

## SANDY BLEIFER: TEXTURALITY

By Peter Frank

Across her considerable career, Sandy Bleifer has addressed any number of themes and issues. Her engagement with personal, psychological, social, and even political matters is constant and unflagging; each series she generates focuses on a different concern, allowing her at one time to concentrate on her inner self and her experiences, at another time to consider how humans relate to one another, at yet another time to contemplate the beauty and fragility of the world.

But what has maintained steadily throughout Bleifer's entire career has been her appreciation for and exploitation of material – principally, but not solely, paper. There is a strong imagistic bent to her visual sensibility, but it is outweighed, even as it is supported, by her sensitivity to texture and heft. In a sense, through paper, Bleifer is always balancing between the condition of painting and the condition of sculpture, fusing the facture of each into a hybrid that depends on its material to function both as support and as substance.

Paper, so potent and so flexible a medium, and one fraught with vast and varied association, has long proved ideal for Bleifer's aesthetic (and, by extension, ethic). Not surprisingly, then, she has repeatedly turned to the arts of Pacific Asia, with their own dependency on paper, for formal and thematic inspiration. The latest of her trips to the Far East, for instance, led to the recent "Ikebana" series, an unabashed homage to the Japanese art of floral arrangement. The series has yielded some of Bleifer's most directly pictorial work, some of her most colorful, and some of her most painterly. For once, she centrally engages the traditional figure-ground formal relationship that is a fundament of Western painting and, to the same extent but in a different way, Eastern. She has expansively broadened the range of her visual texture. Clearly, Bleifer has allowed herself to indulge here with an almost Matissean regard in the *luxe, calme et volupté* of the "oriental" manner.

But the Ikebana works are not without visual austerity. Their images are lush, but their contrasts and contours are stark. The works are structured with a sometimes-startling theatricality – a theatricality whose harsh lucidity recalls that of Kabuki and Noh. The textures, optical and physical, may be sensuous, but they readily combine the coarse with the gentle. There is a constant oscillation between the new and the worn: Bleifer cites *sabe no wabe*, the high regard held by the Japanese for the qualities of age, as a philosophical influence. In the Ikebana series she highlights those qualities through contrast with the young and fresh, so that the portrayal of a single plant, at once luxurious and agitated, evokes both its beginnings and its end.

The Ikebana works come on the heels of several series characterized by a rather more stringent mien. These series go back as far as the early-mid 1980s, and constitute the bodies of work for which Bleifer has become best known. Indeed, those familiar with groups of work such as the "Angels," the "Personae," and the "Walls" and "Graffiti" will find the Ikebana a somewhat surprising departure – although the closer they look, the more the continuities will emerge. In one sense the Ikebanas are a return for Bleifer to a concentration on the readily recognizable object, although previously – as in the Angels and the Personae – the "object" recognized is the human figure.

The Angels constitute an almost serial consideration of the splayed (and perhaps flayed) body, hung as if crucified and bringing to mind the Crucifixion altarpieces of the early and high Renaissance. Their preoccupation with the pathetic fragility of the human body manifests in a yet more brittle way in the

Personae, which present themselves as bodies disappearing into or emerging from masses of paper. This is especially true of the “Paper Becoming Me” sub-series from the mid-1980s and the subsequent “Circus Costumes” works, cast off the bodies of dancers posing in mid-movement. The dynamic of these works builds on the minimal and monumental “Life Casts” and the intimate “Chest” and “Hip” works. In contrast to the victimized passivity of the Angels, the figural presences in these subsequent pieces are active, even brave-seeming, plunging into or emerging from their paper shrouds with a vigor that at once asserts their vitality and exposes them to destructive forces – forces which Bleifer’s compositions imply are a constant factor in the human condition.

The Walls, described by Bleifer as an “Expression of the Urban Environment,” are logically far less reliant on figural or, for that matter, still-life subjects than her other work, old or new. But this series and its many subsets, realized by Bleifer throughout the 1980s and well into the ‘90s, is no less referent to the exterior world. Working with the elaborate textures of walls and wall-like surfaces and the marks they bear (the “Graffiti” sub-series even includes collaborations with a tagger), Bleifer has reconsidered a subject as familiar to latter-day artistic practice as is the human figure. As in her figural work, Bleifer has given new life to the urban wall by recapitulating it in paper. Her approach is especially sculptural here, often incorporating gaps and intervening substances and structures so that dense webs of forcefully contrasting patterns and surfaces ultimately emerge. Such elaboration recurs in the Ikebana works, although there it serves to illumine living things rather than human-made structures.

Sandy Bleifer’s signal contribution to contemporary artistic practice is her overall employment of paper towards a variety of subjects and effects. But over the years Bleifer has engaged this employment in the consideration of diverse subjects, and to regard her simply as an innovator in paper is to miss the deeply felt and conveyed meanings of her artworks, the worldly concerns that motivated their production in the first place. Her various series are in fact collections of thoughts about life, like the *pensées* of a memoirist, perhaps, or the musings of a poet. The only difference is, they are made of paper rather than written on it.

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