

LESLIE LANZOTTI  
*THE FRANKENSTEIN FILES*

Leslie Lanzotti has worked for me for almost fifteen years, first as a student assisting me as I taught a painting class, as well as showing up once a week for clean-up day to help me reorganize my mess of a studio. In 2001 I landed a large commission with DFW Airport and hired Leslie full-time for three years to assist me with the project. She worked very hard and was very dedicated to the success and completion of the “Cosmic Big Bend Landscape” painting. While working on the project, I first posed the question to her about what she might paint after we finished the project. Without hesitation she replied that she has always wanted to do a series of paintings about Frankenstein. I was amused by her answer at first, wondering what they may be like as paintings. Leslie’s first show at Artspace111 was a series of paintings of Faces that was lost because of renovations. Her second attempt was a mix of faces and an interesting series of paintings about the JFK Assassination. I began to wonder if she would ever get around to her dream of painting Frankenstein.

Seventy-five years ago, *THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN* film was released, setting the benchmark for horror movies as well as pushing the envelope of Mary Shelly’s classic tale of man playing god. Leslie Lanzotti’s Frankenstein Paintings represent a new direction for her. Her examination of this cultural icon, as well as the distinctly fractured reality she paints challenges the way we see painting. On the surface of the canvas lays the emotional build- up of tactile paint that is applied with a bravado that is rich and reckless. The breakdown of information allows the viewer to have room for their own perception of seeing. The spontaneous nature of these paintings allows two separate forms of painting to exist on one canvas--the real and the abstract. Incorporated into this mix is the iconic subject that Leslie chooses to paint. Frankenstein represents the inner child in us that feels misunderstood and maligned by the world around us. Leslie has chosen the first two films, *FRANKENSTEIN* & *THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN*, as her resource for the images she uses in the paintings. James Whale, the director, and Boris Karloff both played a large role in deciding the look of Frankenstein. Whale studied the paintings of Rembrandt to influence the lighting for the movie. Frankenstein became the first Monster to appear in an all black attire complete with a dinner jacket, setting the dress code for the artistic social misfits of the future. In the first film, *FRANKENSTEIN*, Karloff portrays the young Monster with a heroine chic physique that is enhanced by his gaunt features and lanky movements, even a touch of PUNK. The Monster

could only grunt and scream frightening noises without speaking abilities; his stare was that of the walking dead. This young Monster was not altogether ugly or grotesque; he actually looked somewhat handsome, sporting a neat set of locks. The only disturbing parts of the Monster were his staples, stitches and electrical rods protruding from his neck. Still, he was enough to scare the hell out of the audiences that came to see the movie. The first FRANKENSTEIN was a huge hit which led to the sequel, THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN. James Whale was given a hefty budget by the studio and created a masterpiece. The Monster was finally given a voice and could speak, which humanized him. Karloff's portrayal was flawless and even evoked feelings of sympathy for the poor Monster. The contrast with the first film was that of the walking dead to a misunderstood fugitive fleeing persecution. Time had also added a few pounds to Frankenstein as well as a few more stitches and staples. The locks had been burned off and the natty jacket was now torn and frayed. The disheveled Monster was more animated and more human which gave him a pronounced presence in the film. The sets and lighting were pure theater, resembling the high art of a Federico Fellini film. The film was also an emotional battleground for the war between science and religion for the director James Whale. The scene of Frankenstein running through the grave yard is shrouded in religious irony as the Monster seems to plead for salvation from Jesus on the cross to pushing over a pope-like statue that obviously represents Whale's disdain of the Catholic church. Another touching scene is where the blind hermit welcomes the frightened Monster into his humble hut and offers him food and shelter as well as a friend to trust. The Monster is overwhelmed with emotion because it is the first time anyone has shown him that he is accepted and loved without reservation. Jesus again appears in this scene on a crucifix hanging on the wall behind the Monster as he is offered water from his new friend who seems to cast him in a halo of light that gives him a religious presence in the film. Let's not leave out the angry mob of torch bearers who chase and bind the Monster to a post in a scene that reminds one of Jesus being crucified to the cross. The references to Jesus in the film are a subconscious portrait of both the director James Whale and his religious issues. Leslie's paintings likewise seem to push both religious issues as well as the cultural icon of the misunderstood Monster to a colorful pallet that mimics a black and white photo that seems to have changed color. Her choice of color is a dynamic exploration of the relationship of hues within a spectrum that relate to the overall primary color of the painting. These paintings also possess a luminous presence of light against dark, something that seems to glow much like a Rembrandt painting.

- Dennis Blagg