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In the Studio: Tom LaDuke

The artist explores the region between perception and reality.

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You'd be hard pressed to find a body of work more painstaking in its construction than that of Tom LaDuke. His last solo show, at Angles Gallery in January, included a replica of a wind-tossed plastic shopping bag made entirely from powdered graphite and glue, an 11-by-8-inch free-hanging "veil" that reproduced every crack in a particular 17th century Flemish painting using nothing but eyelashes and arm hairs, and a sculpture that appeared to be an ordinary bird feather but was made entirely from human hair and fingernails.

Alongside the sculptures were paintings from an ongoing series that involves the application of four exhausting layers per canvas: first "an inchoate space," as he calls it — "not bright or dim, not shallow or deep" — intended to mimic a blank television screen; then a film still, rendered precisely as it appeared on a television in his studio; then the reflection caught on the surface of that screen; then a splintered layer of thick, gestural oil paint made with a stencil derived from a historical painting that relates in some way to the film still. The underlayers — all airbrush — are soft, gray, smooth and ghostly, whereas the oil paint is chunky, brightly colored and seemingly haphazard, with only the slimmest hints at imagery. The effect is that of two entirely different paintings that just happened to brush against each other while wet.

One is inclined to marvel at the mechanics. There are few artists working in L.A. today — in either painting or sculpture — with as delicate a manner or as precise a technique. For LaDuke, however, this is largely beside the point.

"Getting something to look right," he says, speaking in his clean, fairly nondescript studio in the Santa Fe Art Colony downtown (where he also lives), "is not a big deal. It's training or practice or whatever, it means nothing." His work plays with the perceptual tropes and mechanisms we employ to structure and buffer our experience of the world: realism in painting, say, or the frame of the television screen. What interests him is less the way these mechanisms work than where they fall short, how they break down and what slips in through the cracks between them.

"You're doing the best that you can from the things that you know, but the knowledge never creates the painting, it just gives you a framework," he says. "You're heading toward something you think is right, but the best thing is always peripheral, it comes in as a rupture in the continuity of what you thought you were doing — reality rather than the perceived reality."

Think of a lens flare as seen in a film: a flash of light across the screen that pulls you out of the film's narrative world by reminding you that what you're watching is not fantasy but an actual environment in the physical world, recorded at a particular moment by a camera — reality rather than perceived reality.

Much of LaDuke's work is geared toward exploring the uneasy gap between the two. He deals in reflections and layers, moments of overlap and disjunction. He cultivates moments of breach and rupture. Each layer in the paintings, for instance, is set fundamentally at odds with one another. The film still and the reflection are perspectively opposites — imagine two triangles extending from the same base — and overlay in such a way that, as on an actual television, it is impossible for the eye to register both images at the same time.

The distinctly awkward top layer of oil paint presents contradictions on a variety of levels: conceptual (between the history of film and the history of painting), material (between airbrush and oil paint), spatial (between depth and surface), formal (between the photographic and the gestural) and generic (between realism and abstraction).

Because each layer is set down blindly, with a deliberate indifference to what is obscured beneath, the composition is determined largely by chance, leaving room for visual accidents. The result is confusing at first — it's difficult to get a handle on what one is looking at or why — but absorbing for just the same reason.

LaDuke, 47, was raised in L.A. and received his MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in the mid-1990s. He has enjoyed a quiet, steady sort of success over the last decade, marked by regular solo shows at a single gallery, Angles, and consistent critical esteem. His first museum exhibition opens Oct. 23 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Soft-spoken, earnest and inquisitive in conversation, he is an artist who clearly draws a sharp line between his practice and his career, someone for whom success is welcome but largely incidental. "I'm not trying to make a product that should be sold," he says. "I'm trying to make things that probably shouldn't leave the studio. It's important that way — otherwise it's just more stuff, and there's no point in doing that."

Many of his works — particularly the sculptures — are deeply inscribed with personal history and have a strong emotional resonance. The feather is made from strands of his late mother's hair, for instance; an earlier sculpture of a tree branch re-creates a branch that was outside the window of the room where his father died. All reflect in some way a degree of sincere philosophical inquiry, an interest in prodding and investigating the terms of experience to disentangle the real from all that our minds manufacture.

"It's what happens when a hurricane demolishes everything," he says. "For a few hours people are stuck in this real situation, then that gets taken into the symbolic order, and it becomes acceptable. But for the first minutes, psychologically, it's tearing people to shreds. It could be a joyous thing too, it doesn't have to be tragedy. But those little moments are what reality really is. We're living in a fantasy."

Viewed in this light, his studio has the air of a laboratory, his works (and his paintings in particular, with their calculated layers) experiments in the simulation of these "little moments."

He points by example to "Semi-heretical," a 2009 painting in which his use of a mildly erotic image of a woman breathing onto a mirror (taken from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1975 film "The Mirror") stimulated an involuntary association with a childhood memory of the scent of his mother's lipstick — an uncomfortable breach of very separate mental categories. It fascinated him. He pauses in his account of that experience and says with a kind of amazement: "It's really complicated. I had no idea it was this complicated."

Painting?

"Yeah."

Or life?

"Yeah. Same thing. It's really the same thing."

calendar@latimes.com