

Alfred Women You Should Know

Inspiration in Flight: Lise Lemeland

BY BRYAN DALY

Lise Lemeland, an Assistant Professor of Drawing and Painting in Alfred's School of Art and Design, describes the process of art-making by isolating two concepts that assist in making decisions: insight and intuition. In a very simplified definition, insight is the epiphany that alerts the artist of something that becomes suddenly apparent, helpful and correct about where next to take their work to make it flourish. Her explanations of how this force shapes her artwork would sound familiar to artists of every kind, visual or otherwise. It becomes shocking, however, when she uses the word to describe her first time flying.

Two years ago, Lemeland spontaneously decided to take a chartered biplane flight on Martha's Vineyard. The pilot must have sensed that she was, in her own words, "an adrenaline junkie," and decided to take her for a loop and a spin. Somewhere in the air above the small island, spinning in and out of zero gravity, Lemeland experienced a moment of insight that drastically altered her lifelong understanding of herself as an artist. After her first ride in a small plane, she realized that she was a pilot.

It takes an admirable amount of self-determination and confidence to suddenly decide that it is time to learn how to fly, but it is easy to see that Lise Lemeland decides to do what she is called to do and accepts the difficulty as a given. When she had just finished an undergraduate degree in English from Stanford, Lemeland realized that she was a painter, and re-enrolled as an art student. She continued studying to be an artist through a graduate art program at Hunter College, during which time she gave birth to the first two of her three children.

She was already teaching at Alfred when she had her aerial epiphany. Her colleague Will Contino, also a pilot and an Assistant Professor of Printmaking, introduced her to a flight instructor in nearby Hornell. Not long after her first time piloting she knew that she needed not only to be a pilot, but an aerobat also. When she describes the process of executing a single roll, it takes a half a minute to explain the numerous and sometimes simultaneous manipulations of the controls she has to make as an aviatrix. In the air, this all happens in about two seconds. After her initial exposure to aerobatics, the time she had spent painting before became consumed: if not by actual flying, then by a brain that couldn't help but dream of being airborne.

Not only that, but trying to decide how her reinvention as a pilot



Lise is ready for take off!

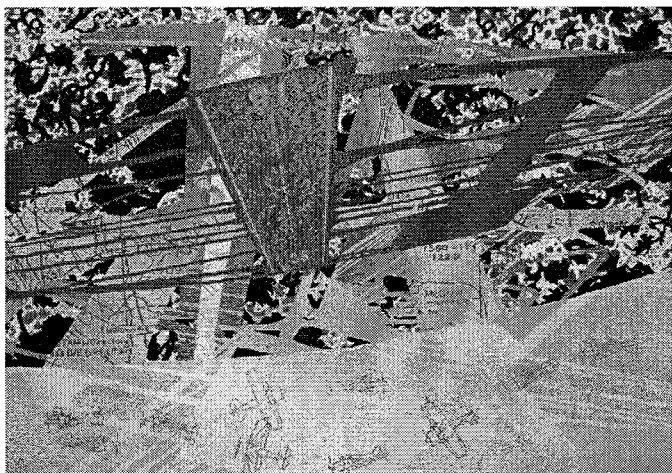
belonged in her existing role as artist was suddenly daunting. Here, intuition took hold. For her, it is a slower process than insight, but no less vital, in which as an artist she discovers how an epiphany can find meaning in her work. Her description of aerobatics, "controlled precision at the edge of the envelope," encapsulates the work she has come to make. Her latest paintings both implicitly and explicitly encompass aerial imagery.

Though aerial perspective influences her work, it rarely manifests in a recognizable form, except for ground maps that appear as one of the many layers in her new paintings. In one, the map of Martha's Vineyard where she first had an insight into flying covers the canvas, among other layers. Other elements she has begun working with include multiple horizons, miniature toy-sized plane outlines that roll barrels and turns loops across the paintings, and in some, the actual commands the pilot must remind themselves while doing these maneuvers. While many artists pilfer antiquated instruction manuals and how-to books for images, Lemeland uses the images of flying techniques from manuals and books she still studies. Several paintings also feature the sky as the bottom half of the composition—a common sight for a pilot, but somewhat stomach-turning for a first time viewer. The visceral reaction one finds in viewing her work can be credited to her impressive artistry, but also to her growing talent as an aerobat.

Seeing how intensely she had transitioned into her most recent art, it is hard to think that flying might be anything but a wonderful gift. But then one remembers the passion that sent her up in the air. She says, "It is a double-edged sword. I go crazy when I can't go up. My art is so wrapped up in it. If I haven't flown in a while, I need to go up so I can remember what I am painting about!" She also weighs the dangers of having such a risky passion, and sometimes wonders why it had to be aerobatics that spoke to her over all else. This is all without even touching on the high price of getting airborne.

But as an artist, she considers flying the second biggest gift of her career. The first, of course, was discovering that she was an artist.

Lemeland is also the author of an excellent three-part article series on aerobatics for Sport Aerobatics Magazine, the third of which focuses on her role as one of two women in a fifty-person aerobatics competition. All three can all be found here for free: <http://executiveflyers.com/2010/03/02/sport-aerobatics-article/> ●



Aileron Roll, 45" x 60", oil on panel, 2009 by Lise Lemeland