



ARTS STORIES & INTERVIEWS

San Antonio artist Leigh Anne Lester's odd botanical universe at center of new exhibition

'Vain Fictions of Our Own Devising' is on display through Oct. 19 at Ruiz-Healy Art.

By [Bryan Rindfuss](#) on Tue, Oct 15, 2024 at 12:01 pm

[SEND A NEWS TIP](#)



Bryan Rindfuss

Leigh Anne Lester stands beside one of her creations at Ruiz-Healy Art.

Head-scratching moments are par for the course when Louisiana-born, San Antonio-based artist Leigh Anne Lester starts explaining her distinctive work.

A brainy amalgam of drawing, painting and sculpture, Lester's creative endeavors explore such heady topics as genetic modification and the myriad consequences

of human intervention on Mother Nature. Simultaneously representational and abstract – a feat within itself – Lester’s projects are easy to appreciate on an aesthetic level but contain layers of meaning that can be far from obvious.

Intriguingly, a large percentage of Lester’s oeuvre is based on three pieces she created more than a decade ago. The germinating seed, 2010’s Hunting Art Prize-winning *Mutant Spectre* is an intricate graphite drawing one might describe as Frankenstein’s monster in botanical form. Adding colored pencil to the mix, its next of kin – 2013’s *Mutant Generate* – comprises two botanical drawings stacked on complementary layers of drafting film.

With those three drawings as her key source material, Lester zooms in, distorts and transforms her own subject matter into entirely new works. In addition to digital processes, Lester employs the classic art-class activity of blind contour drawing to add organic layers of distortion.

Curiously reminiscent of DJ culture, these sample-driven remixes of her own work are in heavy rotation in the Ruiz-Healy Art exhibition “Vain Fictions of Our Own Devising,” her first solo show since 2019.

“I started doing blind contours because my natural tendency is so anal that I cannot seem to go wild,” Lester explained during a gallery visit. “[They’ve] made the work looser and richer. ... And now I’ve even started to do blind contours of the blind contours. So it’s becoming even more removed.”

During the packed opening reception for “Vain Fictions,” Lester passed out stickers reproducing a stark black silhouette of one of her botanical drawings. When quizzed about the design, she was quick to cite German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his concept of *urpflanze*. Developed during the 18th century, Goethe’s theory posited that all plants could be traced back to a primordial specimen. Although long debunked, *urpflanze* fits well within Lester’s bizarre, botany-driven narrative — so she embraces it.

Another historical figure that interests Lester is Leonhart Fuchs – a 16th-century German botanist who published an influential book of 500 detailed woodcuts of plants.

“Fuchs’ herbarium stayed relevant for like 500 years,” Lester said. “People just kept copying his prints of plants. But every time somebody copied one, it became further away from the actual details — which I *love*. It’s so much a part of what this body of work will eventually become. I’ve said this a bunch of times, but I do see [my process] as a slow-motion animation of how these things get further and further removed. ... [And] I like the idea of kind of building my own language.”

Although she’s perhaps best recognized for her masterful graphite drawings, Lester increasingly pushes her work into the sculptural realm. Echoing snippets of information extracted and abstracted from *Mutant Spectre* and *Mutant Generate*, her latest work incorporates cutout wooden shapes and drafting film in a variety of forms — some featuring botanical elements drawn in graphite and others based on blind contours that she paints, cuts out and drapes like lacy cobwebs. Thanks to strategic lighting, the combined materials cast otherworldly shadows — an important aspect of her work that’s reflected in her Instagram handle: cellsmakeshadows.

“Cellsmakeshadows touches on the importance I put on shadow in my work and how it builds volume in the pieces when they are lit properly,” Lester said. “They become fleetingly more three-dimensional through lighting.”

The melange of materials at play in “Vain Fictions” also blurs lines between mediums and materials.

“Just to throw yet another idea into the mix, [this work also questions] what is drawing, what is painting, what is sculpture,” Lester added. “Technically this is a sculpture ... but when you lay it on the ground, it’s a drawing. But it’s also a painting.”

That gray area is also evident in her new piece *Proclamation of Nature* — a family tree-like network of drawings exquisitely framed by woodworker Jonathan Davis of Iron Moos Co. — and the presence of what appears to be blue painter’s tape attaching layers to surfaces.

“I originally used it just to tape things up to see where I wanted them” Lester said. [I ended up liking] the punctuation of the blue ... but it wasn’t archival.” Lester’s solution to that conundrum entailed recreating the effect by painting archival linen tape cerulean blue and then cutting it out in jagged shapes that mimic the way paper tape tears off the roll.



Courtesy Image / Leigh Anne Lester
The drawing that started it all, Leigh Anne Lester's prize-winning *Mutant Spectre*.

“I call it builder’s tape [because] I like that it touches on construction — and for me — the construction of nature,” Lester said. “I’ve told this story 15 times, but it makes me so happy. My framer Jim Yarborough — he’s this beautiful Texas gentleman who says ‘sweetheart’ and ‘darling’ and ‘yes ma’am’ — said, ‘Darlin’, do you want me to take that painter’s tape out of there before we frame this thing?’”

When asked if she ever goes off script to create something unrelated to her early work, she paused briefly before marching over to a suite of drawings.

“This is still relevant, because it’s about obliterating the image,” she said of the series, which began during her 2015 Berlin residency facilitated by Contemporary at Blue Star. “When I was in Berlin, I became kind of obsessed with the rubble mountains. ... Huge bunkers were just blown to smithereens. They couldn’t remove them all so they kind of let nature take over and they eventually became parks. ... My work is about building up layers ... and [this] was a gigantic manifestation of layering [and] the palimpsest idea. The history is still there, underneath.”

In keeping with her other work, the entire series is drawn from the same source.

“This is all the same image,” she explained. “I did an original blind contour of two things I found on one of the rubble mountains in Teufelsberg: a tree stump, a leaf. ... I made the leaf larger than the actual tree stump, [to illustrate] the interplay of the short-term and long-term. ... I’m [exploring] the cultural history of Berlin, but also of nature and destruction of humans, destruction of nature. As colorful as it is, it’s the most in-your-face I’ve ever been.”

Unsurprisingly, Lester even found a way to tie her Berlin series back to *Mutant Spectre* and *Mutant Generate* by attaching scraps of botanical data in the form of abstracted wooden cutouts.

Focusing on an older drawing in a corner of the gallery, Lester pointed to a specific corner and playfully ordered, “Pay close attention to this root ball!” before circling the room to find it in all its various mutations. Amusingly, even she wasn’t 100% certain about every place — or every way — it appears in “Vain Fictions.”

“Usually I can identify what [everything] is taken from,” she said. “But I swear to God, sometimes I have no idea. ... I mean, even I’m confounded.”