Mira Lehr's Artistic Plea for the Planet

by Nancy Novick

Lehr's "Pandora's Blossoms," 2021, for which she employed burned and dyed Japanese paper, acrylic, ink, handwriting, and resin in addition to ignited fuses and gunpowder on wood panels. The piece was part of the *Mira Lehr: Regenerative Rhythms* exhibition at the Deering Estate in Miami this fall.

Looking out over her Miami garden to the intracoastal waterway, activist and artist Mira Lehr '56 has a front-row seat to the effects of global warming. Although her house hasn't been affected yet by the rising of coastal waters, the lower part of her property has flooded during recent storms. "We're seeing an influx of jellyfish, a sign that the water is getting warmer," she says, "and the fish are developing odd markings and look unhealthy."

Lehr has been sounding the alarm about damage to the environment for decades, both in her paintings and, more recently, through multimedia installations in the hope that others will understand the urgent need for change. Her work is driven by a unifying philosophy: "I try to show the beauty of nature so people will fall in love with it and realize how close we are to losing it." To achieve this effect in her two-dimensional creations, Lehr employs a unique blend of materials and

two-dimensional creations, Lehr employs a unique blend of materials and techniques, including Japanese paper and colorful inks laid down on canvas, then set alight with fire and gunpowder to leave a pattern of burn marks. She credits Chinese-born artist Cai Guo-Qiang with inspiring her use of explosive material. "It's all about [capturing] the beauty of nature, but this [technique] adds another more ominous element, the other side of creation: destruction."

In her 2020 show, *High Water Mark*, staged at the Mennello Museum of American Art in Orlando, Florida, Lehr included a number of these works. This exhibition was selected by *The New York Times* for the prestigious, annual Museums Special Section, showcasing the editors' top picks of museum shows around the country. But she also created an immersive experience that brought visitors into a labyrinth of mangrove trees constructed primarily from stiffened marine rope. The trees, which protect the coastline against hurricanes and other storms as well as serving as nurseries for aquatic life, are currently threatened by rising sea levels.

During this show, she was on hand to hear visitors' responses directly. As she had hoped, "it was very affecting, because people walked through it, physically interacting with it. They were engulfed in these big sculptures; they felt a sense of nature pressing in on them." The sense of connection with nature was extended elsewhere in the exhibit, with a video installation of crashing waves mounted on one wall, while sea creatures floated in glassy resin panels suspended from the ceiling.

Lehr's innovative use of scale and space to prompt an emotional and intellectual response is characteristic of her work. At a site-specific installation at the Jewish Museum of Florida, visitors pass under an aerial garden of luminous, reflecting sculptures. This installation was donated to the museum's permanent collection by Dr. Robert Feldman of New York, and is valued at $300,000. For another recent show, she created a sculpture in the shape of a wave and incorporated special halide lights that help grow coral in the laboratory setting to communicate the worldwide devastation to coral reefs and the hope that it can be repaired.

Although she had always been interested in nature studies, Lehr traces her real awakening to environmental issues and humankind's use and misuse of resources

to her involvement in the World Game scenario in 1969 in New York City. Lehr was one of only two artists selected for this summer-long program led by innovative thinker and inventor Buckminster Fuller. "We had just landed on the moon and we were so optimistic," she says. "We viewed ourselves as being on this spaceship—Earth—and talked about how we're all limited in this finite environment and how we have to treat it as such."

Lehr, who was by then a Florida resident, had spent time in the New York City art scene in the mid-1950s after graduating from Vassar with a degree in art history. Her arrival during the height of the abstract impressionist movement had an enduring effect on her. Although she enjoys representational art, she feels that "abstract work gets closer to the essence of things."

Visual artist Mira Lehr in her studio in Miami Beach, FL, where she often uses ignited gunpowder and fuses on wood panels to create her work.

Upon returning to Miami, where the vibrant art scene of today was still many years away, Lehr continued to paint and sculpt and gradually found a growing audience of admirers. Today, her paintings and sculptures are part of numerous international museum and private collections, and she is busier than ever. In October of this year she opened a solo show, *Regenerative*

One example: "Emerging from the Field of Reeds," 2021. Created during the pandemic, it asks viewers to examine their relationship to nature in a post-pandemic world.

Rhythms, and in December her work will be featured at several art fairs and events during Art Basel Miami Beach. Artbook publisher Skira Editore will release a 450-page monograph on Lehr's oeuvre and her place in American art in early 2022.

Now at the age of 87, Lehr maintains that her first commitment is to making "good art," but her identity as an artist and an activist appear inseparable. With the renewed international commitment to ending the worldwide dependency on fossil fuels, Lehr is feeling more sanguine about the future these days. But her sense of urgency persists, both for herself and for the planet. The same ideas that inspired her early in her career are still fueling her creative endeavors. "We have limited finite resources," she says, "and the best thing we can do with our planet is to learn how to use them efficiently, and do more with less. We're in a race to get it resolved before it's too late. The clock is ticking."