

Leslie Neumann: The Happy Activist  
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One of the benefits of being an institution that has been around for a century is the ability to develop deep relationships with our regional artists. Showing an artist's work and the trajectory of their practice over a period of time is one of the Morean's strengths and privileges. In her third solo exhibition at the Morean, Leslie Neumann continues to stun us with her vision and her staying power as an artist. She is indeed a success story—an artist who paints what brings her joy and is able to make a sustainable living from her craft.

Leslie Neumann herself is a study in contradictions. She was raised in the bustling NYC area, but now finds peace and solace in a small fishing village on the west coast of Florida. She is a consummate, meticulous planner, yet she gladly surrenders to the will of her unpredictable medium of choice: encaustic. She is an outspoken advocate of land conservation; however, she wields her paintbrush as a microphone and her luminous paintings as protest signs.

"Manna from Heaven....and Earth" started out as a protest, of sorts—the artist using her paintings to express frustration over our current unsettling times. In "Winds of Change," one of the first paintings in this series, her usual vibrant colors and joyous brushstrokes are replaced with a more somber palette. Dark storm clouds roiling in the sky mirror the neutral hues of the landscape below. Is this a dying land? Or a terrain coming back to life, as seen in the sparse bright green and lavender tones? For Leslie, hope springs eternal.

This attitude is what brings us to this exhibition today. As much as Leslie wanted to make this a show about troubling times as reflected in nature, she just couldn't do it; couldn't resist the beauty that surrounds her in her stilt home on the Gulf—or the sheer joy she gets from a colorful "accident" on the panel. And so, the first paintings in the series, with their ominous undertones, made way to a new dawn, if you will---the raucous colors and irresistible beauty of nature.

They say you catch more flies with honey, and in the end, this exhibition does succeed as a kind of protest. If you ever thought about land conservation and wondered why it was important or whether you should care about it—one only has to look at these paintings to see what we stand to lose. Sometimes a beautifully and lovingly crafted work of art speaks louder than a megaphone.