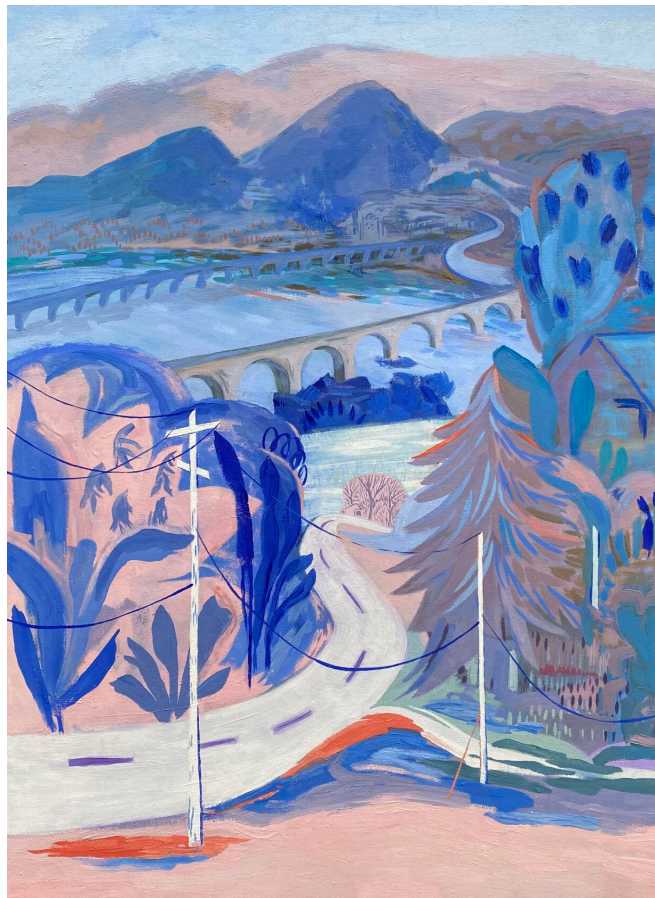


https://lancasteronline.com/features/entertainment/artist-heidi-leitzkes-latest-exhibit-features-familiar-scenes-in-lancaster-county-mount-gretna/article_a39ef486-375e-11ec-9a0e-ab485bf20341.html

Artist Heidi Leitzke's latest exhibit features familiar scenes in Lancaster County, Mount Gretna

MIKE ANDRELCZYK | Staff Writer

Oct 28, 2021



Finding My Way at the Susquehanna River (2021, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches)

Heidi Leitzke

In the fraught spring of 2020, as the COVID-19 lockdowns were beginning, Heidi Leitzke and her 11-year-old son Henry were at the Mount Pisgah Overlook at the Samuel Lewis State Park in York making landscape drawings of bridges spanning the Susquehanna River.

The symbolic power of the scene, one Leitzke had studied and incorporated into her artwork for around 10 years, suddenly struck her with new meaning.



“The job of a bridge is literally to get you from one side to the other,” says Leitzke, an assistant professor of art and director of the Eckert Gallery at Millersville University. “I was feeling like we’re going to make it through. There are bridges. There’s a path forward. Just having that symbol right at the beginning of the pandemic to think about and work through in the coming months became very meaningful to me – as a physical thing to be making, but also metaphorically.”

Taking the familiar and giving it new and novel meaning is the challenge of any artist – particularly landscape artists. Leitzke successfully accomplishes this with her series of 25 familiar scenes from Lancaster County – and elsewhere – in her latest exhibit “a bridge across, a path through” on display now at Elizabethtown College’s Hess Gallery through Dec. 10.

“It’s really beautiful work and I think what’s intriguing and really interesting about the work is how Heidi takes us on her journey around Lancaster County,” says Milt Friedly, a professor of art and director of the art galleries at Elizabethtown College. “I think what I’m seeing in Heidi’s work is this combination of reality, observation, fantasy and imagination.”



Rose Moon (2020, thread and acrylic on linen, 12 x 12 inches)

Heidi Leitzke

A bridge across

Place is extremely important to the work in “a bridge across, a path through.” Some of locations featured in the exhibit include the Susquehanna River, Mount Gretna, the idyllic winding backroads of Lancaster County, breezy Delaware beach scenes and memories of Leitzke’s life growing up in the Midwest. Her atmospheric Susquehanna River scenes are immediately recognizable, yet feel imbued with a hopeful sense of wonder. They seem to breathe with a life of their own.

“It’s almost like amplifying or intensifying what I’m seeing and that’s kind of where the sense of wonderment or imaginative qualities come in,” says Leitzke, 42, of Lancaster. “I’m trying to make something that looks like the way that I feel about that place.”



Her approach – and use of various surfaces and mediums including gouache, oil and acrylic painting, ink and thread – add new dimensions of feeling to these familiar scenes in a way that, say a photorealistic landscape painting, might not be able to accomplish. There's an ethereal sense of magic swirling around Leitzke's work. The images in Leitzke's recent works act as a bridge from reality to the fantastic realm of the artist's imagination.

A path through

The scenes in “a bridge across, a path through,” feel especially poignant now as the world tries to see a path to a future beyond the pandemic and deals with the perils of climate change. The feeling that we're simultaneously living in two worlds – a familiar one and one that's been radically changed – manifests itself in Leitzke's work.

The tranquility of the natural world was on Leitzke's mind during the pandemic.

“Through the pandemic, our family really appreciated the hiking paths that are maintained by the Lancaster Conservancy and we worked our way through the list of all the preserves and explored new hikes,” says Leitzke. “That's something we were doing while I was making this body of work, and the kind of solace and renewal that I personally feel when I'm outside is definitely in there.”

Mount Gretna became an important location featured in “a bridge across, a path through.” Leitzke and her husband, Jay Noble – the director of the Mount Gretna School of Art – and their son Henry, spend a significant part every summer since 2013 living in the wooded borough steeped in a rich artistic tradition.

“It feels like a very magical place,” says Leitzke. “It feels like you're walking through this wooded wonderland and the longer we spent there the more I started to feel that it was a really special place in general, but also for us as a



What it feels like to stand in Mount Gretna (2021, watercolor on paper, 12 x 9 inches)

Heidi Leitzke

family.”

Leitzke says the play of dappled light coming through the trees, the shadows of ferns on the winding pathways and other unique shapes of the dense Mount Gretna landscape inspired her to make a series of black and white ink drawings. The drawings helped her forge a new path in her work.

“By nature I’m drawn to lots of color,” says Leitzke. “Color typically is one of the main visual forces in my artwork. So, by removing color, I was able to focus more on the formal qualities and try to really force myself to build a structure based on value rather than, say, a warm-cool color relationship. So it was kind of an exercise to push myself outside my comfort zone.”

Leitzke says looking at the isometric perspective and calligraphic brush strokes of traditional Chinese landscape paintings helped her find a new way forward with her own work.

“I call it a stacked space. It feels like everything is sitting on top of each other as it moves through the picture plane,” says Leitzke. “A lot of artists will look at other artists’ work to build their visual vocabulary, so I was thinking about those Chinese landscape paintings.”

Threads to the past

Another paradox in Leitzke’s work is how the landscape is at once universal and also extremely personal. Some of the work references Leitzke’s childhood in the Midwest in terms of landscape and medium – specifically her use of thread on linen.

“I grew up in the Midwest in a family of makers,” says Leitzke. “My mom did a lot of sewing and we learned hand crafts and my dad did woodworking. If you couldn’t afford to buy the nice thing, you just figured out how to make it yourself. So it’s just always been hands-on making.”

Leitzke’s use of thread to create landscapes happened by experimentation and convenience. They say necessity is the mother of invention. In Leitzke’s case, the idiom is more literal. When Leitzke became a mother 11 years ago, that led to some necessary innovations in her work.

“I made oil paintings and works on paper until my son was born, but it’s hard to take care of a baby that just woke up from a nap when you’re covered in oil paint” says Leitzke. “By returning to this cherished format of hand-held embroidery, the basics of which I had learned as a kid, I found this way of making a painterly image that was clean and portable. It felt really perfect for that point in my life and it became a thing that felt even more my own voice than the paintings I had been making before.”



Some recognition for some early thread work in the form of an honorable mention from art critic Jerry Saltz let her know she was on the right path.

“You can cluster up the thread and make it feel very messy or stitch with just one or two delicate threads so I love that range as well,” says Leitzke.” I’ve found a vocabulary of marks that feels really painterly and exciting.”

IF YOU GO:

What: Heidi Leitzke’s “a bridge across, a path through” exhibit

Where: Hess Gallery in Zug Memorial Hall at Elizabethtown College, 1 Alpha Drive Elizabethtown, 17022

When: Exhibit runs now through Dec. 10. Gallery hours are Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sat. and Sun. 1-5 p.m.

Cost: Free

More info: Visit heidileitzke.com for more information.



Chain Link Fern (2021, thread and acrylic on linen, 14 x 11 inches)

Heidi Leitzke