

Burning Love**Leigh Salgado's Feminine Side**

By Mat Gleason

Visiting the Downtown studio of artist Leigh Salgado reveals an organized clutter amidst a large expanse of raw space. While her work area consists of a table and a few art supplies, the majority of it is empty, giving a meditative ambiance that lends itself to her meticulous compositions and their frequently sexual overtones. In some, she uses Sharpie pens and Exacto knives to turn high-end artist paper into lace-like abstractions. For other works, done on wood, she uses burning tools to draw busy scenes of flowery netting and vaguely familiar fleshy regions.



Artist Leigh Salgado in her Brewery studio space. Photos by Gary Leonard.

Though it's considered gauche to name collectors, Salgado has several, and her studio at Downtown's biannual Brewery ArtWalk draws an approving buzz from patrons and passersby alike. Some have even confessed to getting turned on during their visits.

Los Angeles Downtown News: Where did you get your start as an artist?

Leigh Salgado: I have a degree in art from UCLA and then I got my master's in art therapy. I practiced as an art therapist but I wanted to focus more on my own art and be a professional artist, so I went to an alternative school called Santa Monica College of Design Art and Architecture. I focused just on making art for a couple years there.

Q: How long have you been at the Brewery?

A: Two years. Before that I had a day space over on Seton Avenue off of Alameda, but I really wanted to live where I did my work so I could work anytime.

Q: Are open studio tours beneficial for your career beyond just a quick sale or two?

A: Yeah, months later people will contact me about a show they're putting together, because they had seen my work at an art walk.

Q: At first glance most of your work appears abstract, but upon further contemplation, a lot of it has realistic imagery. Do you try for a balance between abstraction and representation?

A: I don't know if I actually try to achieve a balance. I don't have a specific idea when I start off because the interesting part is discovering what's going to happen once I do start. So they do have references to things like lace, wire, chain link fences.

Q: They also seem like texture barriers, walls of flowers, the fence and the netting.

A: They're barriers but they're permeable, because they have holes, they have spaces through them.

Q: Some of your imagery is not literally sexual, but one can see a lot of anatomical parts that are aroused. Are you trying to approximate sex without pornography?

A: I'm thinking more about femininity and the feminine body and eroticism without objectification. It's about a female's experience of having a female body.

Q: What other themes have run through your work in the last few years?

A: I was interested in the relationship between the body and spirituality, so I was reading a lot about St. Francis of Assisi and St. Claire, his female counterpart. What interested me about this pair, besides their asceticism, is the complete repudiation of the body to get to the spiritual.

There was such a repudiation that there was almost an obsession with the body, and therefore, almost an erotic obsession. Like, other monks or St. Claire would wash very carefully and tenderly, the feet of St. Francis, and that sounded very erotic to me. If you go through some of their writings, or the writings of St. Claire about Jesus and God, it sounds like they're written to a lover.

Q: Do you find that these ideas are better expressed visually or are you just doing it in the medium you've chosen?

A: Probably both. I like a visual medium because I think there are some things that we don't have the vocabulary to say.

Q: What role does your ethnic background play in your work?

A: Not much of one. But when I got interested in St. Francis and St. Claire, I did get interested in Catholicism because half my family is from Mexico and Spanish New Mexico, but they were Protestant, not Catholic, so I always felt kind of left out from that. I think I was drawn to the drama and theater of Catholicism that I didn't get to experience personally.

Q: Some of your pieces are done with wood-burning tools. Is this your latest series?

A: Yes. I started doing them more as little doodles, and then I got obsessed. Almost everybody or his or her brother has used a wood-burning tool as a hobby. I like it. When I draw I also use a Sharpie because I like to use kind of a mundane tool, an unpretentious kind of tool.

Q: It's a very obsessive style. Have you ever timed yourself?

A: No, that would just be discouraging. It's a pretty long process.

Q: Have you ever burned yourself?

A: Oh, many times. And my furniture, and clothes, and shoes.

Q: Are you burning yourself less these days?

A: Yeah. I've also ruined a lot of the tools because I've burnt the cord. I'm becoming more alert about where I put them.

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