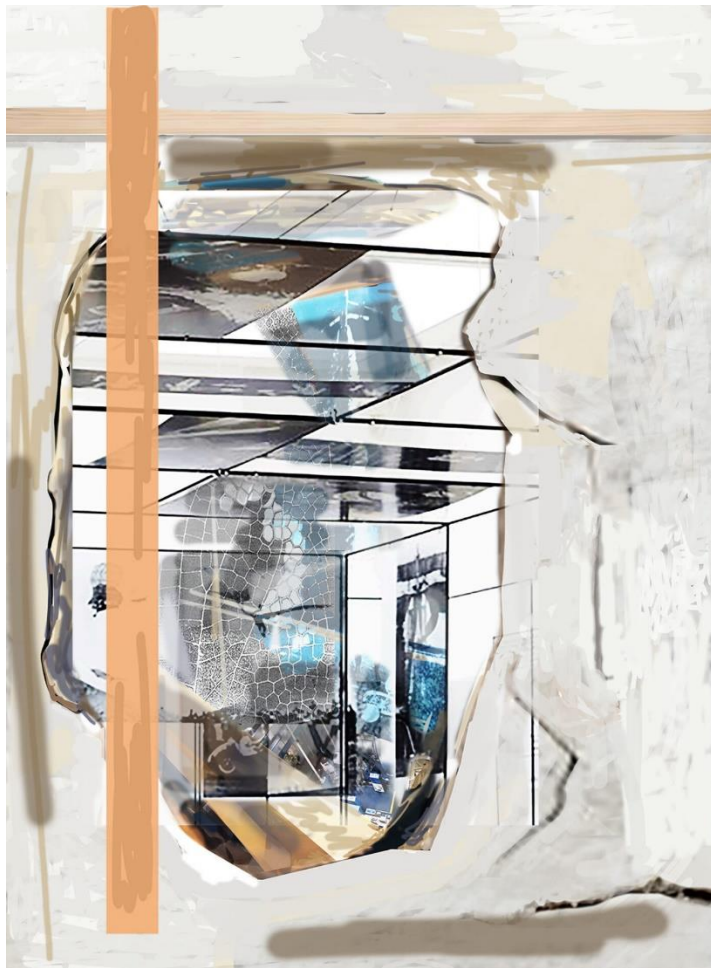


# Ellen K. Levy by Leslie Wayne

**Art that engages with science and archives.**

**June 24, 2024**



Ellen K. Levy, *Excavation 1 B*, 2023, mixed media including paint, print, balsa wood, 29 × 23.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

*Part of the Women by Women series.*

I have known Ellen Levy for nearly forty years and always thought that one of her signal achievements was the way in which she's placed art and science on a level playing field. Her mixed-media paintings, installations, prints, drawings, and videos always grab one's attention as arresting works of art on their own merits, while exploring scientific and technological concepts that are scholarly and in line with current discourse. In 2021, Bloomsbury Press published an anthology she co-edited with Charissa Terranova entitled, *D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's Generative Influences in Art, Design, and Architecture: From Forces to Forms*. I spoke with Levy about her [solo exhibition](#) at the Tower Foyer Gallery and D'Arcy Thompson Laboratory in Dundee, Scotland.

Leslie Wayne It's exciting to see that your long involvement with D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's ideas has resulted in an exhibition where his famous collection is actually housed. Tell me about the concept for your show.

Ellen K. Levy Thanks, Leslie. Several augmented reality (AR) videos have been installed in D'Arcy's laboratory, and images of specimens within the laboratory trigger them to run! These videos cross-reference artworks I am showing at the nearby Tower Foyer Gallery. My show, *Seeing Through*, is curated by Mathew Jarron, curator of museum collections at Dundee, and in it I render imaginary tours of D'Arcy's natural history collection visualized as if it's an excavation crashing through the walls. It's a site-specific, mixed-media installation that includes prints, painting, and AR. Real and depicted objects are juxtaposed within depicted excavations, including specimens from D'Arcy's collection. I reinterpret his collection, imagining it as if through the eyes of futurist author J. G. Ballard and the incomparable Pop artist Richard Hamilton. Hamilton was so taken with D'Arcy's book *On Growth and Form* that he curated an exhibition in 1951 in homage to it at London's Institute of Contemporary Art called *Growth and Form*.

I've followed in his footsteps by curating an exhibition influenced by Thompson's tome. This has enabled me to see D'Arcy's collection through multiple viewpoints involving evolution, fantasy, consumption, fear, and desire. I became so familiar with Thompson's book that it seemed more fitting to refer to him on first-name terms as D'Arcy. Many of the works in my show portray dizzying perspectival renderings of merged organic-machine hybrids, eco-catastrophes, and space travel richly alluded to by both Hamilton and Ballard. I conceive this as a speculative exhibition, evoking our synergistic and fraught relationship with technology—both our aspirations and its threats.



Ellen K. Levy, *Excavation*, 2024, mixed media including acrylic, print, balsa wood, industrial netting mounted on board and incorporated into an AR installation with a selection of specimens from the natural history collection, 50 × 41 × 26 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LW How wonderfully imaginative to explore Thompson's work through the eyes of a science-fiction writer and a Pop artist. How did you first become interested in Thompson?

EKL I came across *On Growth and Form* before attending college. My attention was riveted by its vast number of images, and I was especially intrigued by their frequent juxtapositions of living and nonliving matter. They formed indecipherable puzzles. Over time, I learned a great deal more about the book through discussions and reading about evolution. I was lucky enough to have several opportunities to discuss D'Arcy with Stephen Jay Gould, who had written a foreword for the republication of *On Growth and Form*. The question became why this book held great interest for many artists. The answer revolves around form. Largely bypassing Darwinian explanations of natural selection, adaptation, and evolutionary fitness, D'Arcy identified problems of form and growth as largely mathematical and physical. Matter and its transformations are D'Arcy's foundational ideas, and they increasingly persist throughout culture. With this focus on "forming," it is no surprise that his work speaks to many artists, architects, and historians, in addition to scientists. In more than a century since its publication, *On*



*Growth and Form* has commanded a large following across fields of science and the arts, myself included.

My project has been built from several components that developed over many decades; my current exhibition is the most recent. The earlier components included a solo show of drawings based on Thompson at Baruch College in 1982; my art residency at the D'Arcy Thompson Zoology Museum in 2014; participation in an international seminar where I met Philip Ball and several Thompson experts at the University of Leiden in 2021; the co-edited anthology you mentioned earlier that Bloomsbury Press published in 2021; and an exhibition I curated, *From Forces to Forms*, at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery in New York City in 2022. The culmination of all these activities enabled me to see and imagine *On Growth and Form* through the lens of so many others, bringing me ultimately to the idea for this show in Dundee!



Ellen K. Levy, *Messenger* (from the *Re-Invention* series), 2019, acrylic and gel medium over print composed from redrafted patents and inventions, 60 × 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LW That's quite a journey, which is no doubt ongoing. I think your involvement with the Leonardo Art and Science Evening Rendezvous (LASER) program is another way in

which you continue to explore science through other creative disciplines. Tell me about that.

EKL LASER was founded by Piero Scaruffi in San Francisco in 2009. Later that year, Victoria Vesna, Patricia Olynyk, and I held similar meetings in New York City at my studio every five to six weeks, save for summer months. Our aim was to assemble an intergenerational and cross-disciplinary community with others of similar passions. The LASER program clearly responds to a deep need, given that it has now expanded to over fifty cities and five continents worldwide. Each site has a different character. Ours is informal, and we run them on a dime, relatively speaking. But we've had scientists, scholars, a fractal specialist, artists, curators, choreographers, and a Nobel Laureate present their work. Many of the media artists attending the LASER program exhibit at international festivals such as Ars Electronica and the International Symposium on Electronic Art, as opposed to commercial art galleries. Since then, these two art worlds have merged. Along with the fact that LASER increasingly attracts younger practitioners, the varied backgrounds make for rich discussions about approaches to form and process.

It seems to me that art and science are continuing a process of coevolution. I have long admired—and repeated—an observation by Gilles Deleuze from an interview in *The Brain Is the Screen* that “the encounter between two disciplines doesn't take place where one begins to reflect on the other but when one discipline realizes that it has to resolve for itself and by its own means a problem similar to the one confronted by the other.”



Ellen K. Levy, *Untitled (Domino Theory)*, 2023, AR installation, wood board, 48 x 48 inches, chains, tripod to hold android with AR program installed, 8 painted prints, each 11 x 18 inches, a printed map on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 320 Paper, acrylic paint, dominoes, glue, 96 x 96 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LW That's a very nuanced observation. As artists, we often solve problems by taking ideas and techniques from other disciplines, if for no other reason than to simply have an experience of discovery. It's a kind of elasticity that is vital for growth. I would guess the same is true in the sciences in spite of the rigorous need for proof.

EKL I appreciate your emphasis on elasticity and vitality, Leslie. For me, your summary of the processes involved in aesthetic discovery ring true. Steven Johnson adds flesh to this process by singling out the notion of the "adjacent possible" that points to the need for synchronic circumstances in a given environment and time that allow ideas and inventions to actually reach fruition. Who else but artists and scientists would ask how a slime mold might serve as a model to reconfigure a city's transport needs? We live in an age that is generating powerful technologies and scientific insights that enable fresh, even exhilarating opportunities but carry high risk to life. As artists, we often create experiences that embody this dilemma.

## **“Who else but artists and scientists would ask how a slime mold might serve as a model to reconfigure a city's transport needs?”**

— Ellen K. Levy

LW Exactly. I think that's where parallels between artists and scientists are fascinating and generative. The freedom artists have to embody a dilemma for the sake of expression is unique. Your premise for *Seeing Through* is a wonderful example of that. You have a number of other shows you are participating in this year as well. What's going on?

EKL Yes, it's turning out to be a productive year. In September, I will have two works from my *Re-Inventions* series entitled *Colonization of Space* (2019) and *Portrait as an Astronaut* (2019) in a Getty-funded *Pacific Standard Time* exhibition called *No Prior Art* at the Los Angeles Central Library's Getty Gallery. The exhibition is about the nature of invention and the commons. And then I have a work in an exhibition that was in Armenia last year presented by the media-arts lab CYLAND, some of which will be traveling to the National Arts Club here in New York. My work in this show of mostly Russian expat curators and media artists who have fled Russia in protest of Vladimir Putin concerns the causes of migration due to flooding and political turmoil, both consequences of global warming. My piece, called *Untitled (Domino Theory)* (2023), consists of a platform precariously suspended from the ceiling upon which dominoes—stand-ins for homes—are positioned over maps along superimposed, painted migration routes. Viewers must

avoid toppling the structure, which when viewed through AR triggers a video that shows floods toppling the “homes.”

[Ellen K. Levy: Seeing Through](#) is on view at the Tower Foyer Gallery at the University of Dundee in Dundee, Scotland, until June 29.

*Women by Women, a series of interviews between women visual artists, is supported in part by the Deborah Buck Foundation.*