

Jonathan Beer  
March 2012

Openings

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## Artist Interview: Eugene Lemay – Navigator



Eugene Lemay standing in front of one of his works.

**Eugene Lemay's solo show, *Navigator*, opens this week at Mike Weiss Gallery. His large scale monochrome landscapes are seemingly quiet images, reminiscent of the foggy landscapes of James McNeill Whistler. Upon closer inspection their mysterious surface comes to life – the images are built from layering of thousands of individual words and characters. Art-Rated's Jonathan Beer and Lily Koto Olive were able to talk with Eugene about the work:**

**Art-Rated:** The name of the exhibition, *Navigator*, comes from your time spent as a navigator in the Israeli army. Are these nocturne landscapes depicting specific locations or landmarks?

**Eugene Lemay:** I like to think of my landscapes as a form of "after-sight", an imprint of a physical location that has never quite left me. Of course, there are specific places that I can site – places from my time in the military and later through my travels, yet it is these mysterious remnants that I continue to carry with me, which drive my curiosity and investigation as an artist.

**AR:** In what ways does your experience as a navigator take visual form in your work?

**EL:** It serves as the bedrock for my work, the starting point from which everything has sprung. It is the process of discovery that is so inherent to Navigation, which I am particularly interested in, the vigilant eye that is always on alert waiting to take in new information. What does it mean to see and to identify something in space? The tension between the abstracted images and the figurative elements – all this is part of my conceptual framework. Still, there is a visual that I seek to capture, an enveloping darkness that appears bleak at first but is in fact rich in detail and filled with illuminating surprises.



Eugene Lemay  
Untitled 2  
2012, Archival pigment on archival paper

**AR:** Your landscapes are vast and expansive – does this stem from a feeling of being enveloped by the surrounding elements while on the ground guiding your comrades?

**EL:** Yes and no, my comrades play a big part in my work but in a different way. The landscapes themselves recall experiences far more solitary, as navigators often walk alone. The enveloped feeling you describe derives from those dark moments at night, in which your surroundings become so vivid, transforming into a tapestry of stars, faint objects in the distance and ghostly clouds.

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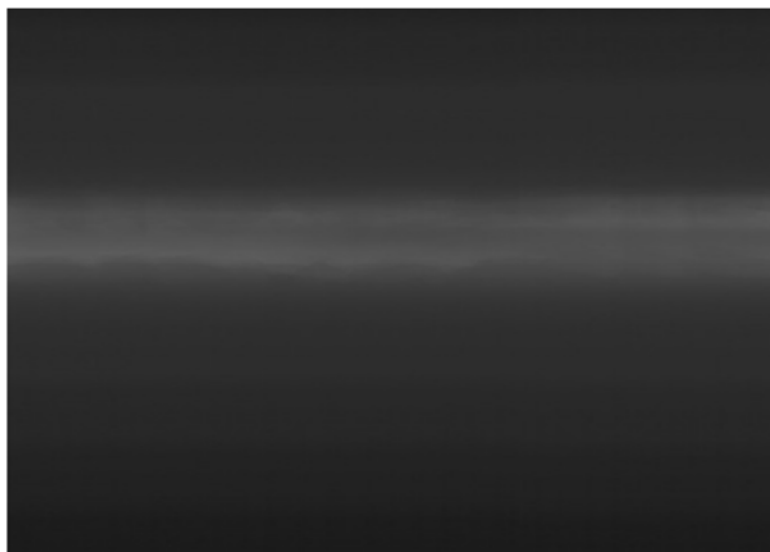
**AR:** You utilize text, typically a non-pictorial element, to build pictorial space. Does the text carry meaning or

is it utilized only for its graphic properties?

**EL:** Writing is a very important part of my process, as it offers me both a way to formalize my thoughts and create visuals. Yet, it doesn't function in a conventional sense rather as a type of sketching technique allowing my mind to roam with ease. I first began to write as an exercise for dealing with loss. I would write letters to bereaved families of soldiers who served with me in the army. Allowing that darkness to pour onto the page gave me a great deal of insight, despite having never sent the letters.

**AR:** These visions are built from the text contained in the letters of your fallen comrades; is this work or process a memorialization? Are these works an elegy of sorts?

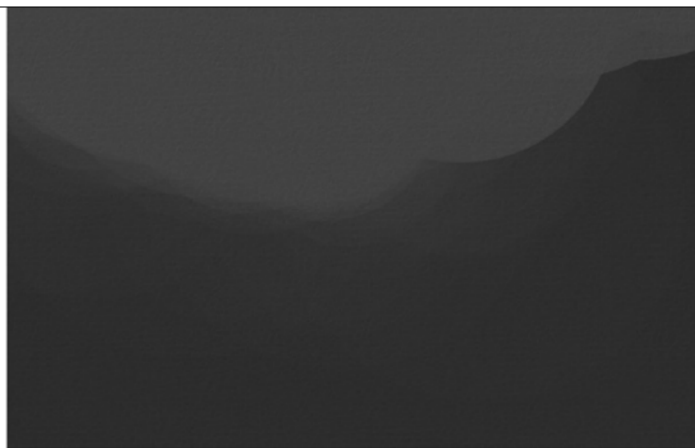
**EL:** Yes and no, clearly the work stems from a place of personal loss and therefore functions as a sort of memorialization. Yet, there is another side to the work that seeks to recall heightened moments of life, a sense of unity and clarity – a meeting with the Sublime.



Eugene Lemay  
Sob 3  
2012, Archival pigment on archival paper  
120x180in, 72dpi

**AR:** With most memorials the text presented is meant to be readable – could the viewer read your works or are they purposely unreadable?

**EL:** It was a deliberate choice early on in the production of the series to make the text unreadable. Sharing these deeply personal letters was not something I sought to do in a literal sense, but rather figure out a way to channel the raw feelings conveyed in the writings. The layering of the text and the quality of the printed-paper serve as a visceral link to this underlying narrative. Furthermore, the Hebrew scrawls reflect another element of my past, having moved to Israel at the critical age of 13. I never quite felt comfortable with the written word, which stemmed from the difficulties of learning a new language, and the feelings of displacement and fear.



Eugene Lemay,  
Untitled 5 (Detail)  
2012, Archival pigment on archival paper  
59x74in, 72dpi

**AR:** In the creation of these works did you ever consider working in an analog manner – physically inscribing each character and word onto your surface? Do you think this would lend a meditative or devotional quality to works?

**EL:** Exploring the differences between analog and digital media is one of the major themes I contend with through my work. The letters originally written by hand are brought into the digital realm and subsequently printed in a manner creating a dense corporal feel. I've often observed people touch the images on the wall to discern whether or not the text is carved into the paper. It is exactly this tension, the play between the physical and the virtual that I am interested in.

**AR:** Are you familiar with the work of Charwei Tsai? She is a Taiwanese artist known for inscribing Chinese characters onto mirrors and plants. Do you have any interest to push this work into the realm of performance art? Perhaps inscribing directly into a landscape?

**EL:** I am familiar with her work and I respect it greatly, yet I find myself more comfortable behind the scenes, so to speak. In this series, I attempt to hint towards my physical presence with the title of the exhibition – as I am the Navigator – the invisible eye from which the images are seen and conceived. I find this type of relationship to be more fitting for my personality. This conceptual play – as if I am part of the work – but obviously I am not really there.



Charwei Tsai  
Sky Mantra, 2009  
Black ink on mirror  
dimensions variable  
Image courtesy the artist

**AR:** Where are you going with your practice from here?

**EL:** I have always been very interested in Minimalism, and certainly, as my works have evolved through the years they have become more quiet and contemplative. I think I will continue to explore issues that have to do with vision, and I will delve more into the realm of installation; employing simple gestures that create striking illusions, such as the feeling that my dark landscapes form cut outs in the wall. But, I imagine I will allow myself time to absorb everything that has happened to me from a creative standpoint in the last year and a half since I first began this series. And from there, who knows...

*Interview between Jonathan Beer, Eugene Lemay, and Lily Koto Olive conducted via email*

*Navigator*  
Mike Weiss Gallery  
March 29 – April 28, 2012  
<http://www.mikeweissgallery.com>