

THE “TRANSFORMING” PAINTINGS OF DOV LEDERBERG

curated by Daniel Shorkend Ph.D.

During Lederberg's formative years as an undergraduate at Haverford College, an important influence was [Stan Brakhage](#), the avant-garde film maker whom he came across in his senior year. Here he found a kind of visionary guru in film-making who “blew his mind” and he gave up a promising academic career to live in the NYC Lower East Side, then a hot-bed of creative activity. Lederberg produced many lyric “underground” films, including “Eargogh” starring the campy Jack Smith (his next door neighbor) as Vincent.

He became an active member of the Film-makers Co-op. It was at this time that psychedelic culture influenced the burgeoning film maker. He took an interest in the theories of Carl Jung and Eastern teachings and meditation as well as – significantly – Jewish mysticism, which he later delved in intensively after he visited Israel just before the Six Days War and because of this elated experience, he decided to remain permanently, living in Jerusalem..

I will now unpack the various levels of meaning in his paintings, the general themes, methods and trajectory of his art. While the above preamble demonstrates a clear path to his understanding of the craft of film and video art, he later used this visual ability in the medium of painting and in fact extended the range of the tradition of painting by its marriage to the processes of media and the technical “savvy” of the artist can be found on his web site. ([Link to site](#))

In his work he demonstrates not only a keen eye but an innovative methodology, all the while allowing sub-conscious and mystical meanings to amalgamate with a very cogent and lucid understanding of the kabbalah texts. In this way, Lederberg is an important Judaic artist, but at the same time I shall argue in favor of his more **universal** calling, not to mention his unique aesthetics, his work need not be categorized as solely Judaic, but more broadly within a surreal and abstract field of reference that deserves a wider appeal and audience.

His marriage of twenty years to the accomplished artist [Yael Avi-Yonah](#) clearly assisted him on his journey and her passing in October of 2012 deeply pained him. Although tempestuous at times as is usual for couples who are both artists, (as Pollack/Krasney and Rivera/Kahlo) they had a reciprocal influence and often exhibited together. In fact, many of his works are a result of the creative and emotional roller coaster that their relationship often traveled upon..

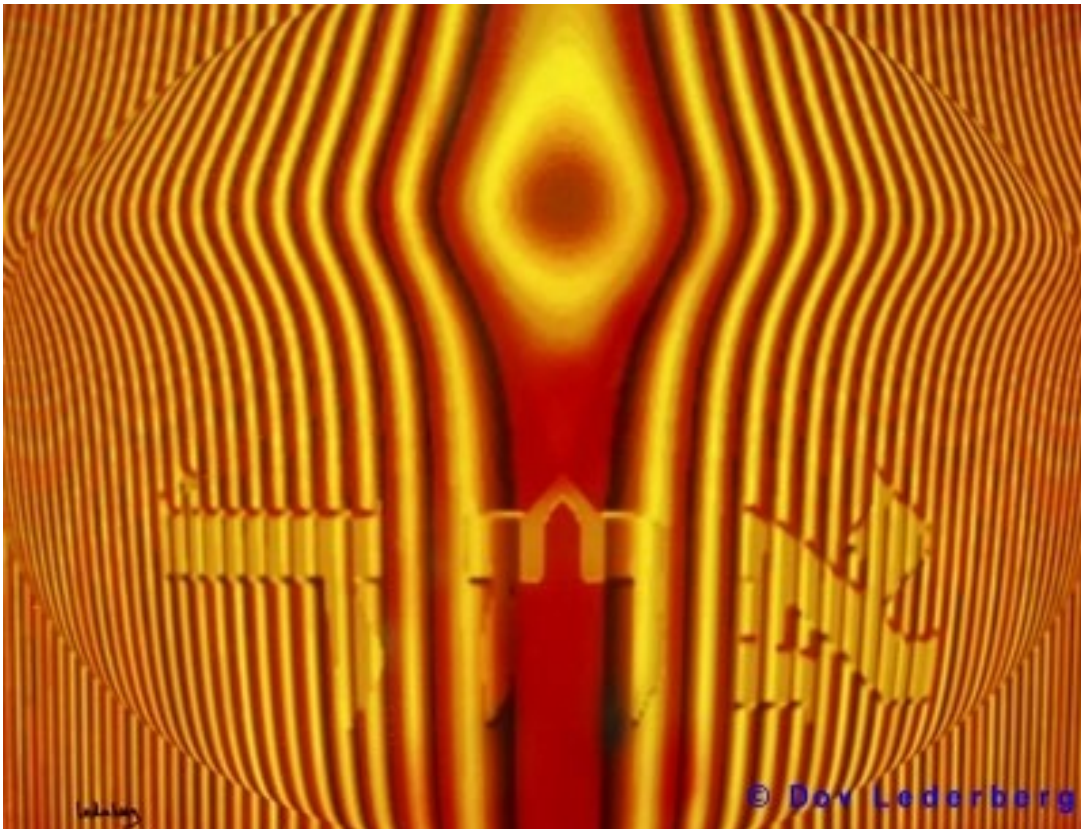
But life goes on and he produced some of his best work since then, moved to Safed in the Galilee and married again - in fact one will find a series of works that makes [direct reference to his new wife, Dorit](#)

So where to start?

Although Lederberg's first love was [film and video](#), (He worked as a film director in Israeli Television from the early 70's and also as an independent, creating documentary and educational film productions). he has – owing to the influence of his late wife, Yael – developed his skills in painting.

Many of his paintings (especially on the Hebrew letters) are derived from the videos and form an interesting dialectic with them - ([Link to paintings](#))

Take for example, “**Echad - the Primordial Light**”, which is from a video still or videograph and now airbrushed on canvas.



airbrush/acrylic on canvas 30" x 40" (76 x 102 cm)

he style can be traced to hard edge abstractionism. He has used stencils to excellent effect and the alternating bands of gold and brown tantalize the eye, but yet since this is a painting and we no longer have the camera to contend with, one can fix attention here and now on the image. Movement is still implied as is

evident in the op art style, particularly of the 1970's, such as Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley and others. He has inscribed the word "Echad" עֶחָד, meaning "oneness" in such a way that it seems to evolve out of the color bands.

Moving on:



acrylics & mixed materials on canvas 19" x 37" (48 x 94 cm)

The "**Stones of Fire**" series - ([Link to paintings](#)) combine images of the Western Wall with the flames of Lag b' Omer massive bonfires, about which one might make associations such as the fiery history of biblical Israel in carving out its destiny amidst the torrent of nations that have attempted to blot out its memory. Horses gallop, sheep are sacrificed and faces scream, yell, love and hate. Yet Israel has survived. The nation lives on and the fire is not the scouring fire of history and the pain of violence, but of redemption, rectification and purification. Lederberg's technique, employing collage, the digital and the painterly combine to form an image that deepens one's emotional connection to the mystical, swathed with yellow, orange and gray.

The artist relates a vision where he sees the Wall as a kind of spiritual camera which takes an imprint of all who come close to it and touch its evocative surface.



acrylics & mixed materials on canvas 18" x 24" (46 x 61 cm)

It is no wonder that faces can be seen within the rock surface and the penetrating crevices seem to go on endlessly with tales of history. The electro-magnetic vibrations of the Wall – after all, is it not the inanimate silicon that can be harnessed to record and hold memory as in the digital age – will store the prayers of all who come close.

His “**Dialogue and Antilogue**” series. ([Link to paintings](#)) is based on a simple illusionist form of two cartoon **faces in confrontation**. Its artistic expansion and development (over 100 paintings) have been influenced by the teachings of Martin Buber and his **I-Thou** and **I-It** paradigm and its application in modern Gestalt psychology. The **I-Thou** Dialogues show two “faces” in harmony and balance, while in the **I-It** paintings (Antilogues), the second “face” is diminished or non-existent.

The former marks a relationship between subjects, where people treat one another with respect and are sensitive to their plight, combining intellect and emotion in meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships.

Dialogue - Harmony



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 40" x 40" (102 x 102 cm)

While the latter is marked by treating the other as a thing or an object. Here, one's relationships are pragmatic – “what can I get out of this” or simply quantitative – measuring and scientifically reducing people and things to numerical equivalence, processes, mechanisms and generalizations.

Antilogue - Greed



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 40" x 40" (102 x 102 cm)

Lederberg has worked on this series for several years and each airbrushed painting on canvas is a representation of primary modes of relationship and being, such as anger, gluttony, birthing, paranoia, schizophrenia, love-making, seduction - to name but a few. In all, one notices the bipolarity or sense of duality in the images, a sort of yin yang symbolism, but with an insightfully new application. As one focuses on the painting, so an energetic and wonderfully rendered sense of line and color comes to the fore. A great network of lines is revealed in most cases, while the backgrounds are more muted, allowing the eye to focus on the seeming tumult of the energetic display of strewn line with the enclosed forms. The series is deeply psychological. Lederberg seems to peer into matter, into the very brain, heart and liver not only for anatomical reasons (interestingly he took a pre-med course at one point), but as metaphors for the emotive and intellectual sphere.

His methods always mystify me: Lederberg deftly uses the effects of iridescent, fluorescent, transparent and opaque air brush paints to great effect, combined with stencils, with various kinds of mark-making, mostly sprayed, to great effect.

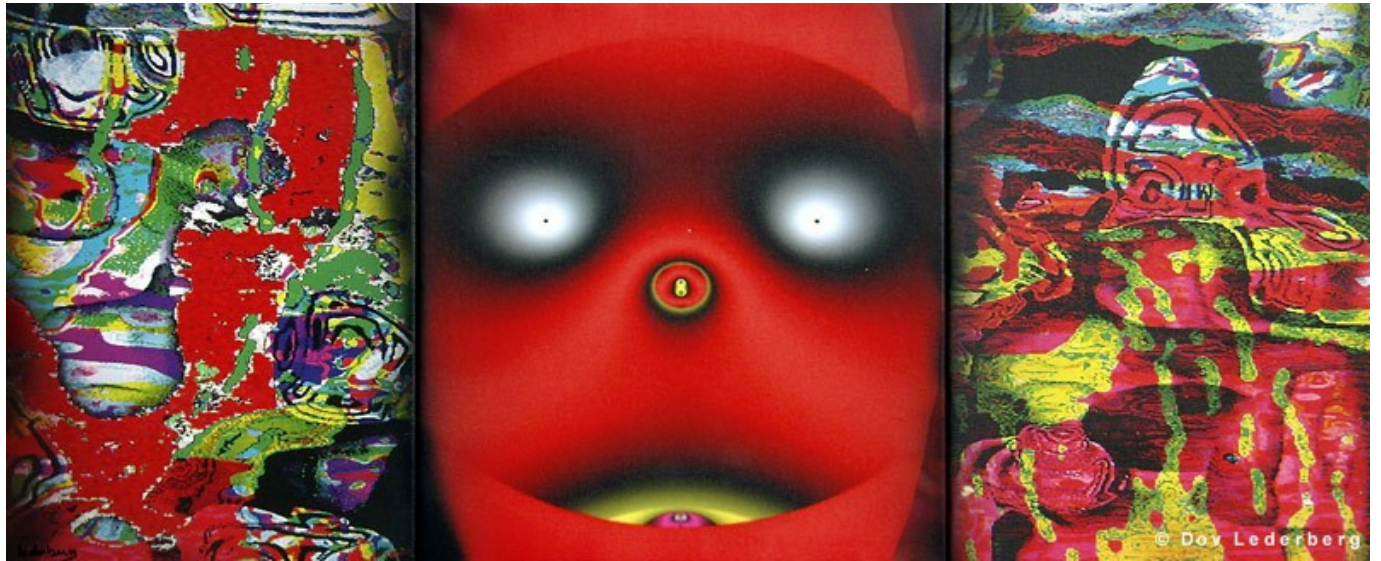
For example, his **Triptychs**' series - ([Link to paintings](#)) skilfully connects the three separate paintings into a certain holistic synthesis.

Some are macabre – one of which - [Descent into Duma \(Purgatory\)](#) – **The Silence of the Grave** was made after his elder brother passed on.



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 26" x 62" (66 x 158 cm)

In another, [Terrorist Surprise!](#) (unfortunately, very much “current events”)



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 26" x 62" (66 x 158 cm)

he conveys how such suicide bombers will end up damned, rather than their strange belief that they will receive a heavenly reward for serial murders.

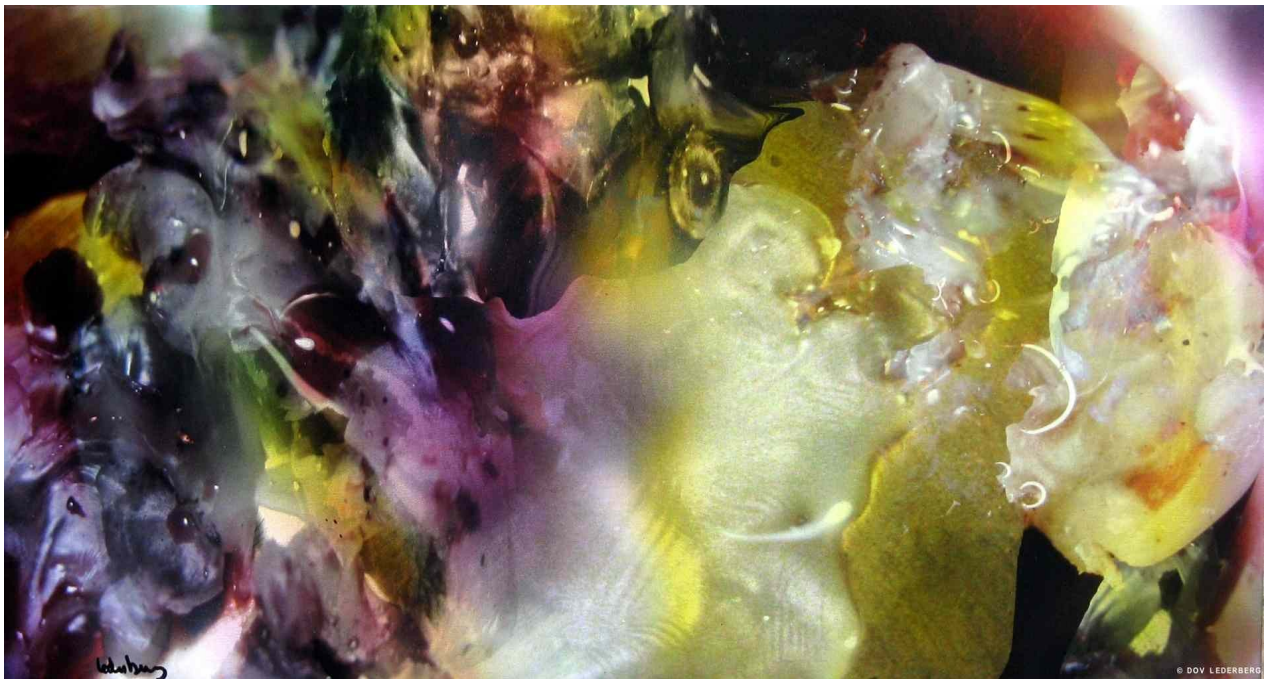
Other themes relate to the spiritual desire to pass what the artist calls the “guardians” that monitor the way to the [Portal](#) of spiritual progress. Should one be found worthy, so one may enter. And one must enter “Pardess: - the mystical orchard, in peace. Only then, will one exit with one’s identity intact without erroneous beliefs.



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 26" x 62" (66 x 158 cm)

His canvases seem to speak of such a narrative: Of trying to traverse unknown territory, of passing into alternative worlds; of delving into the celestial chambers through his montage-like effects culled from his skill with video art. Yet coming back to mundane existence – to the miracle of birth, of life itself!

The series entitled “**Congeaings**” ([Link to paintings](#)) derives from extreme close-ups of wax drippings from the burning Havdalah candle, which separates the sacred and profane, that is the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new, mundane week. The wax, mystifying to me, somehow look like sacks produced by insects or plasma, even a kind gooey substance as if found in a fish pond and around liquid, watery fluids. Their viscosity is apparent. One finds even hints of figuration, some of monster-like import, other images gentler and plant-like. I think they are interesting surreal forms inviting the viewer to see new things as one contemplates the image. One must, so to speak, entertain oneself and develop one’s own sense of narrative.



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 17" x 35" 44 x 89 cm)

There is the sense of the teeming of life, of little insects, fishes and archaic forms emerging amidst flurries of color and embryonic cocoons of sorts. Water droplets appear to give life, for water is the sustainer and initiator of life. A shiny surface allows one to gain a sense of the very texture and liveness or freshness of the creatures that inhabit his (painting) world. The sensual embodiment of the creatures squirming out as if just born, fill one with the sense of the magnificence of Nature that produces wonderful variety. So perhaps the works are about

nature, but also the figurative element in some of them imply that the human-animal-demagogue is part of the evolution of all things, for what is man but dust and ashes, even if humans are the apex and the very crown of creation. Hence human and animal parts seem to interrelate.

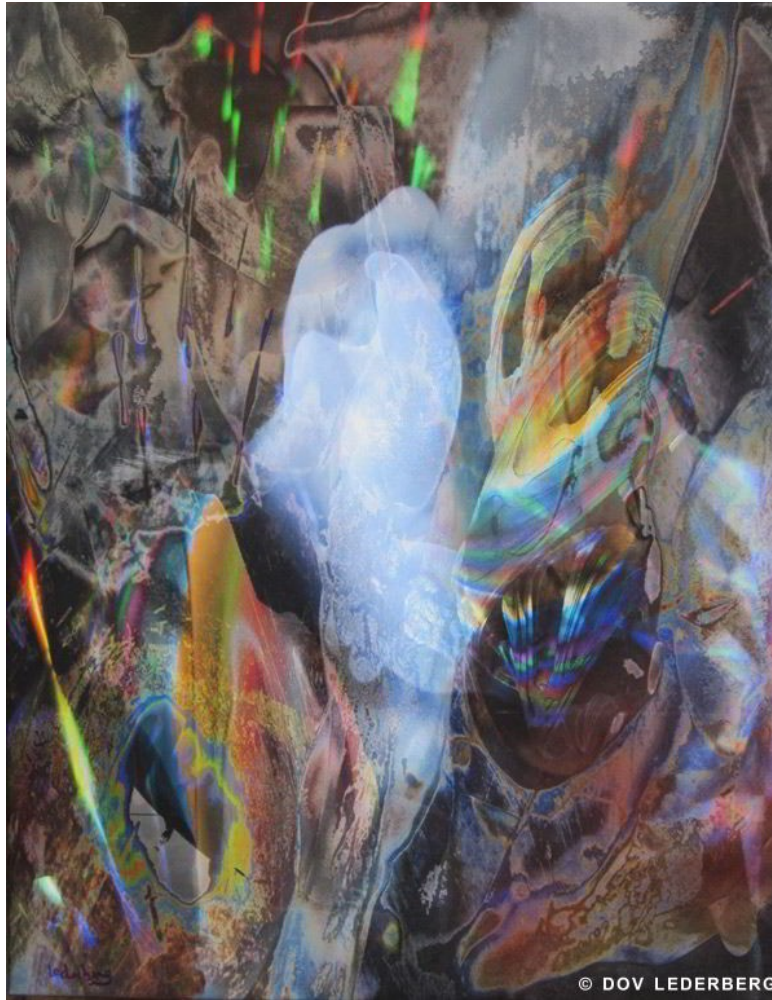
Many of the paintings in this series relate to hidden personal episodes. Lederberg described to me the presence of a “demonic” looking dog that he and his wife Yael once had that was the source of many disagreements at times and the painting below is an expression of this.

Lady Walking Her Dog



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 40" x 30" (102 x 76 cm)

There is also a motif of a kind of eternal paradise or damnation, as demons and angels lurk here and there. Yet in his "[Songs of Resurrection](#)" paintings there is a sense that the turmoil and the tumult will end, and all will be well, the slime and mire will transmute as in an alchemical magical dance into a higher order of being.



airbrushed acrylics on canvas 36" x 28" (92 x 71 cm)

Flowers that open, soft whites upon whites with acidic, expansive primaries surrounding suggest a consciousness on a higher level of being or quantum. For we know not what it will be like in the Future, just as a new born has no inkling while in the womb of a new realm of living that awaits it or the dreamer on the precipice before waking from his slumbers. What then is real?

In fact, it is to the credit of the artist that he is able to create a surface that feels and looks as if it is a kind of substance, as he titles one of the paintings in this series – “Getting Visceral”.



airbrushed acrylics & mixed materials on canvas 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)

I cannot help to think, after conversations with the artist that the past of one who returns to Judaism after being estranged, is forever carried by the artist – past hurts and loves, dreams unfinished and pathways explored or not explored. Actually, Lederberg preceded his time by forty years. Being a “pioneer” and a “bridge between cultures” can be very frustrating. Very few within his ultra-Orthodox community understood what he was doing and the secular world and galleries in Israel who may have had a sensitivity to art looked at him and his works with disdain, as being too “religious” or even too “Jewish” for them. Now the situation on both sides may have improved somewhat and Lederberg is beginning to receive the recognition he deserves. Hopefully, he will not have to wait another forty years!

There is in his work and life not only an intellectual intent to convey an idea or principle, but an emotional reality, even a sensual and highly physical aspect. His abstraction then is as much a response and expression of his life and feelings as it is a recoil into another world, beyond the humdrum and ordinary and the pain of an all too human reality.

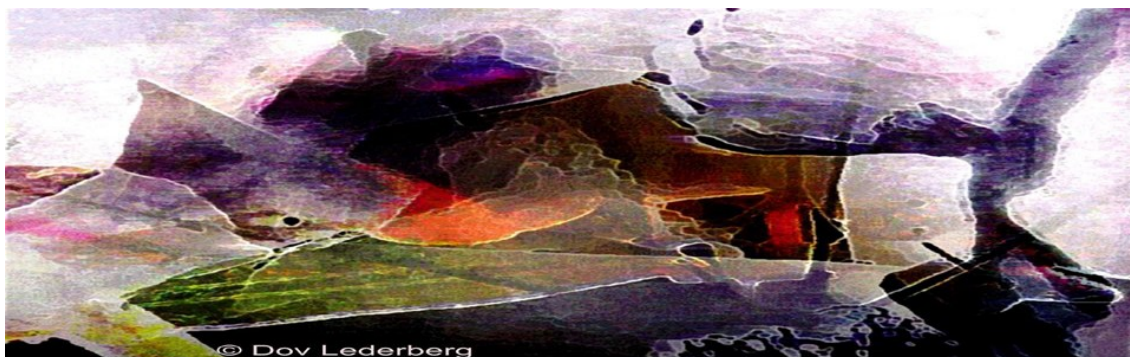
So his “getting visceral”, this imagined impression of physical reality was perhaps not quite enough for Lederberg and one may surmise this led him to the following series of works where I believe he has found a certain mobility and freedom, even though he may not be as physically robust as in days of the past, hauling large canvases from place to place and between exhibitions. Even so, his body may take flight.

His latest series then may be interpreted as a flight into unknown worlds, but the way he paints, the colors and altered consciousness that attend his work, necessarily relate to the narrative of his life. In this case, I would suggest that this latest series is concerned with a flight that attempts to transcend the past.

He calls the new group “**Tzfassers**” along with the **Returning Light** which will be commented upon afterwards ([Link to paintings](#)) and works very well. Quicker to execute, on polymer emulsion material and with less activity than most of the works, it allows the eye to rest. Paint drips; texture is clearly visible, and the colors are dreamy and almost metallic. They seem freer, allowing chance and serendipity to occur and I feel they reflect more calm. They are less descriptive, rather its abstract nature allows a sort of soothing effect and a sense of the amorphous substrate of the initial periods of creation, before form, before even galaxies, stars and certainly planets.

The name of this series “Tzfassers” (a local Yiddish appellation to the “old-timers” who live in Safed) perhaps captures the sense of this small town. A town where little miracles occur; where people who went through bereavement or divorce start again in middle life and where historically many great Kabbalists have treaded. Actually many generations from his mother’s side since 1860 were born and raised in Safed and are buried in the old cemetery there which he painted.

The Tomb of the Ari



White Sun Setting over Meron



polymer emulsions on canvas 27 1/2" x 19 1/2" (70 x 50 cm)

They, the paintings at least, seem less complicated – sensual, yet contained - as streaks and circles form and reform. Gone are the hard edges; gone is the surreal portal into another land. There is only the here and now – the flick of paint, the yellowness of yellow – a gestalt of but a few elements. This pruning down works and in the stillness of painting, in the holding of the image that is static, the sound and fury and courage of previous work gives way to a less technical, a less sophisticated, simpler reduction of elements. This is no criticism. For me it portends to something akin to a new beginning for the artist.

Yet behind the play of color and abstract form, most of the paintings were influenced by events that relate to his personal life. However, since Lederberg is creating **art** and not a diary, they must have an universal appeal.

הרפא לשבורי לב - He Who Heals a Broken Heart



polymer emulsions on reflecting surface 27 1/2" x 19 1/2" (70 x 50 cm)

In the above, for example, there is a hint of a heart (Psalms 147: 3) referring to the worrisome time when the artist was told he may need a stent operation. One can see then a reference to pipes and valves and a sort of pumping from one ventricle to another.

In a more whimsical vein he mentions the influence of needing to wear a CPAC breathing mask at night to counter his sleep apnea in a painting he calls "Love in Outer Space"



acrylics on canvas 33" x 33" (84 x 84 cm)

A perennial theme in Lederberg's work is the magic and what he terms - the very mystery of conception and fertilization. It may also suggest how the

body's vulnerability and one's sense of mortality converge to impel the artist to express that he can find freedom through play and creativity.

Conception



polymer emulsions on canvas 31 1/2" x 24 1/2" (80 x 60 cm)

One sees in these works a kind of reference to sperm cells and the ovum. For it is precisely the love and death dance of the sexual act that eventually culminates in a new life, which is akin to a kind of resurrection. One senses the presence of angelic forms as the genetic code of this new life is, so to speak, put together.

The Dance of Life



A different reading from Lederberg's past is his "Grace Hoper", a playful reference to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (on which he planned to do a Ph.D. thesis before entering film-making). One sees the form of the grasshopper executed with the same free hand.

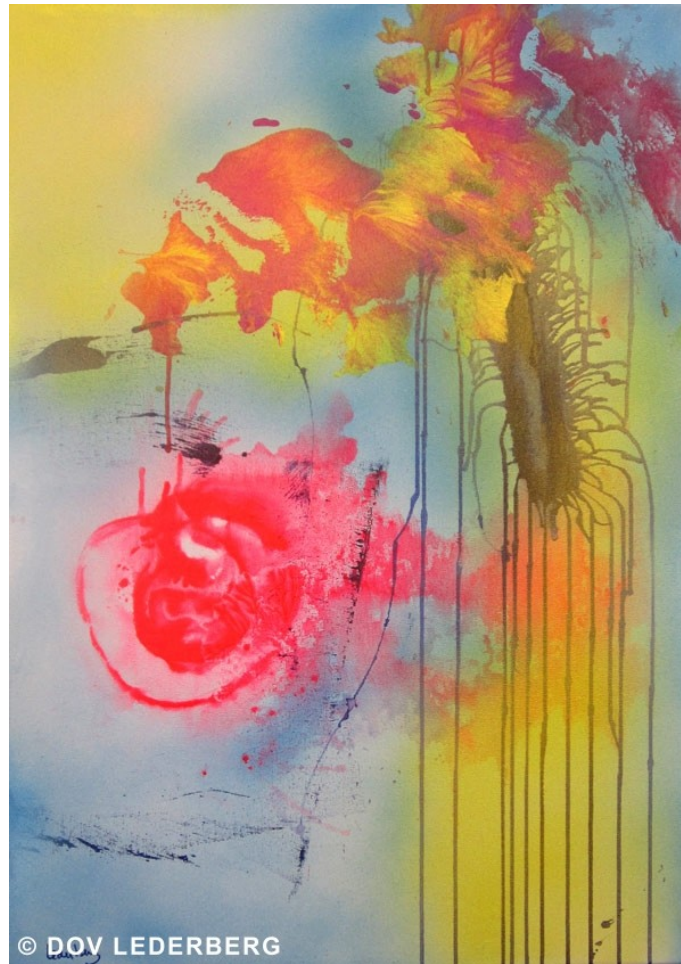


polymer emulsions on canvas 27 1/2" x 19 1/2" (70 x 50 cm)

Perhaps there is an allusion to an insect like resilience in the face of the tumult of existence. Moreover, that this seeming innocuous insect may be both positive as it rids one's space from certain undesirables or a plague reeking devastation on farm lands. So, one hopes for grace.

Looking at the Tzfassers as a whole, one senses a musical calm. Deep space is evoked, rather than the geometries of symmetry and the hard edges that invariably his use of stencils and cut out forms produce. There is content. However, other than simply being visual music, there is a sense of forms

undergoing change, like passing clouds or transformations such as the caterpillar that transmutes into a butterfly - again a potent metaphor for the Resurrection.



© DOV LEDERBERG
polymer emulsions on canvas 27 1/2" x 19 1/2" (70 x 50 cm)

Lederberg is intensely interested in such changes, in the capacity to enter – if one be worthy – a new dimension, to be reborn, as it were, in a new mode of being. However, there is also something quite apt about the phrase “visual music”. When one listens to music, a narrative need not be conjured. One need not see a scene, remember something, recall a film or the like. It is just *that* sound or combination of sounds that arouse a certain feeling or motivate a train of thoughts or better yet, imply and evoke an unnamed sense of awe and mystery. So, such colors and shapes and degrees of saturation or texture, whatever the case may be, may evoke such impressions. It may also soften the mind, so to speak, to lead one in flights of thought. In this context Lederberg suggests how to envision the whole universe:

“Neurotransmitters of the Soul. Inspired by images of brain cells under the microscope as well as “similar” Hubble photographs of the galaxies. The macro being reproduced in the micro, inviting the meditation that the entire Universe is the Brain of the Almighty.”

In which case all creatures, humans included, are like little cells, synapses, or pulses of energy within a grander scheme.



polymer emulsions on canvas 31 1/2" x 24 1/2" (80 x 60 cm)

His “**Returning Light**” **אור חוזר** series,- ([Link to paintings](#)) in the style of Tzfassers suggests a certain ambient space with Miro-like squiggles on the cusp of form, again with polymer emulsions, but now painted on reflecting surfaces, such as mirrors, to create a shimmering "returning light" effect that emanates from the work, constantly changing colors and contrasts.

Self-Portrait of the Artist in a Mirror



polymer emulsions on mirror 38 x 28 cm

Instead of art being a “Mirror of Nature”, the aim is to return the spiritual light back to its Source, to be a “Mirror of the Divine Energy“ that infuses nature in the first place. This reverses much art aesthetics especially of the past in terms of the canon of art history as well as the predictable “Sunday painters” subject-matter. That is, instead of art as mimesis, as responding to nature as is, like a third order Platonic copy, Lederberg insists on recreating and reflecting the

inherent energy of nature or within nature and the self in order to redirect such a light back to its Source, rather than be a kind of shadow of nature or painting in order to represent nature. Realism gives way; even Surrealism gives way and the abstract field is all there is. Unlike Jackson Pollock who regarding his large canvases quipped that "I am nature", Lederberg circumvents the natural and attempts rather to "shine back" the energy in nature to its spiritual origin, rather than simply being determined by the myriad details of apparent reality.