

Geoffrey Lefever

Catalogue Essay by Derek Morris (4 pages/scanned 12/25)

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GEOFFREY LEFEVER

AN INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Lefever has, throughout his working life, been moved and beguiled by different aspects of the physical world that he finds himself confronting while engaged in seemingly disparate activities.

He has been and continues to be by turns involved with both civic and structural engineering, aeronautics, and art. Engineering has been his livelihood, aeronautics an abiding passion and art his *raison d'être*. I use the word art advisedly as his creativity comprises photography not merely for recording but as a means of expression, mark making in various media, which one might call drawing and the construction of "paintings" which use many materials other than simply paint.

Before embarking on a discussion of the works which are the reason for this little book, it will be rewarding to look at all these facets of a complex life, as revealing their interconnectedness will make much more sense of the enigmatic and multilayered nature of the photographs, drawings and paintings.

Drawing as a recording activity has been part of Lefever's life since his teens, becoming more important during his National Service in the early fifties. Although he was dedicated to the pursuit of becoming a painter, he admits that at the time he was not aware of much that was going on in the art world. In spite of his serious interest in making drawings and paintings, he needed a career, so he articled himself to a Civil and Structural engineer,

completing his studies in 1955. Later this gave him the means to support a wife and child, but his commitment to painting, particularly from industrial and natural landscape *en plein air* increased and became central to his existence.

In 1965 he joined the Norwich 20 Group and after a sellout show in Kings Lynn in 1969, he gave up engineering to concentrate on his work. 1969 also saw him spend time in Arles in France, but on his return financial difficulties meant he had to resort once again to his engineering skills. He took up a post in Hertfordshire, which gave him access to London and life drawing at the Central School, and throughout the seventies he attended life-drawing classes with Leslie Davenport at Norwich School of Art.

In 1973 he returned to Arles and had an exhibition there in 1974. Also in that year he showed at Betty Jewson's Pottergate Gallery in Norwich. In 1975 until 1980 he worked with Broadland District Council and virtually gave up serious work on his painting. However he continued with his life studies at Norwich School of Art with help from John Wonnacott and John Lessore in the Life Room and seriousness returned when he was accepted by the School to study painting under Edward Middleditch in 1980.

Throughout the period from 1969 when he first visited Arles until 1980, Lefever's artistic horizons had been widening substantially and he had been looking a great deal at European art, particularly the Expressionists and Frank Auerbach. It is significant that he also discovered the American painter, Richard Diebenkorn, who introduced him to an almost abstract formal structure of landscape, and it was American painting that was to have the most far-reaching influence upon his developing oeuvre during his time at Norwich.

He describes his experience there as being the most seminal of his life, completely changing attitudes to working, and discovering many new unknown artists and the magic of oriental calligraphy. Much of this was a self-motivated journey. Ed Middleditch had thought him already too formed to teach, but later during the three year course acknowledged the developing work and became quite complimentary. Dick James proved to be a beneficial tutor and Ian Starsmore from Complimentary Studies was most helpful in pointing out precedents and routes to follow.

Needing once again to make a living post Art School, he set up a one man engineering consultancy which gave

him the freedom to be his own man, and to be selective about when and what to take on as work. A new means of expression also followed, medium format photography, which he has exhibited regularly since 1995.

Two other important experiences supporting the development of Lefever's mature work occurred early in the new millennium. In 2002, he went on a three-week trip to Nepal recording his trip with many photos. He also made non-topographical drawings influenced by the calligraphy that he saw everywhere. In 2004, he undertook a part time MA at Nottingham Trent University capitalizing on the powerful visual stimuli he had received in Nepal. After a while there he further extended his range of media by studying printmaking. In addition, in recent years, the 20 Group cooperation with artists in Rouen and Novi Sad has been a rich experience and led to shared exhibitions in both cities and a "3 plus 1" show for Lefever at St Etienne du Rouvray.

Earlier, I mentioned Lefever's life long association with aeronautics. He is a very experienced glider pilot and also a passionate maker and flyer of the most exquisite ultra lightweight small-scale aeroplanes. Although he regards

both activities as in some respects hobbies and as means of escaping the responsible rigours of engineering and the even tougher business of trying to make good art, I consider his interest in these singular activities to be not disconnected from the impulses that guide his approach to his art. Gliders and mini flying machines deal with very specialized structures to enable them to stay aloft with minimum power. Also they inhabit real "physical" space and by their movement through it they define its palpable reality. They are also entities that rely on very specific materials to maintain their structural integrity. You may say to yourself how different is this from structural engineering? Not a great deal. Interestingly the artist suggested to me that the engineering part of his life was irrelevant to his artistic activities. On the surface this might be seen to be the case, but there seems to be an intellectual consistency between these apparently disparate involvements which come I believe from deep rooted emotional concerns related to Lefever's responses to the material world. As we come to examine both his drawings and paintings these same concerns will become self evident as underpinning to the methodology of their construction.

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Lefever calls this process a species of magic, as he has no preconception of the eventual outcome when he begins a work. Another component of the creative process that leads him to his final goal is the importance of place to the development of works. This is not a topographical interest; the works are not about special locations and their visual characteristics. But it is as if the ambience and unique qualities of places like Arles or Nepal or a bleak concrete pad in the middle of an empty Norfolk landscape seem to spur the artist to action. But sometimes found materials from a site might be included as visual mementos, so the works can become wedded to places almost in an archeological sense.

So the physical reality of special spaces, as experienced while in a glider, in an empty aircraft hanger where gossamer planes fly, on a lonely Norfolk loading pad, in the high mountains of Nepal, they all inhabit Lefever's drawings and paintings, not always overtly, but often metaphorically. Structures too have been sought out and understood from landscapes and have been converted into formats for the existence of works. It is interesting that some paintings are made on unsized canvas with materials reaching across the full

space available. In others they are built onto sheets of thick handmade paper, again using the whole space, but then mounted onto canvases with quite a substantial margin of white surrounding them. The latter feel quite different, less objects, more pictorial events, but perhaps focusing one's attention more on the almost relief like nature of the work. In some works formal, architectural, matrixes relate them quite strongly to the photographs. Throughout all this intense activity, although operating within quite strict and limiting means, there is great richness and considerable beauty. These serious and arcane paintings demand a great deal of looking, but this effort will be repaid handsomely by meaning and understanding leaching slowly into one's consciousness. This is a kind of painting one can return to over and over again and still find rewards every time.

It is clear from this brief summary of Lefever's art and life that here is a complex man who finds great fulfillment and breadth of experience in the different facets of his existence. Even his denial of the importance of the engineering element in the scheme of his creative pursuits, apart from financially supporting them, [which is pretty vital], is not born out in fact

as I hope I have shown, it is actually part of the whole picture. But if he came to give something up, it would be this. And although the painting and photography remain still the reason for his philosophical being, they are supported by his deeply satisfying and meaningful flying activities.

So this fortunate man, more than most, inhabits both the earth with its grounding weight of materiality and also the infinite space above it that does so much to define our lives. Out of this duality comes the visual poetry of his art.

Derek Morris

Derek Morris was the former course Leader in Sculpture at Norwich School of Art, assistant curator at the King of Hearts, Norwich, past President of the Royal British Society of Sculptors, currently Trustee of St. Etheldreda's Studios, Norwich, and Trustee of the newly founded Charity - Sculpture for Norwich, Committee Member of Norfolk Contemporary Art Society and member of Norwich 20 Group. Also a practicing sculptor.