

Projects 53 : Oliver Herring, Leonilson : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 18-March 12, 1996

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53

oliver herring
leonilson

projects

**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

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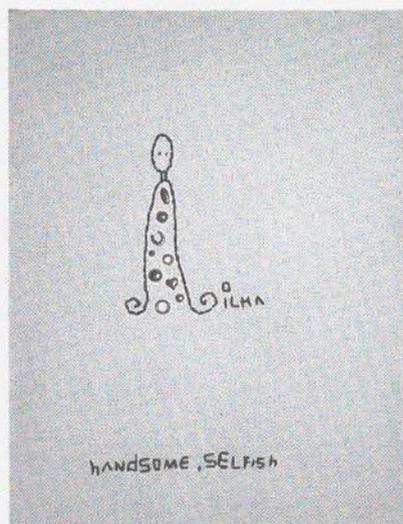
Oliver Herring and the late Leonilson are artists of different backgrounds who have approached art-making in similar ways. While both are indebted to the formal inventions of Minimalist, Conceptual, and Process art, their works arise from highly personal, emotional impulses rarely manifested in those earlier movements. Transforming mundane materials through their own handiwork into ethereal, elegiac panels and sculptures, Herring and Leonilson have focused on loss and mortality in the era of AIDS.

Herring, a German-born artist who lives in New York, had been primarily an abstract painter until 1991, when he began a project called *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, an homage to the actor, performance artist, drag queen, and playwright who committed suicide in 1990 after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. The first work in the project was a giant flower made of Scotch tape. Searching for a way to come to terms with Eichelberger's death, Herring learned to knit and has added to the project by knitting nonwearable clothes, objects, and panels from transparent tape, silver Mylar, and paper. A solitary and repetitive activity, knitting is traditionally undertaken out of the desire to comfort or protect a loved one. As Herring's knitted coats and panels lie on the floor or hang from the wall, they quietly suggest desire and mourning through the absence of an implied human presence. The artist has said, "Although the project is a personal meditation on the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time that meaning is transformed into a metaphor for AIDS in general. And since each piece is made through the cumulative process of knitting, every stitch is (like the overall project) both a measure of commitment and time."¹

Leonilson (born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias), a Brazilian artist, began making artworks from stitched or embroidered fabric around 1989. He spent most of the 1980s as a painter and draftsman known for his colorful figurative paintings and simplified, sometimes ironic or politically based pen-and-ink drawings.² Leonilson's approach to art-making was always autobiographical, and his inclination to sew came from many sources. He was born into a Catholic family in Fortaleza, and his background included the arts and crafts, popular religion, and *cordel* literature of northeastern Brazil.³ His father was a cloth merchant, and Leonilson spent many childhood hours among remnants in his mother's sewing room. In later years, he was inspired by fellow countryman Hélio Oiticica's *parangolés* (cloth capes worn in performances), by Eva Hesse's knotted sculptures, and by the complex, meticulous tapestries that Arthur Bispo do Rosário embroidered with thread from his uniform during the almost fifty years he spent in and out of a Rio de Janeiro mental institution. Leonilson's delicate, crudely stitched panels are related not only to the conceptual investigations of twentieth-century artists like Hesse and Oiticica, but also to the obsessive impulses of "outsider" artists like Bispo and to the tradition of nineteenth-century American fabric

samplers, in which religious inspiration and moral instruction are combined with stylized narrative and decorative motifs.⁴

Ultimately it was his own personal and spiritual circumstances that compelled Leonilson to focus on sewing and that make the embroideries from his final years his most poignant and soulful works. In 1991 Leonilson learned that he was HIV positive. Between that year, when his illness forced him to give up painting and sculpture, and his death in 1993, he concentrated on stitching panels and embroidering pieces of fabric with personally symbolic words and images. Often this activity was like making entries in a diary or writing a love letter. Several of his works were created as gifts for friends, tender offerings to people who were special to him. Sometimes he used cloth they had given him, sometimes pieces of his own clothing. With this body of work, mostly intimate in scale and content, the artist crystallized many of the themes that had preoccupied him throughout his artistic life: abandonment, the expression of love, the fragility of the human body. The awareness of an imminent end compelled him to delve more fearlessly and honestly into these private obsessions.

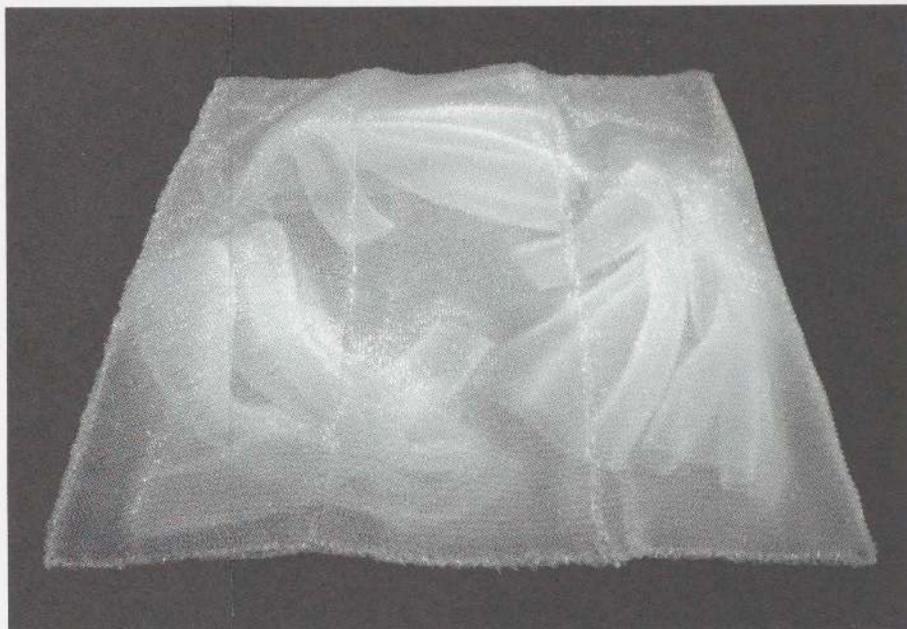


Leonilson. *O Ilha (The Island)*. 1990. Embroidery and mixed mediums on canvas, 13 3/4 x 10 3/4". Collection Raquel Nosek

O Ilha (The Island) (1990) is typical of Leonilson's use of small, simplified shapes combined in a largely empty space with a few words or symbols that have a personal, evocative resonance. The central image in this work is an abstracted lighthouse. At the bottom, Leonilson stitched the words "handsome, selfish."⁵ In the Portuguese title, *O Ilha*, the artist paired a masculine article with a feminine noun, as he did in several other works (the correct combination would be *a ilha*). This change implies that the image refers to a person, most likely the artist or someone he knew, who is like an island, isolated and lonely. Leonilson embraced the image of the romantic rebel or outsider, and while at times he could be reclusive, he also enjoyed traveling and made frequent trips to Europe and the United States. While *O Ilha's* title suggests solitude and separation, the lighthouse is a romantic

symbol for the light that safely guides a traveler through a sea of darkness. It is a sign of hope, salvation, or sanctuary. Lighthouses, towers, and other vertical constructions are recurring motifs in Leonilson's oeuvre. Beyond any phallic or figurative references, they are images of transcendence, associated with the artist's search for the sublime.

Herring too has explored the metaphoric implications of an island in his work. He created *Raft* as part of a 1994 installation called *Island*,⁶ but he has said that the raft itself is also an island.⁷ Three coats knitted from transparent Mylar are encased in a large mattresslike shell made of the same material. Cast away and left adrift, they seem to exist in a ghostly state of limbo. Though nestled together in their diaphanous cocoon, they remain somehow abandoned and alone. This effect of isolation and loneliness is heightened by the use of clear Mylar, which, while seductively glittery and see-through, also suggests fragility and immateriality. Discussing *Raft*, Herring has said that with "the play between the materials and the light . . . the piece always changes. You'll never exactly see the whole thing, you have to walk around it. And while one coat appears in front of you, because of the way the light works, another coat disappears. You have three coats lying in a circle, and it's this thing that comes and goes, almost like life."⁸



Oliver Herring, *Raft*, 1994. Knit Mylar, 10 x 88 x 88". Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

The idea of disappearance is related to a fear of disintegration evident in works by both artists that incorporate imagery of scars or wounds. In Leonilson's *34 com scars (34 with Scars)* (1991), a small white panel of fabric has been stitched all around the edges with black thread. The rest of the piece is empty except for the number "34"—the artist's age at the time the work was made—and two small scars, also stitched in black and crusty underneath from the application of a small amount of acrylic paint. Like many of the works from the last two years of his life, each element is minimal yet highly charged, in part because of the surrounding empty space. The use of sheer voile also conveys a sense of longing and impermanence, and the near absence of color accentuates the notion of dematerialization, both of the work and of its creator.

In Herring's *Wounded Knee* (1995), a seated figure made from knit silver Mylar bends down in an effort to mend an unraveling hole in the stitching at his knee. The figure's childlike proportions add to its pathos and vulnerability. One of Herring's first knitted figures, it possesses an anxiety and tension in marked contrast to the passive serenity of the coats and panels. Whereas those earlier works are memorials to a being or action that has already passed, this figure is an animated personification of the fight against disintegration.

Although their works are related to those of other contemporary artists who have explored the loneliness, fragility, or pain of the human condition,⁹ the process-oriented nature of Herring's and Leonilson's works adds a temporal element that heightens the sense of mortality. These handcrafted objects, dependent upon and suggestive of the time and meditative quiet necessary to produce them, are evidence that both artists have used their art to come to terms with issues of desire, loss, and healing. For Herring, the repetitiveness of the knitting



Leonilson, *34 com scars (34 with Scars)*, 1991. Embroidery and acrylic on voile, 16 1/4 x 12 1/4". Collection Theodorino Torquato Dias and Carmen Bezerra Dias



Oliver Herring. *Wounded Knee*. 1995. Knit Mylar, 34 x 30 x 30".
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

process underscores the passage of time, both affirming life and reminding us of the inevitability of death. "Every moment I knit," Herring has said, "time is accounted for. I associate certain pieces with certain events; it is as if the events themselves were knitted into the work."¹⁰ The aesthetic product is secondary to the experience of making it. "The actual object becomes almost like a remnant of a performance, whereas whatever happened to make this is the [important] thing. [Knitting] allows me to engage in a thought process. . . . It becomes about me learning how to experience myself in a way that I wouldn't otherwise."¹¹

Leonilson similarly explained that the process was therapeutic, almost spiritual: "My work is not as important as the apprenticeship. It is really important to learn from what you do."¹² He added, "I get very tired. Work helps me. I put all my energy into it. It keeps me from fading away. I keep doing these works like prayers, in the same way as the Hindus embroider. . . . My work is guided more by this feeling than by [a]esthetic values."¹³

In dealing with intimate experiences like fear, suffering, and grief, Herring and Leonilson turned to traditionally feminine practices as alternatives to the "fine arts" of painting and sculpture. Although many aesthetic choices today are understood to be influenced by issues of identity and informed by revisionist critiques of the history of art, Herring's and Leonilson's approaches are more personally than politically motivated. In the 1970s, many women artists, such as Harmony Hammond and Miriam Schapiro, created works derived from the domestic environment as a feminist challenge to the distinctions between so-called high art and applied art. More recently, artists like Mike Kelley and Rosemarie Trockel also

have used needlework as a deliberate subversion of traditional notions of sexuality or of painting. Herring and Leonilson, addressing more private concerns, have employed such techniques to explore their own existential condition. Their efforts to deal honestly with certain ineffably painful issues are especially moving when post-modern irony and skepticism are the postures of the moment.

The temporal, metaphoric, and aesthetic issues surrounding the use of craft techniques are perhaps most concisely conveyed by Leonilson's incorporation of the words "O Penélope" in two of his works. The artist again placed a masculine article in front of a feminine noun, which in this case refers to the wife of the Greek hero in Homer's *Odyssey*. At the beginning of the tale, Odysseus is presumed dead because of his continued absence long after the end of the Trojan War. Penelope is surrounded by suitors whom she repeatedly puts off with the excuse that she must first finish weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. Each night she secretly undoes her day's work. As an allegory of patience, faith, and hope, the story of Penelope has an obvious appeal for anyone confronting an unacceptable fate. The image of a weaver working all day only to unravel her work at night also points to an existential absurdity that resonates through the process-oriented work of Oliver Herring and Leonilson. A seemingly futile making and unmaking is also the desperate, hopeful, regenerative attempt to cope with the present and forestall the future.

Starr Figura

Curatorial Assistant

Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

1. Oliver Herring, artist's statement, in Nina Felshin, *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1994), p. 40.

2. For biographical information about Leonilson and many insights into his work I am grateful for my numerous conversations with Lisette Lagnado and Regina Teixeira de Barros of the Projeto Leonilson, São Paulo, as well as for their texts in Lagnado's *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths* (São Paulo: Galeria de Arte do Sesi, 1995).

3. *Cordel* books are rhyming folktales sold at street markets.

4. In Lisette Lagnado's interview with the artist, Leonilson says he saw the exhibition *Shaker Design* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York around 1986. He expresses admiration for the narrative aspect of the Shakers' embroidery and the range of uses they found for it (see Lagnado, p. 85).

5. Leonilson used different languages somewhat indiscriminately, including Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French. The choice seems to have depended partly on the musicality of the words or phrases.

6. *Raft* was one of several knitted works that rested on the banks of a large mound of sand in Herring's installation at the Space Untitled Gallery in New York City in 1994.

7. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among others, whose works involving issues of the body and the spirit have become especially prominent in recent years.

10. Herring, quoted in Maurice Berger, "A Monument for Ethyl," in *Oliver Herring* (Mannheim: Mannheimer Kunstverein, 1993), p. 7.

11. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.

12. Leonilson, quoted in Lagnado, p. 116.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Special thanks to Lilian Tone for introducing me to Leonilson's work and for her help with translations from the Portuguese.

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oliver herring

Born Heidelberg, Germany, 1964. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

B.F.A., Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford University, England, 1985–88

M.F.A., Hunter College, New York, 1990–91

selected exhibitions

- 1995** *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
Color in Space: Pictorialism in Contemporary Sculpture, David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University, Providence
Construction in Process V: Coexistence, Artists' Museum, Mitzpe-Ramon, Israel
- 1994** *Island*, Space Untitled Gallery, New York
Guys Who Sew, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara
- 1993–96** *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art*, The Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase
- 1993–95** *Ciphers of Identity*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore
- 1993** *Oliver Herring: A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger/ Bedding*, Mannheimer Kunstverein, Mannheim
A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

leonilson

Born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias in Fortaleza, Brazil, 1957. Died 1993. Lived and worked in São Paulo

Studied at Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado, São Paulo, 1977–80

selected exhibitions

- 1995–96** *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths*, Galeria de Arte do SESI, São Paulo
- 1995** *Infância Perversa—Fábulas sobre a Memória e o Tempo*, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, and Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Salvador
Art from Brazil in New York, The Drawing Center, New York
- 1993–95** *Cartographies*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- 1994** *Brasil Século XX*, Fundação Bienal, São Paulo
Projeto Leonilson, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, and Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo
Brazil: Images of the 80's & 90's, Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, D.C.
- 1993** Galeria São Paulo, São Paulo
- 1992** *Hien, Leonilson, Ebinger*, Pulitzer Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1989** *Fabio Cardoso/Leonilson/Daniel Senise/Luiz Zerbini*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo