



# Larger Than Life: A Journey through Shimon Okshteyn's Art that Skewers and Reveals

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by Kelcey Edwards

It is already dark when I turn down the long, dark driveway leading up to the Southampton, NY studio of [Shimon Okshteyn](#). Though the studio was hard to make out from the wooded road, a wall-sized, black-and-white photorealistic image of a nude lying face down on a large swath of black fabric is visible through the window of the studio from the driveway, and I realize *this must be the place*.

I am greeted by the artist's wife, Tatyana, an established gallerist and art dealer, and Okshteyn's longtime partner. Shimon Okshteyn was born in 1951 in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, where he graduated from the renowned Odessa Art Institute; he has lived and worked in the U.S. since 1980. Tatyana pours us a shot of vodka and—after introductions, an awkward joke about how hard it would be for the KGB to find the studio, and a brief toast—we make our way to the art.

The first thing that strikes me is the diversity of Okshteyn's work. In the main room there are: two large found object and canvas sculptures on pedestals; the graphite photorealistic piece I saw from the driveway; a colorful graffiti and screen printed mirror; and a large, monochromatic still life interrupted with globs of colored paint in a decadent silver frame.



Shimon Okshteyn's work in studio. Image courtesy of the artist and Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

Okshteyn, a multimedia artist who has exhibited widely since the 1980s, is no stranger to the established art world. Over the past 15 years, his work has been reviewed in such notable publications as Artforum, ARTnews, The New York Times and New York Post. He has had solo exhibitions at OK Harris and Stefan Stux in New York City, Triumph Gallery in Moscow, and now Janet Lehr Fine Arts in East Hampton, NY. His works are in several permanent major museum collections, most notably in the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, and his work has sold successfully at Sotheby's and Christie's, among others.

Despite Okshteyn's broad reach and acclaim, the "Magical Realism - POST POP" show at Janet Lehr Fine Arts is his premiere solo exhibition on the East End of Long Island. I have been eager to visit the artist's studio to get a behind-the-curtain glimpse of the range of work Janet Lehr drew from for the show. I am also hoping to gain some insight into the personality of an artist who, even after meeting him several times, still seems elusive and intriguing.

"Magical Realism - POST POP" at the East Hampton gallery features a sampling of the artist's previous creative manifestations and some newer works referencing landscape inspired by his life in the Hamptons. Gazing around the art in Okshteyn's studio, and I am curious to know if I can surmise the driving force behind Ms. Lehr's selections.



"Beyond Belief" by Shimon Okstheyn, 2010. Mixed media on canvas.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

We pause before the sculptures, which I note have a Magritte-esque sensibility to them with their compositions of canes and bowlers hats. "Yes, of course," Okshteyn agrees, and I recall his acknowledgement of frequently referencing previous art movements in his own work during an artist talk he gave during the Southampton Arts Center's exhibition "[East End Collected](#)." In that show, curated by [Paton Miller](#), Okshteyn's painting *Stillife with Damien Hirst Diamond Skull* exemplified this approach of appropriation in the spirit of re-contextualization.

In a subsequent visit to Janet Lehr Fine Arts, one of my personal favorite pieces on view in "Magical Realism" was an art work that reads as a study for the aforementioned painting, titled *Stilllife - Damien Hirst* (oil & graphite on canvas, 54 x 72 inches). In this piece, the charcoal sketches and notes on raw canvas gave me a sense of seeing the artist's mind at work, but in the larger-than-life way for which Okshteyn has become known. A perfect example of this would be the five-foot-tall sculpture *Comb* (papier mache, 69 x 11 x 17 inches) installed at the back of the gallery at Janet Lehr Fine Arts.



"Comb" by Shimon Okshteyn. Papier mache, 69 x 11 x 17 inches, in "Shimon Okskteyn: Magical Realism - POST POP" at Janet Lehr Fine Art. Image courtesy of Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

In his studio, leaning against a post beyond the sculptures is a graffitied and screen printed mirror,

a colorful and compositionally chaotic piece that seems like it could have been made as easily in the '80s as in more recent decades. In the layered ferment, one glimpses the partially-obscured face of a nude woman and fragments of other images that build a visual narrative of a sexual encounter.

He informs me it is one of the newer works in his studio, and when I visited the gallery the following week I learned that Janet Lehr had selected two other works from this series for the show: *Reflection #9, Mirror with Vase* (graphite on canvas with mixed media on mirror, 80 x 98 x 36 inches) and *Reflection #12* (graphite and charcoal on canvas with mixed media on mirror, 80 x 92 x 55 inches).



“Reflection #9” by Shimon Okshteyn. Graphite on canvas with mixed media on mirror, 80 x 98 x 36 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

Across from the mirror in the studio is the large-scale, photorealistic graphite drawing of the nude I saw from the road. This one, unlike many of the other pieces stacked and leaning against surfaces, is strikingly mounted on a well-lit wall.

“I have photographer friends who have come to see it and swear to me it is a photograph,” Okshteyn boasts.

[Ken Johnson of The New York Times](#) described the realism of the series as “technically impressive” in a review in 2003. Just beyond the drawing I see the small stage with the black fabric draped over it where models—like the one in this drawing—came and posed.

Okshteyn’s art has been described in writing as a master of various styles: a “master colorist,” a “master of composition,” a “master of academic drawing ... of painting ... of realism.” He is, no doubt, a virtuosic artist. But most impressive to me is how, since his early days in the U.S., the artist has been a keen observer of his strange, new environment, expressing his reality through a changing variety of techniques and methodologies. Whatever his approach or technique, he is always balancing between the high and the low, the internal and the external, while playfully referencing the narrative of art history—even his own place in it.

I first met Okshteyn at the 2018 Parrish Art Museum Spring Fling. A mutual friend introduced us at the event, and when I told Okshteyn about my awareness of his work, both from Janet Lehr’s previous group exhibition “[Valentines & Art: Together Forever](#)” and the aforementioned “East End Collected” exhibition, he promptly exclaimed that I was “a genius.” Beyond finding it wonderfully and typically narcissistic of an artist to decide my awareness of his work makes me a genius, the tongue-in-cheek way he delivered this line—with the same wry, almost deadpan humor behind much of his work—convinced me that we would no doubt become fast friends.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Okshteyn suggests that we check out the work upstairs. In the lofted second level of his studio, the walls are lined with books, and the shelves are dotted with framed pictures of a young, hip Okshteyn, long-haired and moustached, full of mirth, confident and daring. Displayed along the banister is an erotic series of photographic collages of reclining models with him standing before them in old age, nude and masturbating. “What am I going to do?” he asks, shrugging, by way of explanation: “I am an old man now.”

I am left contemplating the many layers of these works: the raw exploration of sexuality among the elderly; our culture’s fascination with youthful ideals; the shift of the audience’s “gaze” to include both the artist and the muse; the twist on a classic theme to include the stigma of perversion; and the universality of masturbation of different kinds: sexual, creative and intellectual.

Reflecting on the works selected for the show at Janet Lehr Fine Arts, I was struck by a common theme that resonates with the works in his studio: The exhibition is a survey, of sorts, of pieces that seem to both reference and skewer art historical traditions. This kind of visual humor and intellectual sensibility no doubt has particular appeal to Janet Lehr, an art world legend in her own right who lived through several of these movements and who has deep, personal connections to their many players.

Beyond the quality and range of the work, it is the pairing of the two—the lens through which Okshteyn views the experience of American culture coupled with the lens through which Lehr views Okshteyn’s oeuvre—that makes “Magical Realism - POST POP” one of the “not-to-miss” art shows on the East End this summer.



“Shimon Okshteyn: Magical Realism - POST POP” at Janet Lehr Fine Art. Photo by Janet Lehr. Courtesy of Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

As formidable a challenge as it is to summarize the visual world of such a prolific and versatile artist, in the case of Okshteyn it was perhaps best summarized by art critic and Pratt Institute faculty member [Dominique Nahas](#), who described the artist’s visual universe as “unusually stimulating because [of] its fastidious craftsmanship, strong compositional formats and unusual mixtures of materials [which] lead to an inner world whose range is as complex as it is unpredictable and varied ... A coherent yet surprising use of thematic material, a richness of invention, and a systematized buildup of narrative: all of these aspects make Okshteyn’s work irresistibly attractive to the eye—a haptic feast laced with megatonic power.”



“Perfumes,” oil and graphite on canvas, 68 x 54 inches, and “Flemish Series

(Green),” graphite on canvas with handmade frame, 80 x 90 inches, by Shimon Okshteyn in “Magical Realism – POST POP” at Janet Lehr Fine Arts. Photo by Janet Lehr. Courtesy of Janet Lehr Fine Arts.

Through the windows in his studio, I see the tall trees of the forest surrounding his house. I recall him telling me, almost confessionally, that for an artist not the least bit interested in landscapes, he suddenly noticed an arresting tree formation near his home, and the next thing he knew he had embarked on *Hamptons Landscapes 1-5* (photographs with oil paint and enamel, 7 3/4 x 5 5/8 inches), *Southampton Polo* (60 x 80 x 24 inches, oil on canvas with umbrella) and *Hamptons Landscape* (oil on canvas with collaged reeds, 53 x 69.5 inches).

All of these were selected for the exhibition, and Lehr was no doubt keen to showcase them, not just as a new moment in Okshteyn’s broad oeuvre, but also as a point of connection to so many other art world luminaries who have lived in the area and, at some point or another, been seduced by its natural beauty.

After flipping through a few more studies on paper, and trading a few more stories from the art world and beyond, we bid our farewells as it is growing late, and despite the thoroughly charming company of the artist and his wife, it is getting to be past everyone’s bedtime.

Backing out of the driveway, as the headlights sweep across the property, I notice for the first time a large-scale sculpture of Okshteyn’s installed in the grassy area outside the studio: a giant fiberglass sculpture of a woman’s shoe last (the form used by shoemakers in the repair and manufacture of shoes). I recall the poetic finale of the Nahas quote above, “a haptic feast laced with megatonic power,” and think to myself that if a giant sculpture of a woman’s shoe form at the edge of a forest at night as seen from the flash of headlights is not the epitome of that analogy ... well, then I don’t know what is.



Shimon Okshteyn and writer Kelcey Edwards in the artist’s studio.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Shimon Okshteyn: Magical Realism – POST POP” is on view at Janet Lehr Fine Art from May 26 to June 13, 2018. A selection of Shimon Okshteyn’s art remains on view in the gallery’s Project Space through July 7, 2018 in conjunction with “Light of the Hamptons: Works by David Demers and Haim Mizrahi.” For information, visit [www.janetlehrfineart.com](http://www.janetlehrfineart.com). Janet Lehr Fine Art is located at 68 Park Avenue, East Hampton, NY 11937 in the Starbuck’s passageway.

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