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Interviews

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Art

Beer with a Painter: John Lees

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by Jennifer Samet
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John Lees, "Barrymore (My Days in the Sun)" (2016), oil on paper mounted on canvasboard, 9 x 18 inches
(all images courtesy the artist and Betty Cuningham Gallery)

John Lees's studio is a sloped-ceiling room on the top floor of his cozy farmhouse in upstate New York. His cat curls up on the sofa; scrapbooks and sketchbooks line the shelves, an old card table is used for drawing. He paints at an easel inherited from his grandfather; his records and turntables, as well as paintings from his art school days, are within reach. Amid an art world fixated on work that's fresh, current, unlabored, and image based, Lees makes art that is craggy, built-up, thread-bare, and mysterious.

Lees has a wry, self-deprecating sense of humor; he can do pitch-perfect impressions of his friends, family, and actors of the 1930s. He throws out archaic expressions for comic relief, and to transport us to a different time and place. A music lover and cinephile, his points of reference are unexpected, and not of this moment.

Humor and pop culture references give Lees's work levity — as do bursts of high-keyed color across scraped surfaces with impasto paint in low relief. Despite the fact that he works on paintings for as long as 30 years, they don't appear overly precious. Instead, they seem human and vulnerable. Several of Lees's paintings have been re-shown in multiple iterations over the years, each time edited and re-worked. His subjects include portraits in profile — which feel highly specific, even if the sitter is unknown — as well as household objects like armchairs and a claw-foot bathtub, houses and people, animals and paths through the landscape. They have a swirling, tempestuous energy that builds through the layers of paint. Lees is also known for his scroll-format drawings, which record daily life with his wife and their animals, and the stream in their backyard. These too may be re-worked over decades, and in them, like a diary, Lees records dates, notes, the changing of seasons, and passings.

John Lees, "Man Sitting in an Armchair" (1971/2013-2014), oil on panel, 12 1/2 x 10 inches

John Lees was born in 1943 in Denville, New Jersey, and grew up in Los Angeles. He received his BFA and MFA from the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles (now Otis College of Art and Design). He has been exhibiting in New York since 1977 and has been an instructor at the New York Studio School since 1988. His work is represented in the collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan; the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Kemper Collection, Kansas City, Missouri; the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the New Museum, New York. He is represented by Betty Cuningham Gallery, New York, where he has been the subject of several solo exhibitions, most recently in March to May 2021.

Jennifer Samet: *You grew up in Los Angeles. As a child or young person, how did you get interested in art and art making?*

John Lees: I was named after my maternal grandfather, Johann, who died before I was born. He was born in Vienna, and he was a musician and also a painter. When he came to this country, he was a music teacher, church organist, and choir master. I began painting at around age seven. When I was 10, I started collecting the little Abrams art books. They cost 50 cents at the time, which was my allowance. I was often told by my mother, "You are just like my father — artistic, impractical." I was given marching orders, and I tried to live up to them.

My family lived outside of Westwood Village in Los Angeles. The neighborhood was close to Beverly Hills and Bel Air, where all the film people lived. We were in service to them; that's how I came to see it: my mother taught Latin at a private girls' school, and my father sold high-end cars. My father was like Willy Loman in many ways. He ran vaudeville and movie houses in the 1920s and '30s. I listened to him talk all the time about a Golden Era.

As a teenager, the first thing I did in the morning was look at the movie section of the newspapers. When the major studios reissued their 1930-1949 backlog to television in 1957, that became the basis of my life. I remember when I saw the 1930 film Min and Bill, starring Marie Dressler and Wallace Beery. It was like time travel. If it's a movie made between 1930 and 1935, now we're talking! If someone doesn't know who Norma Shearer was, what can I say?

John Lees, "Pompeiian Porky" (2003-7), oil on panel, 22 1/8 x 22 1/8 inches

I got a Max Factor makeup kit, and my hero was Lon Chaney. I acted out imaginary movies of the 1920s and 1930s in my room well into high school. I would hear my father talking to my mother and saying, "What's wrong with the boy?" If I had thought of it, I might have said, "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror?" Decades later, I realized I was trying to be an obedient son by living an imagined life in the Golden Era of my father's recollections.

At the same time, I was painting. In 1960, I discovered jazz, Beat poetry, and Abstract Expressionism. It all came like a package. At the Dwan Gallery in Westwood, I could see Franz Kline and Larry Rivers. I started showing my work in Beat coffeehouses when I was 17.

JS: *You studied at the Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s. Can you tell me about that experience?*

JL: In the mainstream art world of the time, to be proper or correct meant being avant-garde. It was not proper to be an old-fashioned painter. However, Otis Art Institute in those days was a somewhat backward-looking place. They were concerned with making sure we knew how to foreshorten an arm and draw all the knuckles; Rico LeBrun was the preferred influence, and we didn't want that.

I was trying to be like Red Grooms or Phillip Hefferton. It was kind of proto- punk and "anti-correct drawing." In 1966, I made the painting "Man Eating a Sandwich." I ran into problems in school because my work was seen as tasteless and vulgar. Looking back, though, my work was confused, as I was.

Barry Le Va and Bas Jan Ader were in my class, and were two of my closest friends. Barry's inventions with felt happened right at school. I think they astounded everyone. He would say, "I just want to bury everything that came before." He played the tough guy and I was his comic sidekick.

Bas Jan loved the word "implosion." He later developed an idea that your life's work could fit in a shoebox. Then, of course, he had the project to take a trip by himself across the North Atlantic in a small boat, and he never came back. I always liked to think that he planted the wreckage and assumed a different identity. He seldom shared his deeper thoughts with me. Publicly, he was a great class clown, a disrupter. Margaret Nielsen told me that Bas said I was one of his best friends. I've always felt honored by that.

For a long time, I made paintings of the courtyard of Otis Art Institute. But I don't think I need to paint it anymore. I want it off my back.

JS: *Several paintings in your 2021 exhibition at Betty Cuningham Gallery were dated over a 30-year period. Why is duration and re-working interesting to you as a painter?*

JL: In the 1980s, when I began making images of my past, I had no way of knowing that it would take me 30 years to finish some of those paintings. Jay DeFeo worked eight years on "The Rose" (1958-66), and I thought that was amazing. Eight whole years. I've been on my paintings like "Rhythm King" (1984-2020), which is a portrait of Bix Beiderbecke, and "House in Denville" (1976–2020) for so long. But why should I just say screw it and start a new one? If I can finish a painting that began in 1986 and it turns out to be a better painting, it's like I've time traveled, and justified the time spent.

JS: *I was thinking about your painting "Slope II" (2001-21) in relation to the turmoil of the landscape in Soutine's painting "Return from School After the Storm" (c.*
1939). How has Soutine been significant to you?

JL: At the end of the Charlie Chaplin film Modern Times (1936), the factory worker, played by Chaplin, goes off arm in arm with the girl, played by Paulette Goddard, down an open road. I think of this in relation to the two Soutine paintings at the Phillips Collection, Washington DC: "Return from School After the Storm" and "Windy Day, Auxerre" (both c. 1939). In that period, 1936 to '39, Europe was dangerous. That feeling is in the painting. I love the late period of Soutine's work. I used to feel sorry for other painters of his time. They didn't get to be Soutine. What's the point?

By the early 1970s, I was interested in Italian painters of the 1920s and '30s associated with expressionism and the Scuola Romana movement, like Gino Bonichi, known as Scipione, and Mario Mafai. Wonderful. I had a rendezvous with Italy that I had to keep because of those painters.

John Lees, “Slope II” (2001-10), oil on canvas, 13 x 21 inches

JS: *I also read that the early 17th-century Dutch painter and printmaker Hercules Segers was influential for you. How did you learn about his work?*

JL: I knew about him by some strange accident. Abrams published a big book on Nicolas de Staël, and at the end they reproduced prints of Hercules Segers. Go figure. I don’t know what they were doing there. In the 1980s I was wondering if I could paint the feeling of the passage of time. I was thinking about a crepuscular feeling, like you sense in the music of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. I recognized this feeling when I saw the work of Segers, and that affected my drawing a lot. When you look at Segers’s prints, it’s hard to believe they weren’t made in the 20th century.

I also love the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso. I discovered him in the mid- 1970s, in a book on Jasper Johns. Next to a reproduction of Johns’s plaster sculpture “Flashlight III” (1958) was an image of Rosso’s wax over plaster sculpture “Baby Chewing Bread” (1892). It was like painting in three dimensions. Later, I felt Beuys was painting in three dimensions with fat as Rosso was with wax.

I think of art existing in a large time span, like a priesthood. As a young person, you worry about only being a footnote. But wait a minute! A footnote means the art historians and the specialists are interested. That’s what it means.

JS: *Would you say your interests are the artists who are outside of “the center” — the artists in the margins?*

JL: Someone might say, “If you want a work by the greatest painter of the 20th century, you would probably want a Picasso.” I would say, “No, I wouldn’t want a Picasso.” Then they might say, “Okay, I understand. I would probably take a Matisse myself.” I would say, “Well I like Rouault better. I like Morandi.” If you want to get people angry, you say, “I prefer Utrillo.”

I think of Purvis Young or William Hawkins as my contemporaries. If you look at a Horace Pippin or the sculptures of William Edmundson, there is a very personal sense of touch. A visual artist has his or her touch, like a musician has his or her tone. You know who’s playing. I’d love to be in a show with Purvis Young. I feel I can blow right next to him.

JS: *You've also maintained an interest in Chinese literati painting, and this is most directly seen in your long horizontal scroll drawings, which depict your life upstate, and the landscape.*

JL: Yes, I was attracted to Chinese literati painting, and especially artists who began working during the Qing Dynasty. I was interested in the individualist artists like Zhu Da, and Gao Qipei, who developed his own style of finger painting. He applied ink with the tip of one finger and the side of his hand. He grew one fingernail long and split it like a pen nib. I became more and more interested in the recluse painters.

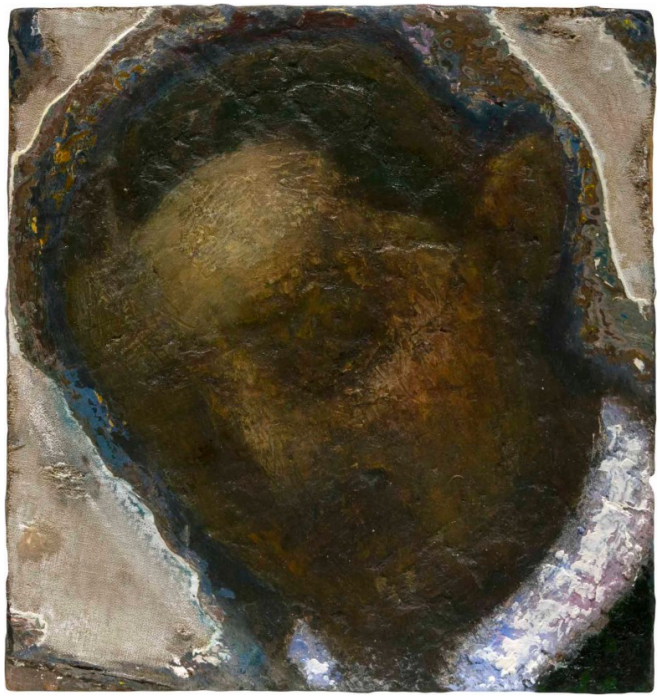
Earlier, during the Yuan Dynasty, following the Mongol conquest, many literati were either not allowed in government service or given very low-level appointments. So, the better thing was to remove oneself. You have something to offer, but they are not interested in it. Well, remove yourself. I like that kind of attitude.

When I found the book on Albert Pinkham Ryder by Lloyd Goodrich, I thought, "I could be like that." I couldn't see myself walking into offices and pushing myself. Instead, I could live life like Ryder. It helped me.

JS: *When working over older paintings, are you interested in chance painting occurrences that happen because of the surface build-up?*

JL: God, yes. For one thing, the surface of the paint on the canvas is uneven. When I was teaching at Sarah Lawrence, I had a canvas installed in the room. I asked the students, when they cleaned their palettes, to wipe it on that canvas. I told them if they wanted to try anything, to try it on that canvas. That was the "Grand Wiper." But, in the third year, there was a student who said he wanted to piss everyone off. He came in with a can of gesso and painted over the whole thing with white. I was going to keep it as a memory, but instead, I removed all the gesso. It was hard to get it off, but I did.

I used the canvas for one my paintings, "Fields in Umbria (Crazy Paradise)." If you look at the side of the painting, you can see that everything is on different levels. Before I sanded it, some areas were really high. You could paint over all those things, but if you sand them down you'll see earlier layers. Some of the paint is going to fall into crevices. Something that is closer to you on the surface may have been painted 10 years ago, and something that's way down below might have been painted recently.



John Lees, "Rhythm King" (1984-2020), oil on canvas on wood, 11.5 x 11 inches

The canvas has its own life. I take things down with a combination of sandpaper, Murphy's Oil Soap, and some of the less toxic, but also less efficient, paint removers. You achieve an element of chance. I love ruins. I love the ruins of Pompeii. I don't know if we would have liked those paintings as well if we saw them the way they looked 2000 years ago.

JS: *Has that been a subject for you — painting the effects of time?*

JL: Yes, I made it the subject of my painting "Pompeiian Porky" (2003-7). I think it's the only conceptual painting I made. I was thinking about whether anything you painted, if it had those effects of time over 2,000 years, could become poignant and moving. I was considering painting a Wonder Bread wrapper, or Donald Duck, but decided on the Warner Bros. character Porky Pig, because I wanted to paint the pink and white image.

When I first began the painting "Bathtub" (1972-2010), it had a figure in it. After finding Milton Resnick and Frank Auerbach, which led me back to Georges Rouault, I changed the way I was working. I wanted to paint a central image, and get rid of anecdotal figures. I wanted to use serial imagery, and neutral subjects that didn't involve snazzy expressionist drawing and funky figures.

JS: *Did you think the bathtub was a neutral subject?*

JL: Well, I did when I decided to paint furniture. But maybe they were not neutral, because I think of the armchair as my father's chair. In the hippie days, certain women would make their apartments kind of retro, with old claw- footed bathtubs. The bathtub became a kind of stand-in for the woman in the apartment.

In The Horse's Mouth, a 1958 film based on the Joyce Cary novel, the character Gully Jimson paints a woman in a bathtub. The paintings for the movie were made by John Bratby. That movie was one of the things that made me want to commit to being a painter. Also, when I was in art school, Don Gualdoni showed me a wonderful etching of a woman in a bathtub by the painter Earl Staley. He is from Texas, and was included in the 1978 New Museum exhibition Bad Painting, curated by Marcia Tucker.

I seem to be interested in monoliths: a car, an armchair, a head and shoulders, an object on a table, a house on the ground. My wife, Ruth Leonard, and I spend time at her family's cabin on a lake in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I've been wondering if I can just paint the lake, without defining it with the shores, and all the things that are around it. The lake would become its own vessel. There's enough going on. Could I do that? I want something new. I'm entitled to a late period!

I feel like it's time to let go. I don't want to feel like I have to be dictated by subject. I want to bring the color up. I spend time looking at artists like Sonia Delaunay and Morgan Russell. I've paid my dues. I want to paint joyous color.

I have a very good memory for the events of my life up to a certain point. I wish I didn't remember things so well. It has changed a bit since we moved upstate. I wanted to pay more attention to my life in the present. The scroll drawings, and my paintings which involve the stream and the hills, Ruth and myself, and our animals, reflect my attempt to really pay attention.