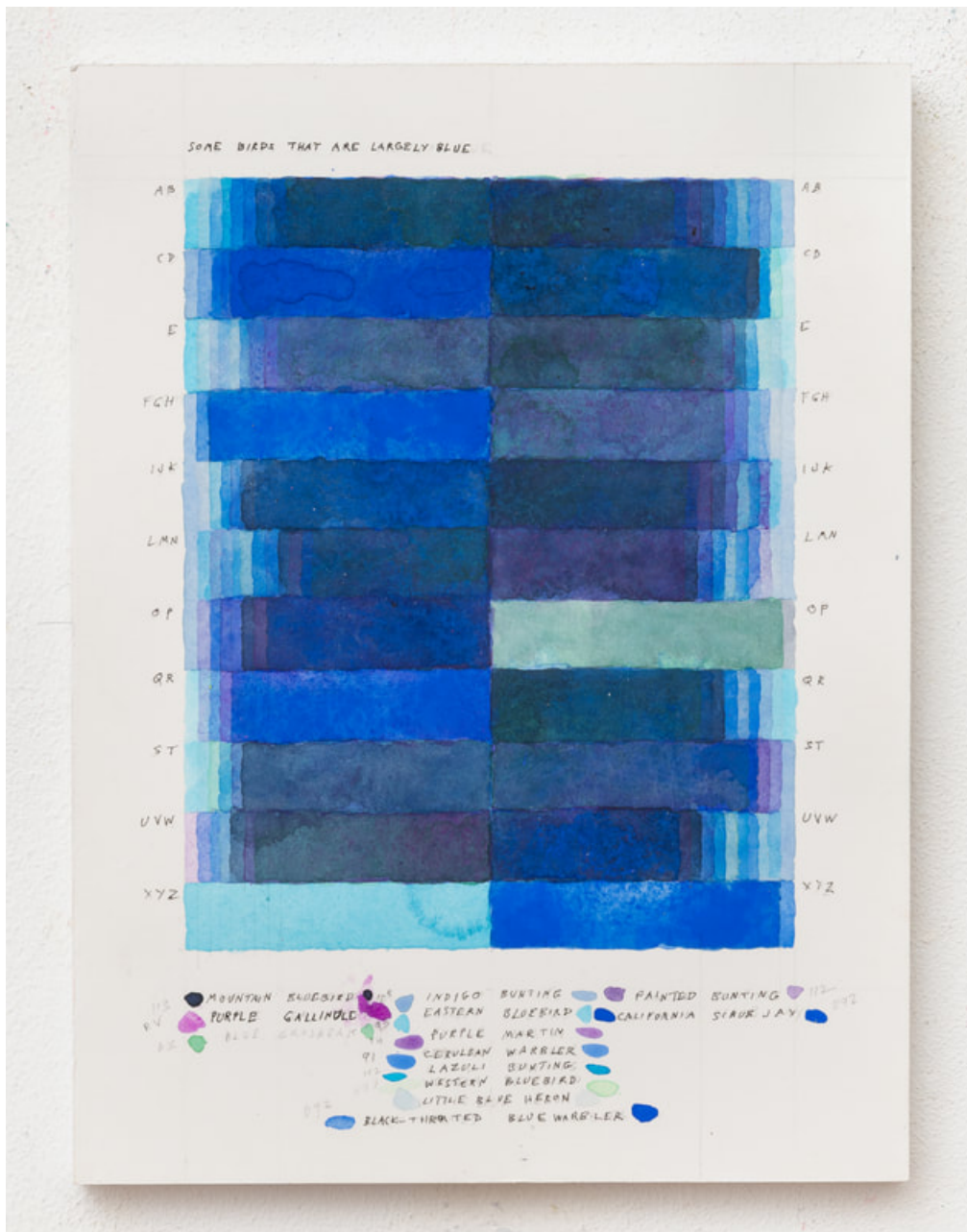


SF: You've recently been to at least two artist residencies (Maison Dora Maar in Ménerbes, France, and Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, NY). Has this had an impact on your work other than increased production? How do you see yourself responding to a certain amount of self-imposed isolation and your ability to develop ideas in the absence of familiar distractions?

LR: During the last few years I have been to quite a few artist residencies. Not teaching since 2021 makes this easier. (Sending out a lot of applications, without being discouraged by rejections, also helps.)

Sometimes I'm amazed that residencies exist. They are such generous gifts. This body of work owes a lot to those retreats. I think I make, not twice as much work as at home, but five times as much. They allow not just more work but more reflection. And it is almost shocking how liberating it is not to have to shop, prepare meals, or even buy toilet paper. Your mind is free.

Residencies usually have beautifully sunlit studios, and I can see my work with more clarity in than in New York. My work is not large but it's optically intense.



SOME BIRDS THAT ARE LARGELY BLUE

2023, acrylic, pencil, ink on paper mounted on panel, 12" x 9"

While solitude is easily available at residencies, and I typically spend long hours working alone, they also provide companionship, often with wonderful people. Isolation, for me, is more likely to happen at home. I know many people in NY, but it takes planning to see them. At residencies, contact with other humans is almost always built into the schedule. It is extremely welcome to end, or break up, a work day with conversation over dinner.

In the city, most of the people I know are artists. People in other disciplines, at residencies, have expanded my thinking. I was at a residency in Virginia when I made the first paintings on panels, moving from drawing to painting. I had shown the work to very few people. I realized I was extremely anxious about using language in my paintings. I take pleasure in collecting and assembling language. Lists are inherently poetic forms. But I'm not writing poems. I was afraid the language might appear to be amateur poetry. When writers responded strongly to the written content, it was a huge relief. I felt validated.

I've met writers who also love making lists, or who love using rules in writing. Sometimes they've lent me an idea or a sentence. Or have just helped me think in a new way.

I met a performance artist who made scripts out of found language, and they resonated so much with what I was doing. I loved her work and she was a wonderful visitor to the studio.



CHILDREN PLAYING

2022, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel

approximately 12" x 9"

SF: Can you talk about your thoughts on the relevance of abstraction in the era that we're living through?

LR: Well, I can argue that my paintings aren't abstract by some definitions, since they contain content and are constructed diagrammatically. But I agree that they can be seen as abstraction. The paint can look like code or glyphs, but the painted parts cannot be decoded or translated back. For all kinds of reasons. The marks in my paintings aren't symbols or language. The marks are themselves.

The presence of content is important to me in this work. But as much as for what the painting does—how it charts the various elements of its making—as for what words or meaning it contains.

I have thought that the content in my painting is analogous to the content in a lot of still life: the specifics of both reflect their time and place, usually without overtly signaling a message.

While I'm constructing the painted areas, the visual outcome is more important than the words I am mapping. And the painted areas are neither an information graphic, nor an illustration of what's written.

However, I and other humans are good at finding relationships between form and content when they're side by side. So a painting documenting a subway trip can start to look like a map. A painting that names bird species can seem to present a bilateral outspread structure like that of a bird, or might seem to resemble sound diagrams, or might even seem to look like a bunch of birds on a wire. In no cases did I start out with those intentions, but all have come to seem like possible valid readings of the work.



CRIMSON RUBY SCARLET

2022, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel

approximately 16" x 12"

Continued...

Back to your question, which relates specifically to the present. At some of the fraught moments we have lived through in the past decade, I have certainly felt, at least briefly, how can I not address this time in my work? Occasionally I have found slightly oblique ways to refer to politics or world events: once, for instance, by compiling a list of protest-focused email subject lines.

In fact, many paintings with rosters of headlines or of excerpts from email contain a residue of current events.

However, I don't feel any lack, any need for content, when I look at other artists' "purely" abstract work, if it's good or great. I think in bad times we are sustained in part by art and literature that is not about the bad stuff. Thank god Joan Mitchell and Matisse didn't make political posters.

I sometimes feel dubious about awards and residencies that call for work that is going to make a difference to the world, by which they mean politically/socially engaged. Artists need to be politically and socially engaged in their lives, like other citizens, but their work is not likely to be what changes government or society. Even the most brilliant political art is virtually always preaching to the choir.

Some artists are by nature political artists and it is what they need to do. Other artists are not. I believe people make the best work by making their own work. I think some young artists feel pressured to make their work "relevant" and should feel free to make the work that's their own.



AI ET AL

2025, acrylic, ink, pencil on panel
approximately 16" x 12"

SF: Who are you looking at (living or dead)?

LR: Just a few: Alfred Jensen, Persian miniature painting, Anni Albers, James Siena, various quilts, Tom Nozkowski, Dan Walsh, Cosmatesque tile floors when I'm able to get to Italy, vintage game boards . . . screenshots of screen glitches on my previous computer before it died.



Leslie Roberts in her studio.

SF: What's next for you?

LR: In September: a solo show at [57W57 Arts](#), and a two-person show at [Left Field Gallery](#)—I am really looking forward to showing there with you! In January, I'll install work that refers to nature, listing names of birds and flowers, at [Studio Light Space](#) in Tucson, And a book of the small daily list drawings I made on datebook pages during the summer of the pandemic. I'm working with [CoMa Art Books](#), run by two wonderful artist/designers based in Amsterdam whom I have known a long time. Last year they published a book of eight of my paintings, titled *I Will Console You with Language*.

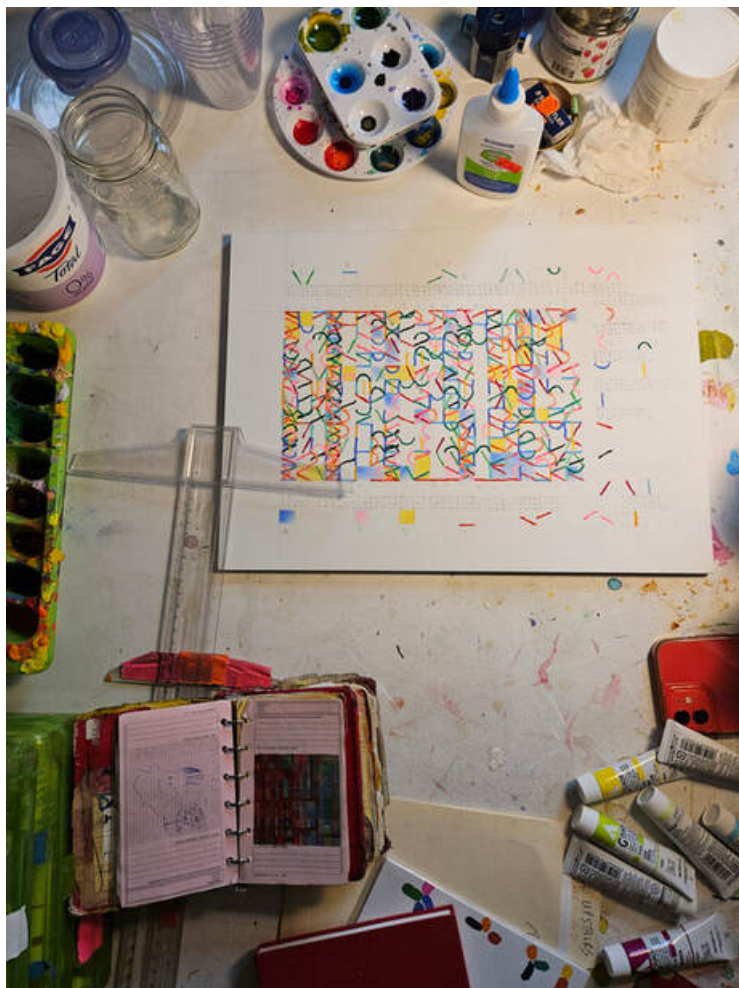


Somewhere near the artist's studio.

You can see more of Leslie Robert's work...

- on her website: <https://leslierobertsart.com/section/281957.html>
- on her instagram account: [@lesliejaneroberts](https://www.instagram.com/lesliejaneroberts)
- at [57W57ARTS](#) in NYC
- at [Left Field Gallery](#) in Los Osos, CA

Leslie Roberts makes paintings driven by color, language, and self-devised rules. She has exhibited in the US and abroad, at galleries including Minus Space, Marlborough Gallery, 57W57Arts, Markel Fine Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum in NYC; the Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC); and the Hafnarborg Museum (Iceland.) She received grants from the Pollock-Krasner and Gottlieb Foundations in 2024. Residencies include Yaddo, Dora Maar House, Ucross, Ragdale, Willapa Bay AIR, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Skowhegan. Roberts holds a BA from Yale and an MFA from Queens College. She is Professor Emerita at Pratt Institute. She lives and works in Brooklyn.



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