

On the Cover

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on March 30, 2013.

Sitting by her husband's hospital bed as he recovered from a heart attack, Deborah Leavy stared at the heart monitor screen for hours. Suddenly, she thought, "That's my next painting." Along with her husband's recovery, what evolved from those hours was a series of six paintings, primarily in shades of greens, blacks, blues, and greys. The fourth of these, *Heart Signals IV*, serves as the cover art for this issue.

In her Artist's Statement on her website (<http://www.deborahleavy.com/bio.html>), Leavy quotes Danny Kaye, noting that he was a painter as well as an actor and comedian: "Life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can." She reflects, "I have tried to take that exuberance and apply it to my life and to my work."

Leavy grew up in an intellectual family that valued the arts. When she showed talent in art, she was given lessons after school. Although she enjoyed art, she remembers, "I saw people who were better than I was. If I wasn't the best in junior high school, though, how could I expect to succeed?" Making the cardinal error that so many of us do—that talent is all and practice irrelevant—Leavy gave up on art entirely for the next 30 years.

She obtained a JD from Yale Law School and worked in various aspects of public policy and politics, for some years serving as chief counsel for the late Senator Paul Simon. In her late 40s, between jobs and in the midst of a situational depression, Leavy reviewed her "bucket list" of things she wanted to accomplish during her lifetime. Trying art again was one of them, and she signed up for a painting class. "I would stare at a still life setup of tomatoes, trying to understand why the teacher was saying there were yellows, greens, purples, when all I saw was red. The focus on the process rather than the product was what mattered. That three hours of intense concentration was very peaceful, meditative, and therapeutic for me."

As the product as well as the process became more important to her, Leavy continued painting and taking classes. Over the subsequent 17 years, her work has been exhibited widely in juried shows in the Philadelphia area and has won several awards. "My journey has been from left brain to right brain—from lawyer to painter." Initially, she painted realistically, enamored of the calm of the still life. "But training in the strict literalism of classical painting was too much like the literalism of the law, and so I

embraced contemporary imagery." Her work evolved into abstraction, which she describes as coming more from the inside than the outside, more from one's thoughts and feelings than from the image itself.

"It took me a long time to really 'get' abstract art. Not having had formal arts education during college, I have had to learn from so many different sources: studying with teachers who are working artists themselves, who are able to put art in context; going through art books; visiting museums when I travel; and regularly going to galleries to see what people are working on now. I think I have been influenced by a wide variety of artists, from Italian Renaissance painters to Mark Rothko and Richard Diebenkorn.

"I can appreciate a good painting in just about any style. I have learned to look at what goes into a painting, where it comes from, the techniques, brushwork, layers, the thinness or thickness of the paint, how it's applied—all the choices an artist makes to create a painting."

Her *Heart Signals* series is descriptive of this process: "I wanted to reflect the time I'd spent staring at the lines representing the heartbeat, but I didn't want to replicate that. The lines in the painting, the different shades and colors, take off from what I saw. It is an abstraction of the idea rather than a copy of the image. It would have been a different series, of course, had the outcome in the hospital been different. There's a tension in the lines, but it's an optimistic painting."

Using a brush for layering and a palette knife for scratching in the lines, Leavy, for practical and artistic reasons, worked on two paintings in this series at the same time, with two easels facing each other. Because the paintings involved taping to achieve some of the sharp edges, she needed to wait for the paint to dry before pulling the tape off. She recalls, "I'd see something working in one painting and think about how it might be expressed or taken differently in the other. It was almost as if the paintings were 'talking' to each other.

"For me, a visual experience of form and space and color and movement translates into layer upon layer of paint and material with a textural surface. What is revealed, what is hidden, what used to be, and what remains become the subject, as well as the process. The Japanese call it *wabi sabi*, finding beauty in imperfection, asymmetry, decline, and decay."

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