

TOM LIEBER

*Born in 1949 in St. Louis, Missouri
Lives in Koloa on Kaua'i*

From the hillside near the small town of Koloa where Tom Lieber is building a family home and new studio, he can look out across the soft rolling contours of adjacent land, inflected with the passing shadows of overhead clouds. It is a site that is insulated, but not isolated from the presence of neighbors in the valley. As a painter, Lieber was recently drawn to the islands by the possibilities of working in an environment where nature prevailed, but Lieber's way of living with and working with nature is quite distinct, shaped by a long-standing inclination to work against the grain of existing convention. In his painting as in his personal life, Lieber has continued to negotiate a sense of space, a sense of place.

Lieber knew early on that he would be an artist, beginning his studies at a junior college in St. Louis before transferring to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, from which he received his BFA in painting in 1971 and MFA in painting in 1974. An active visiting artist program put him in touch with several California painters including William Wiley, Joan Brown and Wayne Thiebaud. Lieber initially remained in the midwest, before deciding—enticed by reports from colleagues who had moved to the west coast—that he would rather watch whales than cornfields. He moved to California in 1976, commuting between Crescent City in northern Humboldt County and San Francisco, before settling full-time in Berkeley to paint and work as a carpenter. He also made what

would be the first of several visits to Hawai'i in 1976; in 2002 he settled on Kaua'i on a more permanent basis.

In Lieber's formative years, he was keenly aware of the push and pull of dominant tendencies in contemporary painting, from the varied approaches to figuration evident in the works of the California artists who were visitors to his campus, to the ascendance and decline of minimalism, and the stirring of new approaches to abstraction. Interested neither in work that was imagery-oriented nor visually ascetic, he began to articulate a personal mission as a painter, seeking to continue abstract painting as it had begun, that is, with an eye toward the articulate gesture that was the hallmark of abstract expressionism. He understood that inspiration would come from personal feeling-states placed in the context of abstract painting.

From 1975 onward, a slow and organic transformation took place in Lieber's painting, contributing to a growing lexicon of signatory marks and an individualized approach to color. In *Cream* (1975) he prepared a lean, monochrome field of three closely analogous hues in horizontal sections; despite its seemingly minimal nature, there is also clear interest in the surface and substance of the field, evident in the density of the paint and a series of vertical line fragments that travel across it.

The presence of these lines, marks in a field suggesting certain but ambiguous configurations, coalesced in *X-Ray* (1980) with the appearance of a two-pronged form (like the open beak of an insatiable bird.) This form maintained a compelling presence in Lieber's work for several years, through several significant shifts in palette—from the glowing *Mr. Sunshine* (1981) to the tenebrous *Shaking* (1982)—and through an increasingly animated working of the surface, evident in *Turn* (1983), with its avian creature twinned in a strange embrace. By 1985, in *Bloom*, that creature had been dissected and dissipated; subsequent works in the next ten years would begin to reassert the dominance of the field over the figure, with occasional hints of the architectonic, and a re-emergence, on occasion, of a dominant horizontal impulse—whether through linear gesture or through the subdivision of the underlying color field—that inexorably invoked the possibility of landscape.

Poet and art critic Carter Ratcliff, who has written extensively about Lieber's work, cautions against a too-literal understanding of the link to landscape; he notes "His paintings are not ideal landscapes for the body to inhabit, not pastoral images, but images that displace the immemorial pleasure of pastoral to the body itself."¹ One might, in other words, think of the parallel universes in which the artist dwells: the first, the world of

(continued on page 9)

LIEBER (continued)

the corporeal, the domestic, the political, the sensate; the second, the world of the fields of color and line, of pictorial space probed and explored, in which the very process of painting is the mechanism by which the self may be transported and relocated. If we speak of landscape then, it might best be understood as a kind of psychic space to which certain familiar but elusive geographic markers are ascribed, an environment not depicted but created, a new habitat, a sanctuary.

At the same time, Lieber is clearly responsive to the specific qualities of the natural environment to be found in the islands; he speaks of its “living color,” the prodigality of growth, the pleasures of living in close proximity to the ocean and the grand expanse of the physical horizon. Responses to specific motifs of nature are spontaneous rather than programmatic. He recalls a period during an early visit to Hawai‘i in the late 1990s when he began a series of sketches of island flora, including banana leaves, working directly on top of what was most readily at hand—some postcards of one of his paintings that had been prepared as an exhibition announcement. The linear gesture superimposed on a background field, beginning with something other than a white ground, sensing an atmosphere of color beneath the gesture—those new possibilities have subsequently found their way into his work as well.

Now when Lieber physically engages nature, he does so with a kind of double

vision. He is aware, on the one hand, of the way in which one reads spatial depth, foreground and background, center and periphery; aware too of that subdivision of sea and sky. He is also aware of wanting, as a painter, to honor the other space he inhabits, beyond the illusory devices of perspective: “If I am going to walk...the blue of the ocean against the sky is strong, beautiful and soothing...if I put it in the painting it does create a kind of landscape that’s really deep; but I don’t paint that way...so there is also the contradiction of wanting to stay on the surface, dealing with the distortions of going from three dimensions to two dimensions. It comes from seeing it, rather than intellectualizing about putting in that horizontal line.” Even in works with a dominant horizon, the upper and lower domains are not inviolate. If anything, the horizon seems like a zone of mediation, as in *Blue Tangle* or *Yellow Web*, where elements from one region penetrate, even erupt into the other.

In tandem with Lieber’s paintings, he has also produced several groups of monotypes at the Vermont Studio Center and Trillium Press in San Francisco. In these smaller-scale but still substantial works, he paints with oil colors on sheets of plexiglas, adding layers of color with brayers, brushes, hands, employing subtractive as well as additive methods of texture- and mark-making

that expand his repertoire of gesture and process. The monotypes may also serve, on occasion, as triggers for larger-scale paintings, as well as providing, through their freedom and flexibility, an important counterbalance to the more sustained and introspective process of painting.

The renegotiations of space in Lieber’s work have gone hand in hand with his development as a colorist. Evolving from the early monochrome works has given Lieber a foundation of restraint; his paintings often build on a field of hues closely allied in value or temperature against which the linear elements play (as, for example, the multiple blue-grays in *Blue Sprout*, enlivened by the brushy contours of deep maroon.) Those juxtapositions of color, of field and line are in turn quirky, lush, lyric, strange; Lieber’s painting has a distinct sensibility, but not a confining agenda; he continues to work feelingly, intuitively. “I know what it means to be a painter now. I can’t consciously go to a painting in progress and fix it. I have to just go in there, mix up some paint, try something, start working, let the whole thing encompass me, then sort of give in to it... I can say it needs a loop or something, but once I go in, and add one mark, all the relationships can change.”

¹ in *Tom Lieber: A Survey 1975-1997*, an unpaginated exhibition catalogue, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco; et al., 1998.

Tom Lieber is currently represented by the Hackett-Freedman Gallery in San Francisco.