



Eugene Lemay, *After-Sight 1*, 2012, Inkjet print on archival paper, 59" x 74"

## **Navigating the Deep** **Eugene Lemay at Mike Weiss Gallery in New York City**

**by Jeanne Wilkinson**

At first glance, Eugene Lemay's images in *Navigation* appear like visions; you imagine falling into them like Alice through a very dark looking glass. Dark rectangular holes float on the wall, some showing natural landscape forms like mountains looming in the distance, others with striated grayish bands flowing laterally across the velvety darkness, dim veils of mist that glow but do not illuminate. These pieces are not paintings but very large prints done via the computer. Unframed, they are

affixed to the wall with wheat paste, which creates the extraordinary effect of the white wall ending and a hole of darkness beginning, emanating a kind of magnetic force that draws you in.

I am familiar with black paintings – they always exude a kind of sublime power to me. While at the retrospective of Ad Reinhardt at the Museum of Modern Art some years ago, the last room in the exhibition, filled with black paintings, appeared to be a place where darkness had become locked

into itself – no entrance, no exit, impervious to our presence. His black grids taken singly are spare and elegant apparitions of warm/cold relationships, but in groups seem an endgame. Mark Rothko's black and gray paintings, after his litanies of soft and flowing colors, seem nothing less than the loss of hope. The bright, sunny palette of Margery Edwards, the Australian artist whose estate I handled for many years, went dark upon moving to New York City, and she became immersed in the ideas of Christian mystics and concepts like the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Her darkness was a place where all things merged into a tectonic arena of contemplation and revelation.

But no one owns the darkness – no person, deity, or theory. It is limitless, the most pervasive aspect of the universe, and as diverse in its meanings and ramifications as the world of light. In Lemay's work, the more you look, the more dynamic his darkness becomes, as if the act of looking itself activates these fields with positively charged energy. Looming shapes and streaks of light fill our vision and make us want to understand what they reveal.

Born in 1960 in Michigan, Eugene Lemay emigrated to Israel as a young teenager with his large family, all of whom converted to Judaism. Israel requires three years of military service

from its male citizens at the age of eighteen and two from females (with certain exceptions). This was a very different life from the one he would have had in the United States, and it has obviously fueled his artistic vision in numerous and profound ways.

The inspiration for *Navigation* springs from his time as a soldier, when he was sent out to explore the terrain at night, with no lights. Before going out, he would study aerial strips of the area to be explored, and his ultimate quest was to memorize the land so that even on a night with no stars or moon he would know it implicitly, intimately, with no mistakes or noise. But these artworks seem less about war than

about an elemental connection to the earth: Lemay's search approximates a child re-entering a dark womb, all senses engaged.

In my understanding, this involvement with darkness is a sensory experience that is both embraced and embracing – one must open up to all the information available in this environment, to form connections that are impressed deeply into the landscape of the mind while becoming overtly known and recognized by the senses. It would seem there is no point in being frightened, because fear would only serve to close off important synaptic functions – one must be fully engaged in a way that has no parallel in everyday



Eugene Lemay, *Solo 1*, 2012, Inkjet print on archival paper, 120" x 240" (304.8 x 609.6 cm)

life. Perhaps, in a way, it's like learning to be blind, wherein all the other senses, smell, touch, hearing, become amplified. But sight is still part of this experience, a sight that has also become enhanced, able to register subtle tone-shifts on a night of muted starlight, or the changes brought about by silver moonlight throwing objects and landmarks into strange and sharp relief.

Upon a closer look, the surfaces of his prints are covered with tiny silvery marks, linear forms that appear to give a slight relief texture to the surface, but in actuality do not. This optical illusion is an artifact of Lemay's working process and herein lies a vital aspect of the work: it is made of layers and layers of letters, some written in Hebrew and some with Arab script. Letters in two senses of the word, the imagery is script and also handwritten correspondence (never sent) to the families of men who were in the war on both sides. More than simply being an inspiration, Lemay's experience in the Israeli army has become, in a way, the imagery itself. This is also where Lemay's choice of medium becomes especially meaningful, as he uses the computer's capacity for subtle layering to build up a dense scrim— the more layers of script, the deeper and darker the imagery.

Lemay knew soldiers in his own unit who died in the war, and he wrote letters to their families. He also wrote letters to the families of fallen soldiers from the other side, perhaps trying to find a way to comprehend the darkness created when human beings, for all their logic, for all their religion, still feel when they must go forth to kill and be killed. However, he never sent any of these letters, and now they have become the *raison d'être*, the building blocks, the underlying force behind and within these large compositions. The layers of words build and as they do, they lose their clarity – the more letters, the less comprehensible and darker the imagery becomes. Yet we are tantalized into trying to make sense of it all, as if by peering deeply into the surface and



*Eugene Lemay, Scrawl, 2012, installation of six iPads with looping video in a case of wood, glass and canvas, 36 x 108 x 18 inches (91.44 x 274.32 x 45.72 cm). Edition 1 of 3*

sorting through the layers one by one, we could also dismantle the war, untwist the threads and webs that make these deadly battles necessary.

But the script remains impermeable, impenetrable, an intractable tangle, even more so than the dark landscape that Lemay used to explore. Stepping back from a close view we receive again the big picture: microscopic tangles fade and blend to become on the one hand a pervasive darkness, and on the other a vision of the real, physical world formed when all these individual units merge as one.

Lemay began his art career as a man in his mid-thirties, and before becoming an artist, he was a highly effective businessman. He now belongs to both worlds, business and art, and this rather unusual combination appears to work well for him. One of his latest projects has been to form the Middle East Center for the Arts (MECA) where

Jewish and Arab artists will work together on mutual projects. MECA is based in Mana Contemporary in Jersey City, NJ, an arts center and art storage facility built out of an old tobacco factory, also one of his recent projects. Not surprisingly, much of Lemay's work on the *Navigation* series was done well into the early morning hours, in, appropriately enough, the darkest time of the night.

*Navigation* leaves us with a vision of dark and light with all its inherent metaphorical implications. It is a darkness that alludes to the natural world, the one that comes and goes as our world spins on its axis; it is also about a darkness rooted in the human mind that lingers under the sway of far less calculable rhythms. This is a realm that Lemay both shares and hides, ultimately leaving us to explore on our own, to discover our own way through the darkness.