

The Many Facets ^{of} Dennis Leri

by Melanie Zobian

Artist Dennis Leri could be best described as the man of many facets in the East End art world. Leri provides East Enders with works in many media—all both powerful and arresting. The artist's own home studio is frequently turned into a forum for art classes where having fun, trusting oneself, and experimenting are the guiding principles in creating art. And beginners are welcome.

"The 'introspective guy' in me really loved this one," said Leri with a devilish glint in his eye as he showed one of his latest paintings. 'Introspective guy' is the creative force in me, the idea man. The piece fit in perfectly with his hatred of structure, of rules, of people telling him what to do.

"I'm still waiting for the right moment to show it to the 'business guy' in me," he added. "Business guy' is the one who has to be the parent in me. He tries to constantly ruin 'introspective guy's' fun. But I absolutely need both of them."

Sitting in his sunny studio in Springs (considered one of the East End's major artist colonies for more than 50 years), Leri isn't your usual artist. He's not wedded to one single medium, but works as a sculptor, welder, painter—as well as a teacher and storyteller.

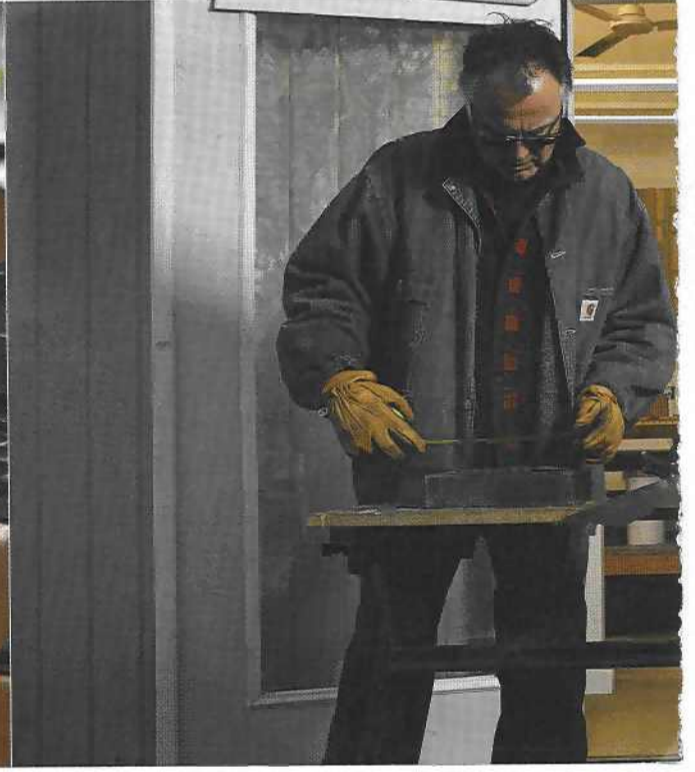
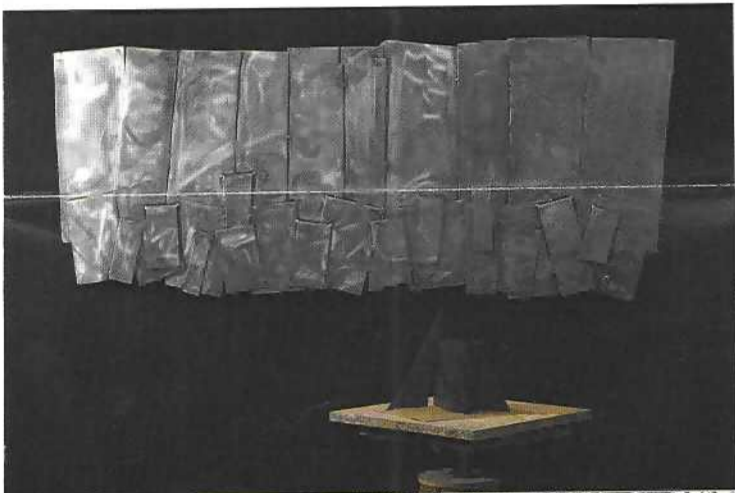
"My father never told people what I did for a

living," he said. "Well, actually, that's not true—he did tell people what I did but in his mind I wasn't an artist, I was an accountant. Or a doctor. Or a lawyer. Or a computer software engineer."

Leri's love of art came from his uncle, a true Renaissance man who used his GI Bill benefits to attend Pratt. He passed along what he learned to young Dennis and his sister, as they wiled away their days in the comfortable neighborhood of Bay Ridge, the place that instilled Leri's lifelong love of water—and his need to be near it. These sessions ultimately led Leri to pursue his own artistic dreams, and led his sister Lorraine (also a Pratt alum) to open Lorjon Studio with their uncle. Here, the pair would teach painting to adults.

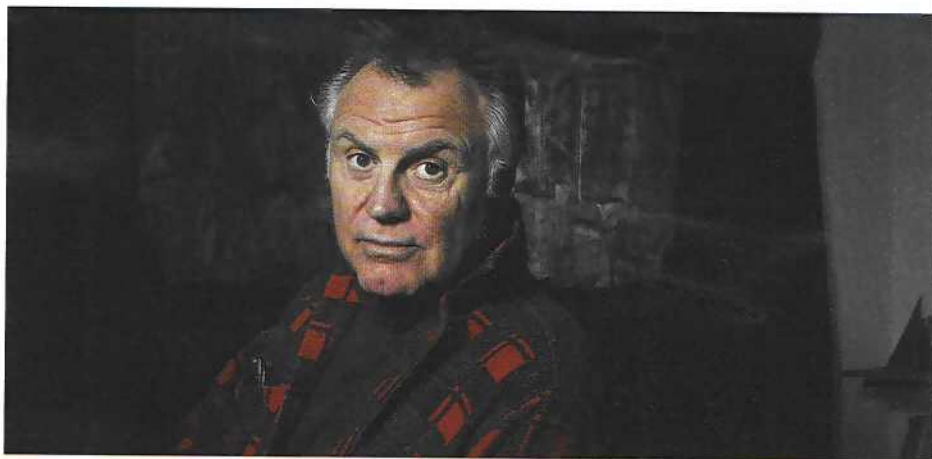
A Style Develops

One of the major sticking points in school for Leri was the constant pressure to adhere to the styles and methods set down by the art



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Photography by Francis Catania



instructors for their students. There was little room for improvisation and breaking out. Only when traditional technique was mastered were students "released into the wild," according to Leri, free to take what they'd learned and create on their own.

His own style ultimately evolved from representational figure sculpture to abstract sculpture to mixed media conceptual sculpture. He also paints and often creates works combining both disciplines. "My objective is to create works without being restricted by any one discipline or material," he explained. "I let the materials and ideas guide me simultaneously."

By choosing materials as he works, Leri has produced what he believes are his most creative pieces—whether mixed media sculpture, metal sculpture, paintings or maquettes for future outdoor sculpture. His creativity knows no bounds, literally—he may weld outside then paint and

assemble manipulated pieces inside, using any or all of the techniques to create a work.

Prized Pupils

In addition to his total commitment to creating his art, whatever it takes, Leri is passionate about teaching. "I have worked as a guest art instructor at a number of elementary and high schools and have had teenagers attend my studio workshops, but currently I teach regularly scheduled "Your Creative Source" workshops in my studio throughout the year to adults, some of whom are established artists themselves." Leri remembered one student in particular.

"It was the third week of this class I was teaching—a group of nine-year-olds," he said. "And there was one boy who would sit in the corner and just break things. Finally, I gave him a Styrofoam cup and told him to make whatever he liked with it. Well, I came back about an hour later and he had shredded the Styrofoam into tiny pieces, but had gone on to assemble them

into the most delicate composition. It was amazing. To have a child who seemed to be outwardly hostile create something of such intricate beauty was absolutely astounding, shocking, inspiring."

Leri's students have a deep respect for him and he has profoundly affected their artistic appreciation. Betty Lipton, an East Hampton artist, first met him nearly six years ago while attending the Art Barge on Long Island, the summer art school founded by Victor D'Amico, Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art. She was initially attracted to Leri's program because it was focused primarily on working with mixed media rather than within one discipline. Since then, Lipton has not missed a class.

"Dennis has a way of teaching that is so gentle—you never feel pushed or pressured," she said. "He has allowed me to go beyond my artistic boundaries and to fully express myself. He considered me an artist



