

## Life Studies

IN STEPHANIE BRODY-LEDERMAN'S ART OF IMAGES AND WORDS, SOME BOLD, NEW ABSTRACT GESTURES ARE SHAKING UP THE EMOTIONAL MIX. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



From left: Stephanie Brody-Lederman, *Everyone Wants Something*, 2010, acrylic and graphite on paper; *White Dumbbell*, 2010, Sennelier inks on embossed glassine, mounted on paper; *Happy Hour*, 2012, Sennelier inks on embossed glassine, mounted on paper.



MEMO TO contemporary art-makers: Is the age of irony over? With the most fundamental tenet of postmodernist critical theory—the notion that the meaning of anything can and will change when it is removed from its original context and placed in a different, unexpected setting—came an indefatigable obsession with a self-conscious sense of irony every such “recontextualizing” gesture provoked. What’s not to smirk at when a men’s urinal is taken out of a rest room and displayed in a gallery as a work of art, or when inflatable toy animals are rendered large, in stainless steel instead of plastic, and exhibited as monumental icons at the Palace of Versailles?

Now, after many decades of post-Duchampian exercises in the appropriation of just about everything into the realm of art, is there any room left in the irony-saturated art world for artists who dare to traffic in a sincere concern for the mysteries of human nature, affairs of the heart or that confounding part of our being, in which, as the French existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir once observed, “things of the spirit come first”?



Throughout her long career, Stephanie Brody-Lederman, a New York-based painter and maker of mixed-media assemblage works, has bucked prevailing trends and steadfastly created the kind of irony-free, psychologically and emotionally trenchant art to which such a description applies. Her paintings, mixed-media works on paper and sculptural objects have reflected an array of fleeting feelings, observations and impressions gathered from everyday life. Her art routinely mixes snippets of overheard conversation with vivid colors and simple depictions of an endless stream of lanterns, chairs, trees, dogs, boats, cars, food, jewelry and other objects or subjects that cross Brody-Lederman’s path or roam from the periphery of her vision into a vast “to keep” file that resides somewhere in her busy mind. Designs on candy wrappers, colors of paper scraps on the sidewalk, unusual words in newspaper headlines, the shapes of shadows, the sounds of feet crushing along gravel paths, the stiffness of the fabric in a pleated lamp-



shade—such details are the raw materials of Brody-Lederman's art.

Her work brings together imagery and language in a seemingly impulsive froth that belies the deliberative manner in which she sorts out her source material and develops her compositions. "I might start out spontaneously, inspired by a single word or dab of color on my brush—then my working method can become laborious," she says. "I experiment a lot and try to sense where a work-in-progress may be heading, where it may lead me. A viewer might assume my approach is free-wheeling, but as I'm working, my editing process is brutal."

For Brody-Lederman, that sense of awareness about what works best for her as she develops each new piece has been many years in the making. Born and brought up in New York, mostly in the Bronx, she was an only child. "As I was growing up, my family moved house frequently," she recalls. "All that moving around was stressful, and

I found an outlet for what I was thinking and feeling in drawing and painting." From the start, she says, she regarded her youthful productions as art, and her father, a real-estate broker who would later briefly own a gallery, took his daughter's creative expression seriously.

In college, Brody-Lederman studied art and soaked up the colors, forms, design sensibilities and especially moods of the artworks she saw in New York's galleries and museums. Still, she never gravitated toward any particular, popular style. "My work has always flowed naturally from whatever I've experienced in my immediate environment," she explains. For example, as a young mother in the 1970s, while pursuing a master's degree in art at C.W. Post College on Long Island (during five years of night classes), Brody-Lederman kept up with the ideas that were percolating in the nascent feminist movement and in what would become known as feminist

Finished paintings in the artist Stephanie Brody-Lederman's studio in New York.



From top: Stephanie Brody-Lederman examines materials on her worktable in her studio in New York; *Faire Courage* (Blue Table), 2010, Senneller inks on embossed glassine, mounted on paper.



art. While not a movement polemicist or militant, she did help, as a volunteer, with the production of *Heresies*, one of the era's pioneering feminist publications, and was especially moved by its contributors' personal-diary excerpts. She says, "I found that, like me, many women were making art in their kitchens and basements. I realized that these humble places for making art had a lot of validity."

Fashioning art out of the most basic aspects of everyday domestic life led Brody-Lederman, a reserved, private person, to create dreamlike drawings whose austere compositions (featuring what graphic designers call "visible language," or written words) literally offered maps of familiar spaces in her own home, like its master bedroom. Back then, she says, "I made art day and night, creating the works that were the harbingers of what I'm doing now. I felt brave about making this work because, through it,

I was exposing my emotional life." In those early works, with rubber-stamped letters or hand-written phrases, she provided obtuse or matter-of-fact descriptions of her subject matter. In time, the character of the words and phrases she used in her compositions became more succinct, wistful, free-associative or even wacky. The artist says, "My words and images are more interrelated than it might seem; I'm not merely illustrating the subjects they refer to, even if some of these words and phrases become the titles of my paintings."

Instead, Brody-Lederman's pictures, with their hints of anxiety, romance, trepidation or longing, are impressionistic portraits of uncertain psychic atmospheres rather than realistic depictions of places or events. Her simple, poetic-declarative word fragments ("Spoonfuls of the old country" or "Fireflies and candlelit dinners" or "You're winging it/From shore to forest") can sound as goofy as they can disjointed. Sometimes, obliquely, her off-beat bons mots serve up the kind of philosophical spirit that can be found in Rainer



The spot on a wall in her studio in New York on which Brody-Lederman hangs canvases or sheets of paper and creates her paintings and mixed-media drawings.

Maria Rilke's verse (like that of the Rilke line, "[W]e are grasped by what we cannot grasp") or the kind of imaginative stretching that turns up in such phrases of Rimbaud as "the melancholy wash of the setting sun." Despite her pictures' bright colors and lopsided charm, they can also simmer with the kind of foreboding that is felt in the moments just before a big scene in a Hitchcock film, like the one in *The Birds* in which a clear sky fills with masses of squawking, flapping creatures seconds before their destructive descent upon a small, coastal town.

Brody-Lederman's text-and-image works have been published in *The Paris Review* and *L'Oeil* (France). Most recently, her poetry has appeared in *St. Petersburg Review*, an American literary journal. Recently, too, her painting has taken a somewhat more expressionistic turn,

especially in several still-evolving groups of works on paper. In them, along with applying hardy washes of potent color, she has abstracted some of her cipher-like forms so that now they only hint at the subjects that inspired them in the same way that the seemingly untethered words or language fragments that are hallmarks of her image-making allude to more complete thoughts or statements. For example, a motif that lately has appeared in several of her paintings and drawings is a kind of rectangle drawn with a curlicue line. It is a distillation, the artist explains, of the designs of cast-iron gates and bannisters she has noticed on New York townhouses and of the shapes of elegant gilt frames she has found in Paris flea markets.

Brody-Lederman, who spends time in Paris each year, made some of her newest works on paper using French-made, shel-

lac-based Sennelier inks of different colors on feather-light, pattern-embossed sheets of glassine mounted on thicker sheets of fine-quality drawing paper. "In fact, the thin sheets, which are not meant for drawing, separated the thicker sheets in a pad of paper a friend had given me," she explains. "But I liked the luminous effects of the inks on the delicate glassine so much, I used them anyway." In these pictures, she says (works like *Croissant + 2 Worlds*, *White Dumbbell* and *Faire Courage*, all dated 2010), "I painted what I saw around me during my strolls through Paris: pastries, electrical plugs, little tables, metal whisks. I'm intrigued by those little Parisian shops that are packed with so many different things."

In similar brush-and-ink drawings, such as *Pink Cross* and *French (Blue Table)*, both from 2010, or in such acrylic-and-pencil works on paper as *No Regrets* and



From left: *Croissant + 2 Worlds*, 2012, Schminckler inks on embossed glassine, mounted on paper; *All Those Good Years*, acrylic and graphite on paper.



*First Frost (Go)*, both dated 2012, a straggling letter or line, a single drip or murky dot of paint, or a seemingly throwaway patch of transparent color may actually help anchor the constellations of elements that make up each composition. Sometimes a

letter in a handwritten word may dangle, crossed out or hiding in a smudge, and call nervous attention to the moods or emotions to which a visible word or phrase alludes.

Mary Anne Butler, the director of Butler's Fine Art in East Hampton, N.Y., handles Brody-Lederman's work in the eastern Long Island region. Of her "somewhat peculiar art," with its "deceptively naïve quality," she notes that "Stephanie always strikes the perfect tension point" between the various elements of her compositions to produce "her very own, most minimalist poetry." Regarding the character and effect of Brody-Lederman's work, Butler adds, "Imagine the sensation of riding a slowly whirling merry-go-round and seeing and hearing the passing, fragmented images and sounds. Viewers must be open to surprise in order to let go, engage and be transported emotionally by her art to some personal place of their own association."

Several years ago, the American play-

wright Edward Albee wrote that Brody-Lederman's art "signals, 'Hey, here I am!'" but that "it does not shout or wave its parts around" as it does so and takes a "wry and touching approach" to the subjects—relationships, family life, beliefs, aspirations, anxiety—it addresses. (Brody-Lederman's work is on view in a group show at Butler's gallery through September 6; this past summer, her paintings were featured in "Arcadia," a contemporary-landscape exhibition at O.K. Harris Fine Art in Manhattan, her longtime, principal dealer. Her drawings are also available at Kentler International Drawing Space, a contemporary-art outpost in Brooklyn.)

At the opening of O.K. Harris's recent exhibition, a young man approached Brody-Lederman and pointed to one of her large paintings in oil, acrylic and pencil on linen (*The Mystery of Our Love of Things*, 2009–10). It depicted an irregular white line—a road—stretching horizontally across a vast pictorial space with a mostly empty, green background dotted with just a few spread-out, isolated trees. "I know that place; it looks familiar," the visitor said. "That picture's like a symbol of my life."

"I understand," Brody-Lederman replied and, without a hint of irony added, "I think it's a kind of a self-portrait. It's about a journey. It's a picture of my life, too." ■