



Clockwise from top left: Mel Leipzig's "Aubrey Kaufman at Mason Gross, Rutgers" (detail); "Judy Brodsky & Michael Curtis" (detail); "Gregory at Gallery Henoeh"; "Gerry Haggerty" (detail), all acrylics on canvas. (COURTESY OF THE ARTIST)

Mel Leipzig's paintings of everyday people are anything but ordinary

The power of portraits



Dan Bischoff
dbischoff@starledger.com

For more than 40 years, Trenton-based artist Mel Leipzig, who just turned 80,

has been painting portraits of people around New Jersey and New York "As They Are."

Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, has just opened a show of a dozen such recent paintings of friends, family and artists, all suspended in their common, everyday pursuits.

Like social media selfies, Leipzig's portraits try to give you more than a likeness by emphasizing the sitter's context.

These portraits are as much about the backgrounds they are painted against as their human subjects: Artists in their studios, actors in tech rehearsal under a grid of spotlights, academics in offices piled to the ceiling with books and crumpled papers — everything in a Leipzig work is painted with an almost hallucinogenic intensity of detail, just as he sees it.

At Aljira there are portraits of his late wife Mary Jo and their daughter Francesca painted on a trompe-l'oeil door, as well as an art critic in his book-stuffed apartment on 71st Street in

Manhattan. Leipzig paints an assistant standing in a doorway to the offices at Gallery Henoeh, his New York City dealer (Henoeh has represented Leipzig longer than any other artist in its stable, since 1984), and a Trenton graffitiist posing in front of one of his temporary outdoor murals downtown.

"But up close," says Aljira director Victor Davson, "what you see is they are all just paint ... The thing about Mel is, he loves paint."

Most are rendered with just four primary colors and black, in acrylic. The paintings in "As They Are," well-chosen by Davson, show off Leipzig's uncanny wizardry with paint, but even

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IF YOU GO As They Are: Portraits by Mel Leipzig

Where: Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad St., Newark

When: Through Sept. 5. Open noon-6 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday

How much: Free. For more information call (973) 622-1600 or see aljira.org

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more so his facility with light and space. Done entirely freehand, and for the past decade without any underdrawing or studies, many of the pictures distort perspective in a way that renders character.

—Leipzig's double portrait of Judith Brodsky, founder of Rutgers University's Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, and her husband, the scholar and activist Michael Curtis, bends her art and his books around the couple like a package.

—In his painting of the cast of a production of Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" (Leipzig is devoted to the Norwegian playwright), he places seven actors and the director within a geometric grid of lighting struts and the stage edge that subtly recreates the relationships among the characters. The distortions of perspective seem at first to resemble those of a fish-eye lens, but closer inspection shows the design revolving around the actor portraying Hedda, glorious in her orange costume.

The geometries are Venetian in their plunge, the picture a Tintoretto set in the drama department at Mercer County Community College.

That's not a bad way to describe all his work, as adding drama to common scenes in New Jersey and New York. (Leipzig even painted the old newsroom and printing plant of The Star-Ledger before the newspaper left for new offices and closed the plant.)

Relatively unsung

Davson thinks Leipzig's achievement is still relatively unsung, though the painter was elected to the National Academy in 2006 and has work in the Whitney Museum, the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, and the New Jersey State Museum, as well as in many private collections.

Last year the Gallery Henocho hosted a one-man show of his work, and another will be held in the Center for Contemporary Art in Bedminster next year. In 2017, the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury will mount an exhibition of Leipzig's portraits of artists in their studios, each picture

paired with an artwork by the artist in the portrait.

If Leipzig feels like something of a discovery, that could be due to the lingering prejudice against portraiture. Modernism threw portrait painting into history's dustbin for nearly a century, despite portraiture's central role in secular art ever since the Renaissance.

After all, portraitists are required to more or less produce a likeness, which ties them to realism and not abstraction. And while portraits have always been made in every era, the process of building a career in portraiture has always involved a certain amount of patron flattery and therefore compromise — not what the Modern revolution was about.

Leipzig pursues portraiture without commissions. He paints directly from life wherever his sitter is at home, and pays his subjects \$25 an hour, no matter if they are rich or poor. Flattery isn't necessary (though he is usually kind to his subjects).

The only limit, Leipzig says, is he finds it difficult to paint "anyone I don't like."

"They used to say 'It's been



Mel Leipzig's portrait of Aljira founders Carl Hazlewood and Victor Davson is really a portrait of the gallery's neighborhood on Military Park in Newark, seen through its front window.

done," the painter says of realistic portraiture, "and you would not be able to do it any better. That was supposed to put you off the attempt."

But Leipzig never wanted to do anything other than paint the figure. Born in Brooklyn, Leipzig wasn't wealthy like John Singer Sargent (probably the most influential pre-Modern American portraitist, whose similarly uncommissioned portraits are currently in "Portraits of Artists and

Friends" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). So Leipzig had few natural links to the class that normally pays for portraiture.

But he won a scholarship to Cooper Union in Manhattan, and then to Yale University, on the strength of his portfolio. After graduation, he won a Fulbright Fellowship in 1958 to study in Europe, and moved there for a year. But he found painting very difficult while he was abroad. "I switched to

watercolor for a while," he says, "because I couldn't finish a painting." By the early '60s, the art world seemed to be at war with itself, with pop art leading a bitter but popular revolt against abstract expressionism.

On his return to the U.S., Leipzig got a part-time job selling memberships at the Museum of Modern Art. He taught painting for a while at Columbia University, and then landed a teaching post at Queens College. In the late 1960s, New Jersey was building a public art education system of its own, and a Cooper Union graduate, Sam Willig, was hired to chair the art program at Mercer County Community College just outside of Trenton. Leipzig moved there in 1970 and taught painting and art history until he retired in 2013.

Leipzig never uses photography in his work, digital or otherwise.

Every image is hand-made — artisanal art, you might say. And over a long career, together his pictures make up a kind of record of life here in the Northeast, created one person at a time.