



He calls working with roofing tar experimental, child-like: what is this stuff? You touch it and it's disgusting and gooey, but also like frosting on a cake, repulsive and sexy at the same time. It reacts to the temperature of the room, you can sculpt it wallowing in a purely sensual connection to the deep brown/black richness of the tar, no thinking about what it means. There's also an immediate chemical reaction between the tar and the oil paints self-made, so it's all done at once, in a morning, action painting, a one shot deal. If you go over it you start from scratch.

The process, he muses, is something like a tea ceremony, getting everything in order beforehand, only it's painful to lay out the tar on the plywood panels, his back and knees aching, then mix and line up the pigments, and then jump. There's a contest between the tricky tar and a finely developed sense of calligraphy, wet vs. dry brush strokes, with works on paper seeming to act as vocabulary cards for this language. But, he insists, this is writing that is non-verbal. Here lies a curious combination of order and disorder, control and letting go of control, a tea ceremony with tar.

Three years ago he did a series of paintings of human cannonballs, men shot from cannons at county fairs. In the intervening years a trip to Laos inspired quieter but still large canvases of saffron-robed Buddhist monks receiving offerings of sticky rice. Some of the monks were covered with tar and bled into the current series of vertical panels. This is a person determined and intensely intellectual who remained present in his own body while painting both cannonballs and monks, enthralled by observing the other protagonists.

Now he's mining a self-reflexive psychological state rather than a position in space, and has brought in new flavors, blues and greens, coolness combined with desire. He pictures the new set of panels as a corridor of cavernous doors (I think of Bluebeard's castle). He's tall so it's his door size, 8 feet high. If we're going to get analytical about it we could say these works resemble the psychological process of individuation, discovering the self. He qualifies that: the less self-conscious the painting, the more successful, these pieces are all about letting go of a certain level of consciousness. He's moving away from painting a painting. Perhaps as he says he was more of a cannonball than he thought.

Craig Harbison, April 2013
Matthias Leutrum Installation
Artist Profiles are a project of A.P.E.