



Thierry
Lefort



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 96 x 48 in

Los Angeles, beyond itself

Thierry Lefort and Southern California

By Yann Perreau

A violet canyon. Electric wires on urban poles that draw geometric shapes. Deserted streets where some houses bloom grey while others blossom orange, echoing the traffic lights of a few parked cars. Large, white roads. Tar. High, curved palm trees, whose weird shadows cut their own shapes into the landscape. Thierry Lefort's Los Angeles paintings immediately take you in. They bring you into a universe that anyone who has ever lived in this city would define as equally familiar and strikingly new.

Ten years ago, the French native painter took a one-way flight to L.A. He was busy teaching and exhibiting in Paris when not traveling for exhibitions in China, Russia, and other parts of the world. But he wanted a new start, a new environment to immerse into. "I don't remember why I chose this city. I had never been here, and I knew nobody", explains the artist whom I meet in his studio in North Hollywood. He wandered from one neighborhood to another, intrigued by the megalopolis's peculiar environment, that strange mix of wild nature, high-tech or derelict buildings, large highways, and empty streets. The unique light in the city amazed him, with its striking contrasts that draw everything it touches like a razor blade. "Even in Provence, there isn't this kind of light," he exults, referring to the famous region of France that his master Cézanne devoted his almost entire life to painting. Like the XIX-century artist, Lefort is a passionate observer who just can't stop working. He dedicated three years of his life to a junkyard in the Paris suburb, waking up at 5 a.m. every day to go there with his tools until night came, noticing every little detail, from every angle.

Los Angeles became his obsession. He went, came back, and back many times. At least four to five months every year. He restlessly explored the city, noticing all these elements that we, Angelenos, don't have time to stop and look at, as we are constantly driving somewhere. A concrete building that most people would find random but appears to him as an attractive shape in the city landscape. A crossroad. Palm trees.

Lefort landscapes immediately raise a fascinating question for their viewer: how something so average as a Southern California street, with its lawn, parked vehicles, and street signs, can become so captivating and enthralling on his canvas? When they depict Los Angeles, Hollywood movies tend to exaggerate its glamorous or fantastic atmosphere. Their audience wants to see the American Dream on the big screen. But Lefort prefers the real to the extraordinary. Digging behind the surface, and deconstructing the phantasmagorias usually associated with the "City of Angels" or "La-La Land", his oil landscape captures the banal, everyday poetry of these non-places that characterize Los Angeles. A small driveway with parked cars in a supermarket (La nuit des modèles - Ralph's parking, 2022) becomes enthralling, as its large road of blue anthracite, emerald, and soft green juxtaposed carry the eye toward the unknown.

Surely Lefort got the "sunshine or noir" dimension of Los Angeles, to quote Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*, its ethereal, hyperreal aspect. But he also understood how, behind the apparent anarchy of this endless urban sprawling, a sensible structure becomes apparent, if one takes the time to observe the city as a whole, seeking its nuances in what seems at first glance uninteresting.



Thierry Lefort
Papillon
Oil on canvas, 29,9 x 39,9 in



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 35,8 x 35,8 in

No distinctive detail could allow one to identify that these urban landscapes take place in Los Angeles. Their streets have no name, and none of their buildings are remarkable, listed in tourist guides. Nobody, famous or anonymous, is represented in any of these works. One of the works, provocatively named "Hollywood", represents the less SoCal environment ever - a grey bitumen avenue with no palm tree but carobs and carrotwood. It could as well be a suburb avenue in Europe or elsewhere in Northern America.

These works are not about Los Angeles. "The topic doesn't matter," as Lefort puts it. He shares with Cézanne the conviction that "to paint from nature is not slavishly copying; it is to realize one's sensations." On the one hand, he is an observer, trying to capture the immediate mystery of what lies in front of him. On the other, he is an inventor, creating forms, shapes, and colors that go beyond a strict representation of reality. This



Thierry Lefort
Capturer les rêves
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in

is striking when you look closer at his colors. His mauve skies, orange buildings, blue shadow. The painter explains making radical choices when deciding on colors. His palette is limited to ten original ones: tree blues, two yellows, one white, one black, and two reds. Each one of his colors is thoughtfully composed, melted from two or three primary colors, his original take on the element studied. "Otherwise, you would just have a Dunn-Edwards color," he explains, referencing the famous brand that sells primary colors in various parts of the city.

In *La nuit des modèles - Ralph's parking*, a small part of the sky has an unusual green. "Here I started with colors that are not blue, he explains, like emerald green or cobalt. A grey-blue, when mixed with a lemon yellow, created an acid green." The four different colors that he finally picked to compose this sky are not gradient.



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 39,9 x 29,9 in



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 39,7 x 29,9 in



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 72 x 23,6 in

They don't blend. Each of them has its own shape, carefully drawn, and then put next to another. "Every element in my works, even the colors, or the shadows, are singular forms that I put together like pieces of a puzzle," he explains.

Lefort only uses oil in his painting, as it allows more nuance than acrylic and can melt while still fresh. But oil usually takes at least a week to dry. That can create issues, stopping the artist at the pick of his inspiration. The French painter learned the art of oil painting from Philippe Lejeune, a Maurice Denis student. Lejeune taught him about "fresh glaze" (*glacis dans le frais*), a technique that allows the undercoat of a painting to be glazed, so you can add another layer without melting or waiting for the previous one to dry. The result can be astonishing, as in this surreal purple, created by a slim veil of diluted red paint applied to a very dry blue.

These paintings radiate an unusual light. Studying Vermeer, the "master of light," Lefort learned how to use the canvas background to create a retroactive lighting effect. To the average, manufactured, white canvas, he applies a subtle gray mixed with black Chinese ink. This first screen will stay with the painting and shine through its forthcoming layers. Rather than from its light though, he confesses being even more interested by shadows and shades in Los Angeles. Grey and black are his favorite colors; he appreciates their nuances and endless possibilities. "I start working with sketches and photographs, then I look at the dark spots I created or captured. I wonder which shadow I should keep as it is and which I should eliminate."

Looking at Lefort's landscape is a disorienting, dazzling experience. Everything seems in motion, animated. Nothing is still or even straight. Curves, movements, shapes. Electric wires drawing strange forms, running out of the canvas. A building façade gently bends toward the road. The artist explains how he is trying to make you forget the frame of the painting, "this convention that limits your eyes to a narrow rectangle." He loves Los Angeles because this city is all about curves, inclined roads, arching palm trees.

Nothing is repetitive in these landscapes. Everything is fluid. « I don't proceed by addition, but by subtraction. As painters, we tend to make too many leaves in trees, that are too green. We always paint too many things. » He describes his process as a "constant attempt to hold back and make choices, eliminating the unnecessary, the uninteresting".

In 1904, Paul Cézanne wrote in a letter to Emile Bernard about his project of "dealing with nature as cylinders,

spheres, and cones." This radical gesture of abstraction is at the core of Lefort's work. But he is even more moved by an attempt to capture the emptiness that Zen Garden and Bonsai art also cultivate. The Ying and the Yang. Three years studying with a Chinese monk, in a Shaolin temple in China taught him about simplicity and minimalism. He shows me the two volumes of John Y. Naka, the world-renowned bonsai master who brought the art of bonsai to the West and lived most of his life in California. Bonsai is the art of growing certain trees and shrubs, of many varieties, in small, shallow containers. It is through careful and precise training and pruning, that the plant is slowly shaped and manipulated to give the appearance of an older, mature tree.

"It is this void that gives a vase its shape, for instance. Without the void, it would be nothing." His shapes are drawn from the void. "At the beginning, I have the shapes and masses that move around that void. And then I tighten, I get into the details. Sometimes, the shape doesn't suit me, but I leave it. I wait for it to dry for a week, then return to the painting and work through the voids." He compares his process to playing Mikado: a fragile balance where you try to slowly take off one piece after the other, avoiding the whole construction to move. He quotes Delacroix's diary: «You start a painting with a ballet, you end with a needle.»

When he first arrived in Los Angeles, Lefort discovered there weren't the same canvas formats here as in France. He had to assemble one canvas on top of the other to remain faithful to his vision. "This forced me to make more interesting compositions." It appears in A very elongated canvas, whose essential study is on that road, where endless shadows play magical tricks. I had to rethink the whole painting as a complex interplay of these shadows." His artistic gesture is a radical one. A new series of blue landscapes...

Lefort landscapes articulate a fascinating philosophical problem: how ideas and nature, abstraction, and representation, ultimately compose what we call "reality". How much do we project onto nature? How much do we truthfully represent from our observations? But more than Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, or Color field painting artists, who were obsessed by this dilemma, he quotes the Bay Area School of Painting as his primary source of inspiration. "I was lucky to meet Joe Blainchtain", he recalls. The Californian painter told him how, in the 1950's, Elmer Bischoff, Nathan Oliveira, and others joined him in a move away from abstraction, the moto at that time, and toward a return to figurative subject matter. David Park also destroyed many of his "nonobjective canvases" and began a new style of consciously naïve figuration. This "going backward" movement is visible in Lefort's aesthetic. When carefully examined, his landscapes reveal the emotional strain of the artist that inhabits them, an almost dialectical movement between abstraction and figuration. But his works ultimately reveal how nature is inhabited by these tensions, even in a megalopolis like Los Angeles. This car, that road, this shadow: they all follow an invisible pattern, fight for their own existence, or help each other to nurture in a shared vast ecosystem. Good artists reveal the struggle of the visible and the invisible, that glorious project of modern and contemporary art, unachievable yet constantly reattempted.



Thierry Lefort
Les nuits que l'on aime
Huile sur toile, 11,8 x 17,7 in



Thierry Lefort
Sans titre
Oil on canvas, 96 x 48 in



Thierry Lefort
Les nuits que l'on aime
Oil on canvas, 72 x 35 in



Thierry Lefort
Les nuits que l'on aime
Oil on canvas, 72 x 35 in



Thierry Lefort
Seven o'clock for one kiss
Oil on canvas, 96 x 96 in



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