

## *Unboxing*

I followed the dirty masking tape that I had laid on the floor, turning on lights as I ascended four flights of stairs that wind their way to the back of the Rice Seed Building. I found the studio key in its usual place above the electrical panel, and let myself through the large door to Leslie's studio. At this time of night, I have the space to myself anyway.

The sink dripped steadily to keep it from freezing. When I turned it on, it spluttered and groaned like a car right before it stalls. The discolored water turned clean—clean enough anyway—and I waited for a bucket to fill. I pushed the large rolling tables into the other half of the space and began to wash the floors. Dirt smeared as it turned to mud. The gray-blue painted floorboards slowly regained their color as the mop passed over each spot once... twice... three times.

I'm not used to cleaning these floors. As mud and dirt gather through winter and spring, the cold gray paint fades into a warmer grayish brown. I long for the hardwood that I know lies underneath these layers of latex and grime, but repainting the several thousand square feet has taken the place of mopping.

Leslie Parke is a struggling painter who, for over thirty years, has rented the top floor of what was once a seed-packaging facility. It's divided into two spaces: the climate-controlled, drywalled and padlocked room where she paints; and the "gallery/storage" space into which she expels most of her finished work. Some of her work gets packaged and shipped off to real galleries, but most of it stays in storage. Here, the dripping ceiling, fluctuating northeastern temperature, and rampant mice slowly destroy her work as it gathers dust. Whether it goes or stays, it is rarely seen again.

I met her when my grandmother bought one of her paintings—a gift for my dad. The diptych of large koi in a pond swims across our living room wall. At the time, she needed someone to do "computer work" for her. As it turned out, she had nothing of significance

that had to be done on the computer, or maybe I was completely incapable of doing it. Instead she gave me a short list of small chores, and ever since, it has grown far faster than I've been able to check things off.

*Do you need a rug?* she offered, gesturing at a canvas, folded up and tossed into the corner of the "gallery". She'd used paintings as welcome mats before, though they deserved much better. I had already left twice without taking this particular piece; I feared that she was trying to give me paintings instead of money—she couldn't really afford an assistant and this wasn't the first time she had pushed her old work on me. She finally put it in my hands as I was walking out the door.

The oil paint had cracked along the creases where it had been folded for years. But as I flattened it, the gaps in the paint disappeared, closing like a chasms collapsing on themselves. The painting has a border now, where it used to be folded around the wooden stretcher, but the image of two boxers is nearly without flaw. Leslie often suffers bouts of uncertainty, when she is incapable of appreciating her work, or even finishing it. A small blotch of paint, in the wrong shade of beige, had found its way between the shoulder blades of one of the fighters, but the painting was probably discarded during one of these periods of doubt and not because of the blemish.

Last winter, she fell hard on ice. For weeks she complained of a sore back, a bruised coccyx or, when she was feeling particularly light-hearted, a broken ass. She spent the rest of the year struggling to produce any work. This had no immediate effect on her income, as she already had a couple dozen paintings waiting to be sold in galleries around the country, but it was disconcerting. She blamed the cluttered studio for her lack of focus, and after we had cleaned it, her cluttered apartment. She hired a woman she called a "professional organizer", who first went to her apartment and then to the studio. This was not very

productive, and I even debated pointing out to Leslie that she may well have been the victim of a domestic scam, but Barbara, the “organizer”, was around for every minute until she wasn’t around anymore at all.

Even with her brushes hung in size order on the wall, Leslie couldn’t paint. She went several weeks without asking me to come in. I think she had become worried about paying me. I left town for school, cursing the unpredictable income of working for an artist, but when I returned months later, things had improved. She was energized; the studio was full of large paintings, more than one or two still wet. *I went to one of those new age-y healers!* she told me, giddily. *She fixed my intent.* I looked at her, confused. *When I broke my coccyx, it also broke my intent, she told me she would fix my intent, and she did!* Once I had joked about how I didn’t act like a Taurus and she was offended, so this time I was wary. *Even if it’s bullshit,* she said, *it worked, so I’m just gonna go with it.* I nodded, smiled, and said that the placebo effect is definitely real, which was as close as I could come to approving.

A four-by-six foot painting, hanging on one of the far walls, caught my eye. I remembered taking the photo from which it was made. Old sheets of insulation had been lying around the studio for weeks. The yellowish hard foam kind with the shiny silver coating. We had laid them out like funhouse mirrors so that they caught the light coming through the window and the blue of the sky.

Like all of her work, this painting was a photograph, recreated with paint. Leslie owns several cameras that she travels with, but she doesn’t know how to use them, though I’ve tried to teach her several times. Instead, her go-to picture taker is her cell phone. She gives me one of the cameras to use while she holds the phone up awkwardly, delicately touching the screen with an outstretched finger.

Leslie had danced around the room, catching various angles and “ooing” at light bouncing off of the silver sheets. Then we cycled through hundreds of images on her

computer, and picked ones that she thought were either “easy to paint” or looked “fucking impossible”. In the end, we settled for a shot of just one of the sheets, face on. It filled the whole frame with its dimply, metallic surface, but for a satisfying tear in the bottom left. She projected the image digitally, though old slides litter every room, onto a canvas hanging on the wall.

When she paints, her face is often inches from her brush. She wears large headgear-like glasses with magnifiers. She looks like a scientist. Her computer streams episode after episode of a semi-political drama which she only listens to. The lights are off and the windows are covered by sheets of card board. The projector colors her back with the distorted image. In her left hand, she holds a piece of white card-stock paper, which she lifts up and down into the light of the image, so she can see it without it mixing with the color she has already applied to the canvas. For hours, days, weeks, or months she adds one patch of color at a time, each distinct from its neighbor. She calls it “color by number”. Slowly, the piece comes together.

From across the room, the new painting looked like a sheet of the insulation hanging on the wall. I walked in front of it and half expected to see my reflection. As I approached, the image changed. *I love this one*, I said. She saw me inspecting it. *It looks like shit from up close*, she laughed. *I know*, I smiled, *they all do. That’s what I love about them*.

I tacked my painting of the boxers up on the wall of my bedroom with the long silver thumbtacks you use to pin down the legs when you dissect frogs in middle school. When I stand back, the two fighters look photorealistic. Their bare shoulders seem to glisten with painted sweat as they hold each other frozen on the canvas. As with the rest of her boxing paintings, she has somehow eliminated the aggression from the fight. With their bodies stopped, the heavyweights look more like they are holding each other in an embrace. I can

just manage to see their closed eyes as an indication of their intimacy. At this distance, the painting becomes more than just realism, it becomes a new reality. It makes me believe that all human interaction is meant to consist of love—as if we are naturally inclined to nonviolence. After all, these two boxers, meant to be fighting, appear affectionate.

When I walk towards the painting, though, the colors begin to define themselves separately. I can see the brush strokes, the areas of one color that don't blend into the next. I remember that the painting is a contrivance, and I am struck by the brilliance of it. By how incredible it is that an artist can conjure this utopia of love from a sport so full of violence. It takes a fine hand, a finer eye, and a depth of thought I can barely fathom, to create this fictional image from a photo of reality. When I show people Leslie's work, I tell them to view it from a distance, and then slowly walk towards it, watching it shift from a collected image to a created one.

Working for the artist gives me a different perspective than the average observer of her work. I've roamed through the gallery countless times, seeing all the work she seemed to think was at least somewhat worthy of displaying, but I've also seen the underbelly. The storage area, two large racks made out of warped two-by-fours, holds plastic-wrapped paintings from the 70's and since, some of which even I don't think are very good. On the rare occasion that we explore this conspicuously autobiographical shelf, Leslie and I will both marvel at just how different her work used to be. Many of the pieces are huge canvases shaped like Frank Gehry buildings. These are filled with cartoonish looking biblical scenes, angels with halos painted in shiny gold, peering over clouds. Then suddenly she decided to work from photographs, and her paintings started selling, instead of ending up on the rack.

Sometimes she'll grab an old painting and hold up her hands as if to crop it. I've become familiar with this gesture, and I know what comes next. If she doesn't immediately re-rack the painting, she'll put it down, leaning it against a wall or table by a tenuous corner.

Sometimes she will go herself, but more often she will send me, to get a brand new stretcher from the other room. Holding it up to the painting where she had cropped it before with her hands, she'll nod and say *I don't think this part is totally horrible*. And she'll bring the painting to the operating table in the studio. I'll scour the space for her elusive "good scissors", and then watch her plunge them into the painted canvas. She cuts roughly through the hours of work from years ago, until she has the section she thinks she's happy with. This, she'll spread over the small stretcher, and hold at arm's length. *Much better*, she'll say, and hang it from a tack on the wall. Sometimes even this won't do the job and she'll hand the whole bundle to me to throw away. As I hold the crumpled piece above the open garbage can, I'm amazed at how painless it is for her to let go of old work. I try to find ways to avoid dropping it into the large, plastic bin; I stick it in a forgotten drawer or leave it pinned to an abandoned wall.

Once, I snuck a small section of a piece home with me. It was filled edge to edge by a budding almond tree. I resisted dropping this so-called scrap into the garbage because of the history it held: multiple croppings, folds, cuts, and borders that have been added and changed over the years. For me, all this history is like an old book. I can hold it and feel the age in my hands. But for Leslie, the memory of painting it is within her, and the painting itself serves as no more than a reminder of the technical lesson it taught her. Unlike me, she doesn't need to hold a painting to imagine it being painted.

On days when I'm doing less consuming work, like prepping a canvas with gesso, Leslie only pretends to work in the same space. She shares her memories of her time in France or her Swedish ex-boyfriend; she still keeps in touch with him, but only so that he can ship her staples for her favorite staple gun every couple years—*I bought it when I lived there and now it's the only one I like!* she argues. I continue to spread layers of white paint, each a little thicker than the last, over large canvas. By the time I'm done, the wet gesso has

pulled it tight like a drum. Though she pays me as an “assistant”, I often feel like she really just likes to have someone around to tell stories to. Months after I walked home with the boxers folded under my arm, she told me about her experience with the world of professional fighting. I expected to hear her fascination with the human form. Her desire to explore the way the blue of the referees shirt and the white of his skin contrasted with the red gloves and dark skin of the fighters. Her deeper thoughts on humanity. Whether we are ordered to aggression or intimacy. What it means to fight. What it means to be human.

*I've always loved the sport, she said.*

I was sure this was a misleading introduction, but she did not turn back. While I clung onto hope that my own interpretation would eventually emerge in her words, she bounced on the soles of her paint splattered shoes and told me stories of an old trainer whom she befriended. Of spending time at his gym where Mike Tyson graduated adolescence. About going with him to see Rocky IV in theaters. She told me she quickly started picking up training techniques. And about the fights where boxers' young daughters stood by the ropes and told Leslie the ins and outs of their father's craft—when a fighter was going to win or lose based on how he held himself walking into the arena. When the trainer died, Leslie's connection to the boxing world faded quickly. She still watches fights, “just not the olympics”.

*Oh, I said. I think I've misinterpreted it.*