



KELLIE LEHR

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FORM ONLY PAUSES

JUNE 10 - JULY 1, 2023

What does it mean to fold? Folding can involve many things in both art and life—everything from DNA to our skin folds. There's an embodiment that speaks to change, time, and space. Mathematically, folding helps us solve problems. In day-to-day life, it helps us organize chaos. My latest series of works focuses on the use of raw canvas, exploring alternative ways of presenting paintings and utilizing the simple act of folding. The work consists of abstract paintings, soft sculptures, and soft books made with ink, charcoal, acrylic, and oil on raw canvas. I start with an unstretched cotton canvas that I fold, ink, wash, and dry outside in the sun. The folding is slow, methodical, and tactile, not exalted. It speaks to the everyday activity of living in the world. It also contains tension. Areas are hidden and revealed, patterns made and disrupted, the unexpected embraced.

I'm interested in how frequencies, patterns, and gestures can create a flux of time and space and how the canvas holds a memory of its previous dimensional states. I see painting as both a performative action and a ritual where I am a co-creator in the process. Other movements and artists inform this process: Supports/Surface, Neo-Concrete (Lygia Clark), Pattern and Decoration, Color Field, and Feminist Performance Art (Mierle Laderman Ukeles). The process of folding is physical and feels intimate. Folding, unfolding, refolding is a reiterative process. A pattern emerges. There are infinite ways to fold, and although my materials are humble, the options feel limitless. - Kellie Lehr

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Cover image: "Morning in Lavinia" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2021
Ink, charcoal, acrylic, pencil, oil on canvas - 84"h x 29"w x 5"d



"Fear of Heights" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022
Oil, acrylic, charcoal, enamel, ink, and pencil on canvas - 61"h x 38"w

FORM ONLY PAUSES¹

Essay by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

Kellie Lehr's folded dress-like wall-forms strike the unconscious first, as a structured vertical flare for the viewer's imagination of feminine power on a mythic scale. The energy of rocket ships, or paper airplanes is latent. Warped and bent surfaces conduct movement through air –movement implicit in these somewhat symmetrical, streamlined forms. I call them dress-like, but they are sealed, without arm or neck holes, folded back on themselves like vessels or volumes.



"Earthsea" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022
Acrylic and fabric on canvas - 48" h x 30" w

contrasting triangles used in traditional quilting. The historically feminized

Making is a process that keeps time. It is time travel, and the power of making is that one's consciousness is tuned by the craft. Time, like water in a vessel, takes on the shape of its making. Lehr's folding action resembles yoga's limbering up of the body – folding brings imaginative depth, pockets and revisions to the flat surface – increasing flexibility – fast scrubbing or slow painting of edges, honing imaginative pathways. Folding is temporary, temporal open form, pausing. Lehr defines diagonal folds by rubbing and drawing with charcoal, and staining with ink and paint. Attached to the breezy painted cerulean and magenta surface of *Earthsea*, 2022, are two fragments that might provide clues to the triangles that appear throughout the exhibition. These are two strips of a

"flying geese" quilt – a sequence of

anonymity of the quilt form is embedded in a bravura shimmering sea of paint, swept through with arcs made with a very large brush. This dialectic between gesture and geometry is a thread throughout the work. In *Earthsea*, it is felt as a stark contrast; other times, as in *Play It As It Lays*, 2021, the gesture of bringing together the lower corners of a rectangle actually produces another set of subtle triangles.

How is time in Lehr's works? I write, longing for the past while imagining futures. There is an uncanny power in the dress forms, like angels or space travelers—think of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Walter Benjamin described as the angel of history who looks toward the past, seeing the pile-up of catastrophes, with his back to the future toward which he is blown.

Canvas is both a plain weave cotton textile, suitable for simple clothing, bedding and domestic use, and (since it took over from wood—and became much more portable because of it) the support for western culture's highest, or at least most debated, medium: painting. This material morphs throughout Lehr's practice, performing differently in each work, sometimes as soft, swirling, textile, and sometimes as flat, gridded, abstract. Sometimes folded, sometimes unfolded. Oscillation between the flat and the folded produces a complex tension in the work, as folds literally make a flat surface spatial, introducing corners and edges to the interior space, not unlike the corners in a room or hallway. An edge becomes a shift in space – a brim or perimeter, from which the perspective changes. To "involve" comes from enfolding, rolling up, entanglement, to



"Play It As It Lays" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2021 - Charcoal, ink, acrylic, and cloth on canvas - 86" h x 54" w x 4.5" d



"Math, Myth, Alice, Janus, and Where did the landscape go" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022
Ink, acrylic, charcoal, pencil, on canvas - 82" h x 29" w x 5" d

¹ From Lisa Robertson's essay *Garments/Etruscans*. The full passage is "One meaning of form is 'the resting place of a hare.' Surely a hare doesn't stop for long. Form only pauses. Well the earth is not different from ornament. Using the medium of our bodies, we dress in its fibrous elements and mix them around. The web, the fleece, the skin, the stem, the gauze, the seed fluff, the petal and leaf tinctures fixed by mineral and chemical mordents; we're wearing the spun-out elements of the teeming surface we've endangered. Clothed, we're shuttle-like. Even a city is woven with our transactions. A loom is the fundamental unit of architecture and economics."



"Changing Planes" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022 - Oil, acrylic, ink, and enamel on canvas - 84"h x 32"w x 5"d



"Voices at the Gate" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2021 - Acrylic, glitter, ink, chain belt, painted leather, and headphones on canvas 86"h x 27"w x 6"d

envelope or surround. The folding process is all of this. This work engages both maker and viewer in a space that surrounds and sweeps up.

Voices at the Gate, *Morning in Lavinia*, *Changing Planes*, *Tethered Flight (For Ree)*, and *Math, Myth, Alice, Janus and Where did the landscape go*, are all what I am loosely referring to as dress-like wall-forms, assuming that a double-hyphen will produce a sense of their hybrid qualities. I love the way they integrate difference and contradiction, but I am equally enchanted by the simple, archetypal gestalt in this prehistoric form - A Venus or goddess figure not unlike the Cycladic sculptures that inspired Paul Feeley's undulating paintings of the 1960s. In 2016, the performance artist and painter Carolee Schneeman gave a short recorded talk on Cycladic figures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She described them as "symbolic remains that

are deeply, physiologically connected to women's sense of their own bodies... the position with folded arms is reverential, contemplative, and is very peaceful. ...these figurines are concerned with pregnancy, maternity, and also with death... it's only when the Greeks, with their masculine gods, began to invade the Cycladic islands *that the arms open up*. The subtlety and the sense of safety is completely transformed." [my emphasis]

Sonia Delaunay's *Simultaneous Dress* of 1913 is a relevant comparison. Until recently, eclipsed by her husband Robert in patriarchal modernist art history narratives, Sonia Delaunay is now celebrated for her work in fashion and design, but her work is still undertheorized. The spiritual or even witchy undercurrents I sense in the work in color and on textile are subsumed or sublimated into the overt color theory of "simultaneous contrast," describing the production, in the eye, of a color's opposite on the color wheel when the cones become fatigued. The possible magical qualities of forms of simultaneity are left unsaid. But how can one thing be two things without the hint of a transport?

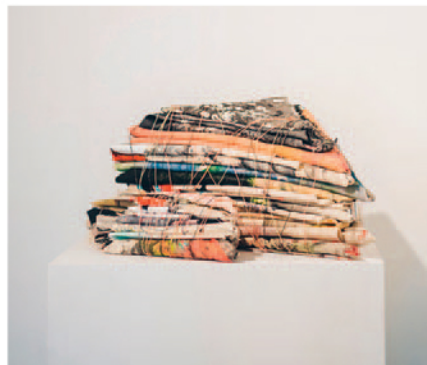
Lehr can be mathematical and precise. In the past, she has worked in controlled and fastidious geometric abstraction, corralling oil paint in analytical planar shifts that operate optically to produce the illusion of spatial undulation. Think for a moment about the origins of an essential drafting tool: the compass. The shoulder, a ball joint, allows humans to make close to perfect circles with no tool outside the body. The wrist and elbow, both hinge joints, enable straight lines if used with care. The system of joints (both hinge and ball) generate knowledge and index of knowledge. To hold or "encompass" is painting's epistemology. Lehr's recent work activates the visual language of geometry, but through inhabiting rather than mastery. I am moved by the absence of heads on the dress forms. They are not meant as figures or portraits - not representation, but rather imagination of indwelling, through *not being there*.

The dress-form proliferates in recent art. Sadie Laska made provisional, cartoonishly exaggerated clothing for a show in 2021, and Annabeth Marks hung trench coats encumbered with modernist painting back-



"Tethered Flight (for Ree)" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022 - Ink, charcoal, acrylic, and rocks on canvas - 92"h x 29"w x 4"d

packs from the ceiling a few years ago; Em Rooney has been building her series of wall sculptures, sometimes part-clothing, structured on tall steel spines through multiple shows, and Jae Jarrell's *Revolutionary Suit* from 1970, a two-piece suit with a sewn-in ammunition belt, was shown in a recent group show on AfriCOBRA.



"Collapsed Landscape" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022
Ink, charcoal, pencil, acrylic, oil on canvas,
folded, stacked, and bound - 18"h x 16"w x 8"d

Imagining is not well understood in our image-laden world. Perhaps the saturation of images *out there*, makes it difficult to share the images of *in here*. Many of Lehr's works are titled after Ursula K. Le Guin's novels, which she listens to while working in the studio. "Imagination, working at full strength, can shake us out of our fatal, adoring self-absorption," Ursula K. Le Guin wrote, "and make us look up and see—with terror or with relief—that the world does not in fact belong to us at all."

In the sculptural work, *Collapsed Landscape*; a stack of painted canvases remain folded, wrapped in a woven network of string, displayed on a plinth. The hiddenness demands that the viewer imagine the paintings, as well as the labor. What is perceived is density, storage, compression. In *Small Book (vol 3)* the fold of a book is desublimated, with a large stitched spine. The book can be opened, "read" by a viewer as the pages are turned. Perusing the spaces, one is *in* time; remembering and anticipating as one moves through.

In "Making Things, Practicing Emptiness", Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote about a change in her consciousness when, after being diagnosed with an incurable cancer,



"Untitled (small book vol 3)" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2021 - Oil, acrylic, ink, charcoal, house paint, transparencies, painted thread, and velcro on canvas - 10"h x 10"w x 3"d



her love of textiles ceased to be about adornment and personal beauty, and became separate, formal, "dislinked from the need to present a first-person self to the world." Sedgwick connects this with her study of Buddhism, her increasing desire to *let go of ego and dualism*.

The French writer Annie Ernaux published *The Years* in 2008, a memoir in which she did not use the "I" pronoun. The subject is *we* and *us*, *they* and *them*, and sometimes *one*. The book is no less about identity and politics, for its absence of a personal identity, and in fact the exigencies of money, power, war, race and gender are omnipresent, exerting their forces on the lives of everyone in her generation. The pressures of time itself, and the collective events of history remembered in fragments of tunes and advertising jingles, war and the ever-increasing quantity of products bear down upon the *we*. A series of photographs taken of the writer throughout her life are described starkly enough that it took me a while to realize that this was *she*; the subject (and author) of the memoir, glimpsed through the folds of time, asserting the felt specificity of the June sun on half her face.

Lehr's *Rhapsody*, from 2022, is a fifteen by nine foot billowing canvas, draped over the fireplace and mantle, up to the ceiling and then extending from the ceiling like a canopy over pillows inviting the viewer to lie beneath the densely inked surfaces. As with the dress forms, the canvas has been inscribed with both direct mark-making, and a method called frottage, where the canvas is scrubbed with a sponge, picking up texture beneath where the canvas was positioned during the time of its making on the floor. Lehr described to me her childhood memories of sitting in the yard, pulling out grass, sculpting the outdoor, horizontal "ground." Her physicality and embodiment in the making is undeniable and welcome, and suggests a ritualized



"Rhapsody" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022
Ink on canvas - 15'x 5.3'x 9'

investment in the physical objects that invites a viewer to empathize, or as the German *emfühlung* suggests, to feel into.

I have a water-stained postcard of “The Voice,” by Edvard Munch on my bedside table - a figure in a white dress surrounded by branchless trees in clear bright colors. The body of water behind her is sliced through with thin vertical trees framing an afternoon moon with reflection, resembling a long yellow lowercase ‘i’ amidst the trees. The solitude of the girl is accentuated by her lack of arms.

Somewhere in the books it was stated that painting is concerned with the feelings conveyed by space... If one saw it as the primary reality to be manipulated for the satisfaction of all one's basic needs, beginning with the babyhood problem of reaching for one's mother's arms, leading through all the separation from what one loves that the business of living brings, then it was not so surprising that it should be the main preoccupation of the painter. So it became clear that if painting is concerned with the feelings conveyed by space then it must also be to do with problems of being a separate body in a world of other bodies which occupy different bits of space: in fact it must be deeply concerned with ideas of distance and separation and having and losing.²



“Between Dreaming and Daybreak; Syncopations” by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022 - Flashe, acrylic, oil, pencil, cheese cloth, mixed media on canvas - 60”h x 42”w

Pausing in form, the work of the work is staying with the movement of distance and separation, having and losing. Inviting the viewer to become concerned with the feelings conveyed by space.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung is a painter and writer who grew up in Olympia, Washington and participated in Riot Grrrl in her formative years. She attended the Evergreen State College in the 1990s. This introduced her to holistic structural ideas about aesthetics and politics. She worked in used bookstores and bars until her thirties, when she moved to Chicago and attended the School of the Art Institute for graduate school, and now she is working and taking walks in Norfolk, Connecticut with her wife, Fox Hysen, and dog, Moses. She is opening attention to Buckthorn roots, depth psychology, difference, climate change, ecosystems, permaculture, New England textiles, transfer stations, rhythm, Sun Ra, the effects of soul lag on humans, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the color of light on water, and the emotional landscapes of students, friends and strangers alongside whom she lives. She has shown at The Blaffer Museum in Houston, TX, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, The 2014 Whitney Biennial, Kadel Willborn in Karlsruhe, Germany etc. In 2021 she opened a mid-career survey show at the Blaffer in Houston, Texas, *Comic Relief*, accompanied by a monograph.

² Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able To Paint*, 1950



Image: Kellie Lehr in her studio at Mt. Sequoyah, photo by Kat Wilson (c)

Kellie Lehr is a visual artist located in Fayetteville, AR. Lehr recently received her MFA from Lesley University College of Art + Design in Cambridge, MA, and holds a BSBA from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR. Her work has been included in numerous exhibitions throughout the US, including Manifest Gallery in Cincinnati; The Painting Center in NYC; 21C Museum Hotel in Bentonville, AR; the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock, AR; Ft. Smith Regional Arts Museum, AR; and the Raizes Gallery in Cambridge, MA. In addition, Lehr is the Gallery Director and Curator for 211 South, a contemporary art gallery located at 211 South Main St. in Bentonville, AR.

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"Velveteen Playlist" by Kellie Lehr (c) 2022 - Oil, acrylic, ink, and charcoal on canvas - 59"h x 40"w

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