



What Lays Beneath

A Retrospective of Works by Leonard Jubenville



Rondeau at a Friend's Cottage, 2010. Oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

Postcards from the Centre of the Mind

Post COVID-19, we have seen a big travel push in the media. In nearly every weekend edition, newspapers feature full-page, full-colour ads that urge us to rev up our first-world carbon footprints and skyrocket to remote, restorative destinations. In June of 2022, the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, opened a massive exhibition entitled, *The Summer Trade*, described as, "...a tale of...tourists in search of what travel brings: entertainment, experience, and the recovery of innocence."¹ Consumers everywhere seem to be chomping at the bit to divorce themselves from the four confining walls that have blankly stared back at them over the last two years, offering them absolutely nothing in return.

Tourism ads would have you believe that the only way to escape the claustrophobia of our crappy lives is to pack up our toothbrushes and leave town. The Beat Generation,² along with Leonard Jubenville, would disagree. Jubenville's work infers that the best way to travel is through our minds; we should voyage inward to understand our place in, and our impact on, the world as we know it.

Jubenville's landscape paintings are intense snapshots that shine a spotlight on everyday places worth remembering—and even celebrating—for a hot moment. The hyper-reality of his works recalls vintage travel posters of faraway places that embody every good consumer's bucket list. "We think we can consume and consume," said Jubenville when speaking of contemporary societal practices.³ This is true. We always seem to be on our way to somewhere else, racing to places where we can whip out our credit cards to buy the things that fill our insatiable voids. Without Jubenville's documentation of the natural wonders we storm past in our fossil-fuel-guzzling behemoths, we would never know they even existed. Who has time to send a postcard? If we drive past these places and don't see them, are they real? These questions recall the revelation made by Vladimir Nabokov, who suggested that "reality" is the one word that should always appear in quotation marks.⁴ As an artist, Jubenville is witness to our current "reality"—the reality we are too enslaved by consumerism to see. Through his exhibition, the artist invites the viewer to postulate a curated selection of fleeting places to discover *What Lays Beneath*.

During his early career, Jubenville began establishing allegory as a conceptual motif within his works. Following his return from a watershed trip to the Amazon, he painted *Eating the Rainforest* (1985). Viewing this work, the consumer begins their journey-on-canvas to the left, gazing pleasantly at a Rousseau-esque lush green postcard. Before one can ask, "Where are the tigers?" their excursion quickly degenerates. A gluttonous fire, reminiscent of Dante's Third Circle of Hell, rages in the composition's centre, quickly ripping away any scenic pretense. Because no comment about the Earth's destruction is complete without reference to the McFast food industry, Jubenville has drawn a faceless, hooded figure presiding over an oversized hamburger container, which, with a seemingly unhinged jaw of its own, appears poised to devour the consumer themselves after they eat its inner contents.

Jubenville's early 2000s *401 Series* is a collection of works meant to drive home man's contempt for the natural order. Bridges, roads, and wind turbines slice through pastoral settings that may have warranted postcards if not so deeply scarred by industrialization. In *401 Overpass* (2002), Jubenville paints a bruised, fiery orangey-purple nightfall, suggesting Tolkien's fictional world of Mordor lies just beyond its horizon. This work of dark beauty feels ominous, evoking the essence of annihilated worlds where only the languages of the enslaved are spoken. Through this reference to the omnivorous consumption of resources by faceless profiteers, perhaps Jubenville is wondering, as Ginsberg did, "what sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?"⁵

In *Thames River, Early Spring* (2010) Jubenville depicts a landscape that is bright and frozen, suggesting a warmer interpretation of 1950s Disney illustrator Eyvind Earle's works of magical realism. Complimentary colours pop, drawing the

viewer into a mini acid trip through an amber-gold-canary-yellow willow. Similarly, *Rondeau at a Friend's Cottage* (2010) focuses on fantastic, magical, pillowy clouds, which Jubenville witnessed as they formed over Lake Ontario. "That was the summer of the thunderheads," the artist explains, to which those who live in Chatham-Kent, Ontario, can pause and nod in understanding. In both pieces, this extra layer of collective memory creates somewhat poetic postcards. As Leonardo Da Vinci stated, "Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt,"⁶ and *Thames River, Early Spring* (2010) and *Rondeau at a Friend's Cottage* (2010) are two of Jubenville's most skillful articulations of this declaration.

While Jubenville painted extraordinary large-scale canvas depictions of the natural environment, he also created small-scale worlds within the ordinary. The window as vehicle of divine light has appeared as a metaphor in many masterworks of the past, including Renaissance Master Raphael's *The Aldobrandini Madonna* (1509). However, the window in Jubenville's *Disposable Culture* (1990) is simply a plain illuminated platform for scattered detritus. Crumpled paper, an empty paper bag, discarded fast food containers, and other items represent an ongoing cycle of undergrad creation, expulsion, consumption, and satiation. Looking out the window and into the distance, the viewer sees impartial trees and a reproachful sky, which may have been silent witness to debauchery. Because the artist has painted such an oversized window, the complete frame of which is not visible, smarmy art history students may argue that this becomes a deliberately fabricated metaphor of hope. Despite this, writer Lynn Fisher reminds the viewer that Jubenville "paints what he sees."⁷ At its core, *Disposable Culture* (1990) is a sentimental postcard from a place of the artist's past.

Winter's Edge, 2008. Oil on canvas. 22" x 32"



Jubenville's early 2000s *Paper Bag Series* serves as a thematic forerunner for two works by Gavin Turk, member of the Young British Artist cohort. Turk states that, "we are defined by what we throw away and conversely we are deconstructed by what we choose to display in our hallowed museum halls."⁸ Turk's prints *Blue Trash* (2022) and *Pink Trash* (2022) each depict a pop-art rendered black plastic bag, bulging with trash, knotted at the top. The viewer can easily imagine what new worlds are forming within the percolating primordial ooze. In contrast, and seemingly summoned from the fictional land of Brobdingnag, the large paper receptacles of Jubenville's *Yellow Bag* (2001) and *Orange Bag* (2002) are empty. In each work, Jubenville's intense rendering of shadowy pulp valleys and over-exposed paper hills creates a creased landscape of Lilliputian crossroads, within which post-pill Alice could become lost and left begging for a road map.

The food has been consumed, as evidenced by the confusion of empty packaging found on the windowsill in *Disposable Culture* (1990). In *Orange Bag* (2002), the discarded packaging is unseen. The bag has strained to contain something, as the viewer can see by its structural battle scars. Where have the contents gone? Furthermore, where does garbage even go? This work leaves the viewer to imagine that the packaging has joined tonnes of other garbage *en route* to the trash vortex in the Pacific, where it will all mix and masquerade as sustenance for doomed sea creatures. Yes, Virginia, this man-made place is a "reality," and you can buy a postcard of the Pacific Trash Vortex if you want. Our legacy is trash, both figuratively and literally, as articulated by Jubenville and Turk alike.

Leonard Jubenville has been, and with increasing intensity, reflecting upon his place in the world. Perhaps best known for his striking large-scale representations of Southwestern Ontario landscapes, a great number of Jubenville's pieces hang in private North American collections. He has received several awards and accolades. However, decades ago and fresh out of art school, Jubenville began experimental works dedicated to the exploration of craft and subject matter. These early pieces have become hometown fan favourites. Crows, an amaryllis, his wife, lake waves, a snowy backyard, a sleeping cat, his son's shoes, apples, flowers: all meticulously documented with a developing discerning eye. As the artist surveyed the pieces chosen for this retrospective, he paused at one of his early works and said, "That's kind of striking, really."

Now, after over forty years, he is a student again. As Jubenville explains, "I stopped drawing in the early 2000s because I became interested in other things. I became interested in Quantum Physics." Will this fresh allegory become skillfully woven throughout upcoming works? Is this an entirely new direction for Jubenville? With the recent completion of *Time Space Reborn*, which includes a moving clock mechanism, the viewer could deduce that Jubenville has begun a scientific body of work, the essence of which will be difficult to capture on canvas, through assemblage, or even through words. And it seems that what he is discovering is, as the Amboy Dukes sang, "beyond the seas of thought, beyond the realm of what."⁹

Wherever he goes in this late-career exploration into matter and energy, we hope Jubenville continues to send us postcards from the centre of his mind. — Laurie Langford



Paper Bag (Purple), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36"



Paper Bag (Red), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36"



Paper Bag (Yellow), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36"

Laurie Langford is an artist and writer living in Chatham Ontario. She holds a BA in English Literature & Art History from the University of Toronto.

Notes

¹ "The Summer Trade - Confederation Centre of the Arts," Confederation Centre of the Arts - The Centre for All Canadians. October 6, 2022. <https://confederationcentre.com/exhibitions/the-summer-trade/>.

² "The Beat Generation," Dictionary.com. 2022. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beatnik>: "The Beat Generation was a movement of young people in the 1950s who rejected conventional society and favoured Zen Buddhism, modern jazz, free sexuality, and recreational drugs. Among writers associated with the movement were Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg."

³ Leonard Jubenville (artist) in discussion with author, September 26, 2022: All direct quotations by Jubenville within this publication are drawn from this discussion.

⁴ Herbert Gold, "The Art of Fiction." *The Paris Review*, vol. 41 (1967).

⁵ Allen Ginsberg, "Howl for Carl Solomon," in *Howl and Other Poems*. California: City Lights, 1956.

⁶ Leonardo Da Vinci, "The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci." Translated by Jean Paul Richter. New York: Dover Publications, 2010.

⁷ Lynn Fisher, "Leonard Jubenville: Up to Now." 10.

⁸ "Trash," Gavin Turk Website. 2007. <http://gavinturk.com/artworks/image/1407/>.

⁹ Amboy Dukes, "Journey to the Centre of the Mind." Mainstream Records, 1968.



Disposable Culture, 1992. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48"



Still Life, 1981. Graphite on paper. 8" x 30"

What Lies Beneath

A Retrospective of Works by Leonard Jubenville

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List of Works

Alpha and Omega, 2003. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

Still Life, 1976. Graphite on paper. 24" x 35". Private Collection

Wash Day, 1982. Oil on canvas. 36" x 32". Private Collection

Gladiola Fields, 2016. Oil on canvas. 46" x 46". Private Collection

Portrait of Tom Coatsworth, 2015. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48" Private Collection

Still Life, 1981. Graphite on paper. 8" x 30" Private Collection

Winter Tracks by Moonlight, n.d. Oil on canvas. 36" x 38". Private Collection

Lake Michigan Shoreline, 2001. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

Winter Crows, 1996. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

401 Overpass, 2006. Oil on canvas. 14" x 35". Private Collection

Rainbows in my Head, 1988. Oil on canvas. 72" x 48" Private Collection

Paper Bag (Red), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36". Private Collection

Paper Bag (Purple), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36". Private Collection

Paper Bag (Yellow), 2003 – 2005. Oil on canvas. 36" x 36". Private Collection

Walking, 1999. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

Thames River, Early Spring, 2010. Oil on canvas. 48" x 60". Collection of the Artist

Rondeau at a Friend's Cottage, 2010. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Collection of the Artist

Sharon Reading, 2012. Oil on canvas. 48" x 36". Collection of the Artist

Time Space Reborn, 2016. Oil on canvas. 48" x 36". Collection of the Artist

Eating the Rainforest, 1988. Oil on board. 30" x 60". Collection of the Artist

Sleeping Cat, 1983. Intaglio print. 12" x 16". Private Collection

Disposable Culture, 1992. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48" Private Collection

Amaryllis, 2018. Oil on canvas. 32" x 22". Private Collection

Velvet Leaf in Winter Field, 1990. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

Botanical Drawing, n.d. Graphite on paper. 30" x 20". Private Collection

Burlington Bay, 2017. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Collection of the Thames Art Gallery

Kent County Turbines, 2011. Oil on canvas. 44" x 84". Collection of the Thames Art Gallery

Coming and Going, 2002. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Collection of the Judith and Norman Alix Gallery

Winter's Edge, 2008. Oil on canvas. 22" x 32". Private Collection

Eastbound on the 401, 2003. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Collection of the Artist

Territory, 2009. Oil on canvas. 40" x 48". Private Collection

Portrait of Dr. Mahoney, 2015. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Private Collection

Zara Belanger, Writer. Leonard Jubenville, Illustrator. *What I have Learned (About Life After Suicide)*, 2017. First edition, softcover. Published by Plant Print.

November Chickens, 2014. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48". Collection of the Artist

Lake Michigan Dunes, 2001. Oil on canvas. 36" x 84". Collection of the Artist

Cover Image: *Thames River, Early Spring*, 2010. Oil on canvas. 48" x 60"



75 William Street North

Chatham, Ontario N7M 4L4

519.360.1998 | ckartgallery@chatham-kent.ca

www.chatham-kent.ca/TAG

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