

Homo Ludens THE BOXPOEMS OF ANNE-MARIE LEVINE

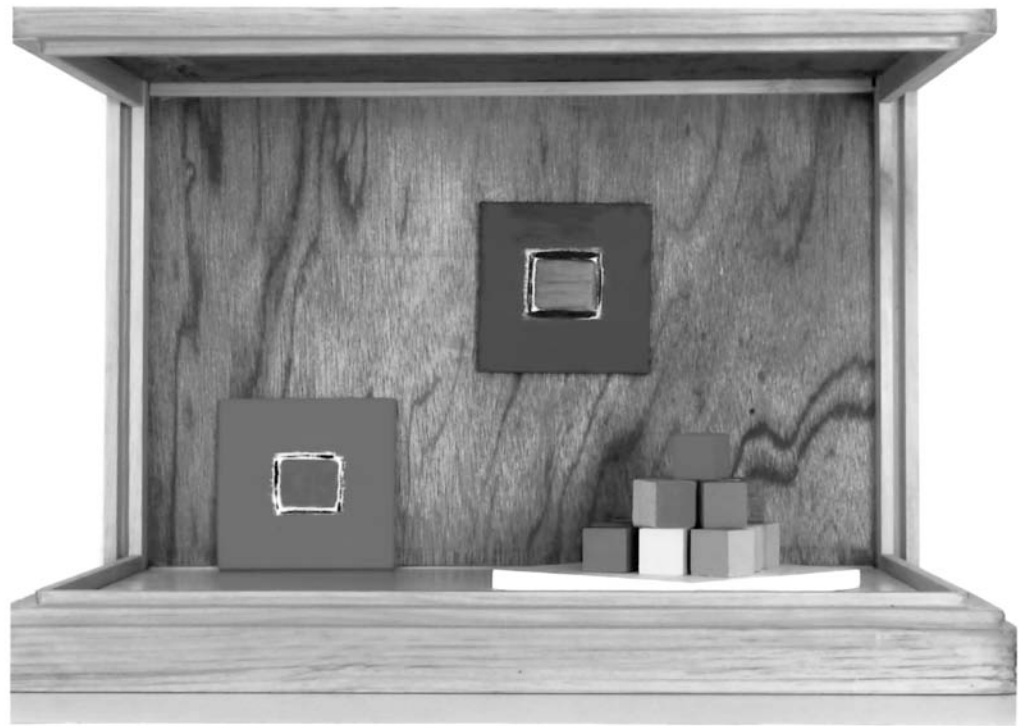
By Lise Motherwell

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.

—D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

ANNE-MARIE LEVINE is a pianist, poet, and now, a painter born out of a period when she found that words no longer could fully describe her experience. Described as a moody child, she moved to the United States from Belgium's grey skies to the "swimming-pool blues" and colorful flora of Beverly Hills, where she fell in love with the light and color of California and the painters Diebenkorn, Matisse, Miro, and Bonnard, among others. Her love of color and light led her to want to create a different kind of art from the music and poetry she had made in the past.

Anne-Marie's work, rather than moody, has a playful quality, exploring both color and texture—not only of her materials, but of life. During a period when she was not writing poetry, she made her first visual works: miniature paintings, empty sculptural painted boxes, and dollhouse boxes she called "Boxpoems," as if they were a three-dimensional extension of her poetry. Constructed with acute attention to detail, her boxes incorporate and recontextualize aspects of her life, and evoke projections from the viewer. Just as dollhouses of childhood allow for the playing out of intrapsychic and relational conflicts, these



BOX WITH TWO PAINTINGS, 2004, MIXED MEDIA, 10.5H BY 15.5W BY 10D INCHES

miniature rooms arouse memories, fantasies, and yearnings. The royal blue captain's chairs on the stark white sandpaper terrace of a Santorini cave dwelling suggest Mediterranean seas, warm days, heated sex, and the freedom of summer days.

A persistent theme in her work is an examination of the boundary between interiors and exteriors. In *Otherwise Engaged* a room is set up with a chair and coffee table facing a wall with a large view of the outdoors—a castle in the background, a river in the foreground. The box puns on the boundaries between what's inside and what's outside. It plays upon the past and the present—the outdoor scene could be a painting or a window; the modern furniture is contrasted with the image of an Irish castle. Are we inside or outside, in a time of yesterday or now? What is real and what is imagined?

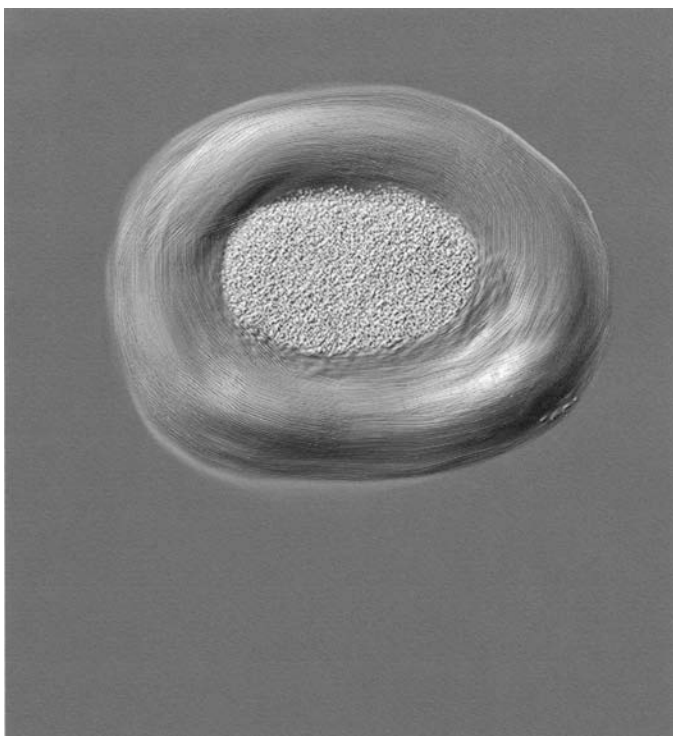
Such meta-questions are similarly raised by Escher drawings in which endless iterations betray our notion of up and down, beginnings and endings. A more complex rendition of inside meets outside is *La Condition Humaine*, an homage to Magritte. Placed inside a house interior are outdoor cement patio furniture and an old woman seated on a park bench. She is looking

out the window at fields and trees. The contradiction of outdoor furniture inside is both evocative and humorous—the viewer's projections onto the dollhouse scenes allow for interior exploration (i.e., one's inner world) as well as the exploration of space, color, texture, placement, and composition.

The miniature paintings (three by three inches) that hang on the walls of a living room or gallery have since escaped the boxes and become works separate from the context of rooms. Levine writes, "The boxes are . . . a context for the colors and shapes that please me and that I wish to see around me. In the same way, the miniature paintings are a way to give shape to the colors that I love, so that I may have constant access to them." While the actual paintings are small, the colors and textures are not—they evoke strong feelings but require, like the small paintings of Tabitha Vevers, the viewer to step in close and become intimate with the images. Since the paintings are small, she has found ways to "float" them in frames, often in a series.

Recently, Levine discovered that she could "paint" on the computer. She began with a kind of tinkering or doodling. As she became more fluent, her play often evolved into something more serious. She would then work through it, to see what the possibilities for variation were. "At that point, it's not play anymore," she said. "Although it is a great pleasure for someone who loves color and texture to have so many possibilities instantly available."

She creates her digital prints on British paper from her computer paintings. The ease of use of the computer paint program and the ability to erase without destroying an image allows a



GRAY III, 2007, DIGITAL PRINT, 11 BY 14 INCHES, LIMITED EDITION

freedom she could not find in traditional painting. Like her early paintings, her first computer images were an exploration of color—various colored squares, stripes, and rectangles juxtaposed and centered on black backgrounds or within black borders. Then she returned to the flowers of her childhood, rendering line drawings of flowers in vases. Over time, the paintings became more fluid and abstract—she experimented with rough edges and swaths of color reminiscent of Rothko paintings (Rothko was a close friend). The two-dimensional images did not completely satisfy, so she began to explore the use of texture in the paint. These early paintings, such as *Sandbar #7*, include studies of stacked brushstrokes, one above the other. Each pigment reflects light in different places suggesting thick stripes of wet oil paint on pockmarked cement. She also created a series of circular paintings, suggesting, once again, flower images, but adding a sexual dimension. The texture and depth of color is sensual and sculptural; one wants to touch the painting's surface.

Some of the more interesting pieces are those abstractions rendered in black or grays. A show of these pieces at Sarah Lawrence College in February this year was entitled, "Sex, Death, Abstraction." Sex and death are themes Levine has explored for years, first in the dark musical pieces she played and then in her poetry. The title evokes a dark mood, but these images surprise and delight. Their sculptural quality makes them feel as if they are coming out of the paper like living, breathing creatures trying to escape the confines of the background. When she adds color, the images become ever more playful. In *Metamorphosis 2*, two circles, one grey and one a startling pink, encompass tiny grains of black juxtaposing the smooth, shiny surface of paint against the rough black. These paintings appear to be abstractions of earlier three-dimensional objects. The black grains hearken back to earlier explorations of texture as in the painted sandpaper in the Santorini Boxpoem.

Even in her darker pieces, unexpected humor shows up in Levine's work. Two phallic-shaped objects, crossed like dueling swords, evoke an *affaire d'honneur*, but their furry texture suggests two teddy bears duking it out rather than soldiers fighting to the death. A vase of black flowers against a grey background seems both funereal and mischievous. These contradictions in Levine's work illustrate the model of true playfulness that Erik Erikson described as a "leap": "To truly leap, you must learn how to use the ground as a springboard, and how to land resiliently and safely. It means to test the leeway allowed by given limits; to outdo and yet not escape gravity. Thus, wherever playfulness prevails, there is always a surprising element, suggesting some virgin chance conquered, some divine leeway shared. Where this 'happens,' it is easily perceived and acknowledged."

The poet Anne-Marie Levine has surprised us with her adroit leap into painting.

LISE MOTHERWELL is a psychologist who practices in Brookline and supervises at Massachusetts General Hospital. The daughter of a painter, her work focuses on the relationship between play, creativity, and art.