

An abstract painting featuring a central, flowing, blue form that resembles a liquid or a crack in ice. The form is composed of various shades of blue, from light to dark, and is overlaid with a network of thin, golden-yellow lines that suggest cracks or veins. The background is a solid, vibrant blue. The overall composition is dynamic and textured.

JAC LAHAV

BLUE SEEDS:
Reflections on Foster Care

Lyman Allyn Art Museum
August 26 - December 3, 2023



"Sometimes they come with shoes." Photo Courtesy the Artist.

JAC LAHAV'S *FOSTER PAINTINGS*

by Heather Bhandari

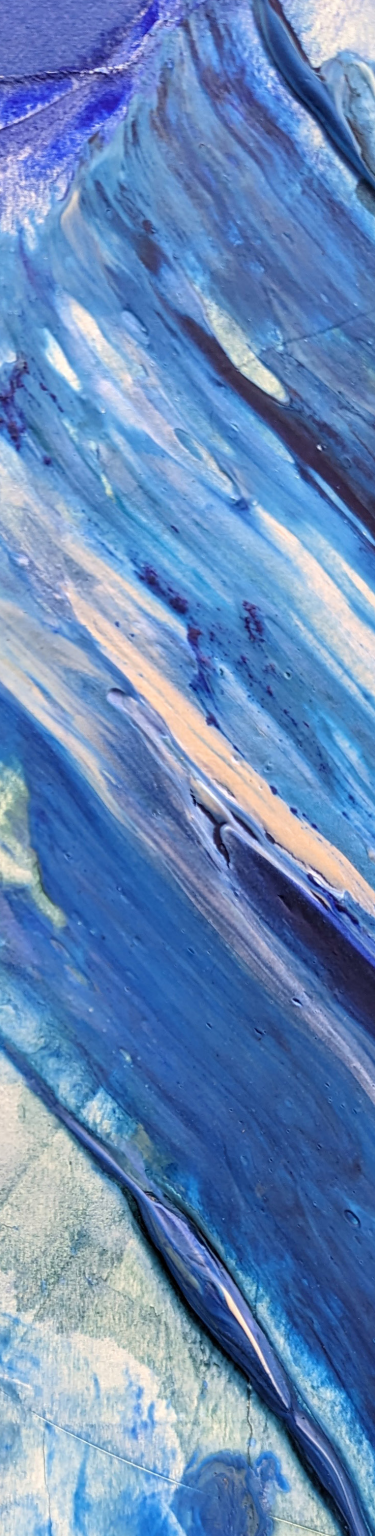
We tend to forget things. Forgetting can be a coping mechanism, a survival response, a way for the brain to prioritize what is necessary to move forward. It happens naturally and often, with only the most emotional and unique memories holding fast: firsts, trauma, triumphs.

It takes work to remember.

It takes effort to stave off the disillusionment and detachment that might develop when something has occurred over forty times and you're sleep deprived from caring for an infant. When you've been in contact with a government agency forty times and counting, that first call will be memorable, but the impact of each subsequent call decreases, sharp edges rounding and ultimately disappearing.

In an ongoing series of over forty blue velvet *Foster Paintings*, Jac Lahav makes a concerted effort to remember. Each painting represents one point of contact Lahav and his partner had with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) regarding the potential placement of a foster child. Not all calls result in a placement, a complete story, or even a loosely defined picture of who the child is or what might happen next. But each call does evoke a cacophony of feelings ranging from anticipation to excitement to heartbreak. Each call is a seed, containing wild potential. In turn, each painting represents one touchpoint in a twisting, unpredictable journey.

What does it mean to foster a child? By definition, you are promoting the child's development. You are responsible for their care, usually in the short term, in a stable, safe, and nurturing environment. You are also required to cooperate with DCF's decisions. Ultimately, you are responsible to start, stop, love, let go, and start all over again. You are responsible to say "yes" when you can and "no" when you cannot. Through painting, Lahav records the intense challenges of being a foster parent and the constant care (of a child, of oneself, of one's family) required to continue such physically and emotionally difficult work. Time in the studio is time to process, offering a space in which the unpredictable path of creating home, family, and community can be examined, confronted, and contained.



If you know Lahav's previous figurative work, it may come as a surprise that the canvases are oriented as portraits (vertical), yet the images are abstract. Upon further reflection, however, it is clear that the decision was necessary. Aside from the technical prohibition on representing a foster child's likeness, the abstract nature of the work emphasizes the ambiguity of each call and the open-ended nature of each decision. Through a combination of printing on velvet and lusciously painted strokes in Flashe, Lahav alludes to the restraint required of a foster parent and, simultaneously, the ability to let go within that restraint. The soft blue paintings hold hard edges to protect the vibrant, emotive, bodily strokes within. The swooping gestures of paint explore within predetermined limits. They appear as confident, coded glyphs, protecting tender details. Each painting represents a singular experience, full of contradictions. Together, the growing accumulation of paintings forms sentences and paragraphs, telling a story of growing community and capacity.

To care for a foster child requires hope for the future and a belief in collective responsibility. Fostering requires a willingness to be vulnerable and accept uncertainty. Perhaps the ritual completion of these paintings serves as a way for Lahav to control the chaos, release the emotional burden, and remember the stories. Akin to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work exploring memory, loss, and love; On Kawara's recording of time; and Mary Kelley's Post-Partum Document, Lahav is marking time to remember and better understand the journey. While the paintings may change shape or color or texture someday, for now they remain soft and vibrant, commanding our attention and demonstrating a growing record of one human's capacity to love.

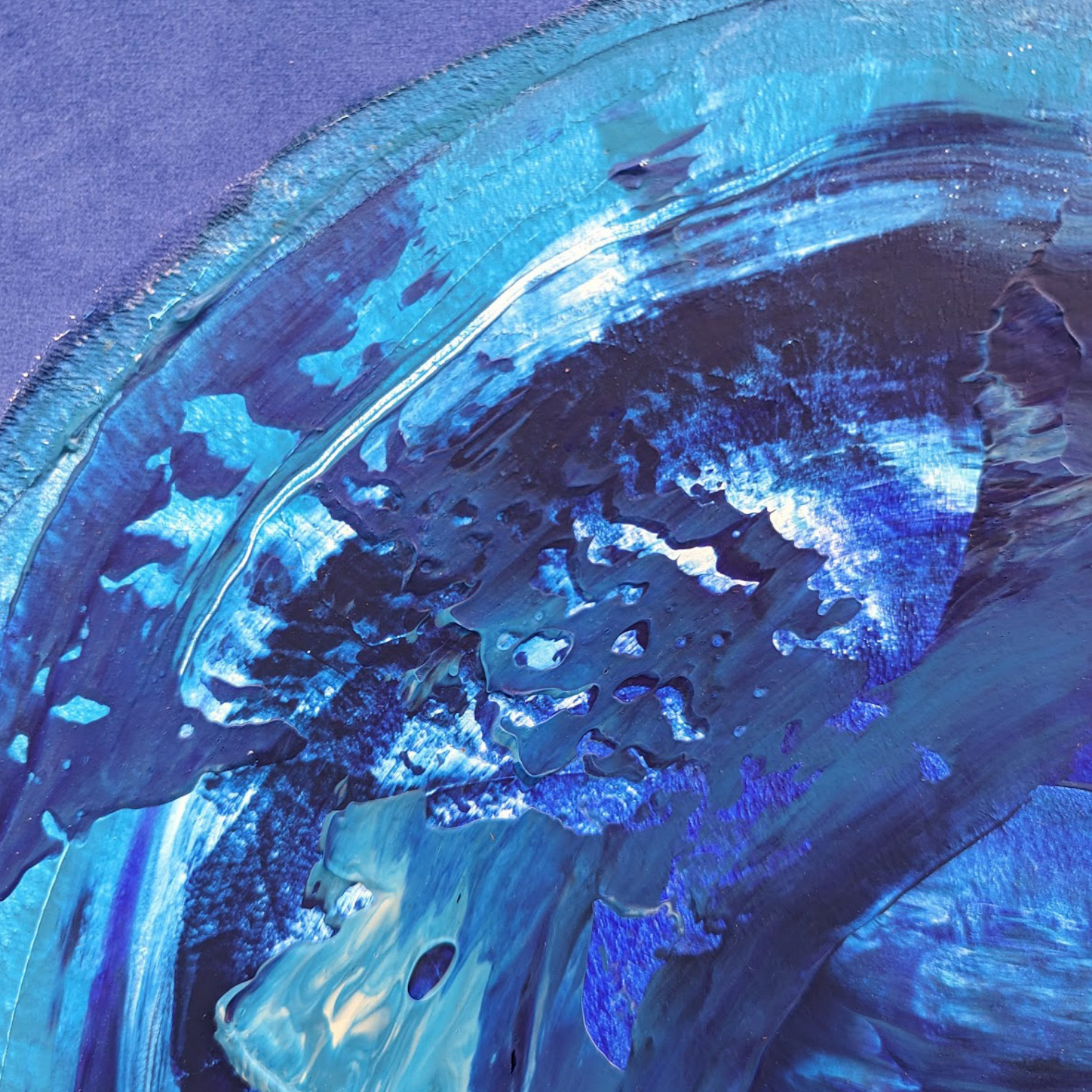


07/21/2021 (#4) - Foster Painting
2021
24" x 32"
Acrylic and Flashe on Printed Velvet



Conditions of Change 1-3, 2023, Acrylic, Flashe, and 24k Gold Leaf on Canvas. Photo Courtesy the Artist.

< detail



10/10/2021 (#9) - Foster Painting
2021
24" x 32"
Acrylic and Flashe on Printed Velvet

CRACKS OF GOLD AND SWIRLS OF BLUE

by Tanya Pohrt, Ph.D.

Interested in surface, texture, color, and materiality, artist Jac Lahav presents a stunning and thought-provoking interplay of ideas and imagery. With an abstract idiom, Lahav delves into the alchemy of paint and surface, using layers and varying materials to process and explore the challenges and emotional complexity of serving as a foster parent.

Lahav's recent body of abstract artwork emerged during COVID isolation, when the artist was working at home in Lyme, Connecticut. Inspired by old palettes with layers of dried and cracked paint, Lahav was struck by the beauty and complexity of these surfaces. As artifacts of the painting process, the layered surfaces spoke to both the history of a painting and the process used to create paintings. A palette's abstraction inspired new conceptual possibilities for Lahav.

Two distinct yet related types of painting are on view here, both dominated by the color blue. One series features Kintsugi-like cracks of gold that overlay the paint surface, emulating the practice of visible repair in Japanese pottery. The second group of vivid blue and white amorphous forms represents each instance when the artist's family was contacted by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) with the potential to care for a child.



Studio Palette and Paint. Photo Courtesy the Artist.



The Miles Gallery features 13 of a series of over 40 Foster Paintings with ethereal floating shapes painted in acrylic and Flashe (a vinyl paint) on a printed blue velvet gradient. Thick swirling zones of blue and white paint convey energy and growth in primordial forms. The central painted sections vary in size and shape — no two are alike. In *(07/21/2021) #4*, the blue and white shape is oblong, not unlike an egg or a bean. The deep soft blue of the velvet ground contrasts with the shiny vividness of the paint surface, holding the viewer's gaze.

In the Powers Gallery, paintings referencing Kintsugi pottery suggest broken forms made beautiful, their cracks emphasized rather than hidden. Below a latticework of thin gold broken lines, Lahav used a large pallet knife to paint energetic gestural forms, in blue and white paint that resemble streams of flowing water. In *Conditions of Change #3*, thickly painted lines split and branch, leading to destinations unknown, beyond the edge of the canvas. Such energetic stripes of color and texture are divided by gold leaf lines, reflecting Lahav's interest in Barnett Newman's zip paintings, which he cites as an influence, along with the work of Francis Bacon who expertly used simple lines to create space in painting. These jagged gold lines catch the light and dazzle the eye, absorbing our gaze before we look past them, our eyes shifting from the surface to a deeper zone like watching a baseball game through a fence at close range.

Materiality is key to this work. This is art that demands and rewards close looking, and Lahav reminds us of the importance of experiencing art in person, not mediated through a screen. "All these paintings contain Flashe, which is a vinyl medium that can hold a lot of pigment. It gives off a really seductive, velvety blue." Lahav notes.



Color is important here, carrying a range of personal and broader associations. As Lahav comments, "blue reminds me of the Middle East, of Israel, where I was born." Blue holds a wider array of associations as well. "The blues" in music represent the idea of sadness and emotion, while blue is also the color of the sky and the sea, full of vibrant beauty and promise.

Lahav is known for painting large-scale realist portraits of prominent historic figures, work that has been exhibited at the Jewish Museum, the Florence Griswold Museum, and recently at the Slater Museum in Norwich. A restriction on photographing children in foster care limited the potential for Lahav to showcase their portraiture. Lahav was also interested in historic religious restrictions on certain imagery, such as the Jewish prohibition against making images of the divine. Given these limitations, Lahav wondered, "What is a painter to do? Looking at abstraction in my palettes, I concentrated on the medium making the surface, the process, and the painting's history the content. This presents new approaches for painting ideas and emotions that don't have clear visual analogues."

"Painters try to guide the physics of their materials, exhibit control and direction over a liquid medium," Lahav notes. As paint dries it solidifies to become a "memory of the moment." Perhaps this negotiation between control and allowing the paint to reveal its more mercurial properties is analogous to the process of navigating the relationships and shifting expectations of Lahav's foster care experience. Painting offers a way of processing life's complexities and Lahav is developing an alchemical roadmap for understanding their past, present, and future.



Palette Rock and Studio Tools.
Photo Courtesy the Artist.



Long Legged Fairy Tale

2022

24" x 32"

Acrylic, Flashe, and 24k Gold Leaf on Printed Velvet



Foster Painting Installation in Hazelwood Gallery.
Photo Courtesy the Artist.

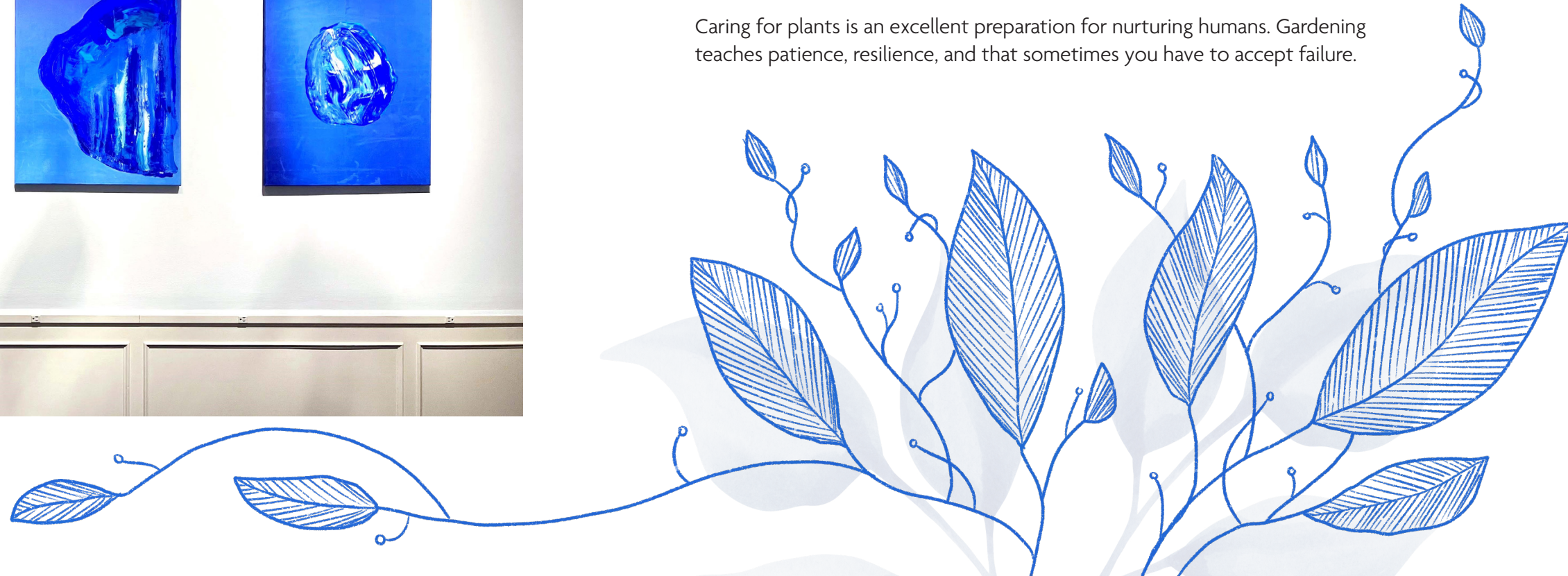
PLANTS AS ALLUSION

I used to have a black thumb.

In 2011, while living in an old farmhouse in upstate New York, I learned the simple joy of gardening; watching plants grow, evolving from little seeds into giant behemoths. Discovering that I too could have a green thumb.

Five years later, I became a father, and drifted from outdoor gardening to indoor plants. A symptom of nesting, my plant obsession continued into the early days of the covid quarantine. While some became sour-dough bread-making fanatics I became a succulent person, embracing the care of bizarre alien shaped cactuses.

Caring for plants is an excellent preparation for nurturing humans. Gardening teaches patience, resilience, and that sometimes you have to accept failure.



NON-LINEAR THOUGHT

From care to propagation, our relationship with plants helps us better understand the human condition. They also present wonderful analogies for non-linear forms of nurturing.

Our culture is obsessed with the idea that human life must follow a linear progression, like climbing a ladder. We are taught since childhood that we must progressively achieve as we “grow up,” in everything from career to family.

You care for a plant and it will get bigger and bigger.

Yet plants show us that life is not a ladder, it's more of a messy road trip. Sometimes you need to drive backwards to get gas, sometimes you need to take a detour and discover a whole new civilization. The same is true for plants.

Sometimes we need to severely prune a plant for it to thrive. Sometimes we need to take a clipping and grow a whole new succulent to really watch blossoms.

Recently I heard a great story about how botanists differentiate between closely related plant species. Two plants can seem identical, but after a century of observation, one might suddenly bloom with a unique flower. This blossoming leads botanists to reclassify the plant, changing its species name.

People change and blossom as well. Were we to accept and applaud these changes in our evolution, it might lead to a greater cultural understanding of our needs as humans. However we are stuck in the belief that both humans and plants have a “normal” setting — a linear progression.



Foxy (Black Backed Jackel)
2022
16" x 20"
Flashe, Acrylic, Graphite, Gouache on Canvas

THE LOUNGE

The installation in the Hazelwood Gallery of the Lyman Allyn Museum stands as a marked departure from conventional gallery spaces.

Traditionally, galleries have embraced the “white cube” aesthetic, characterized by stark, white walls and minimalistic presentation. This aesthetic, while considered pure and neutral, creates a sense of sterility and exclusivity. In my installation uses over nine-hundred feet of blue felt vines intertwined with blue carpeting and accented by bean bag chairs, to transform the gallery into a lounge-like environment. Perhaps I'm traveling back in time to my early days of tending indoor plants, bringing my nesting impulses to the art institution, infusing the galleries with warmth and accessibility.

In my work the use of blue felt vines and carpeting creates an enveloping visual experience while inviting tactile exploration. The materials engage the senses in ways that traditional gallery spaces avoid.

Art institutions have strict rules against touching alongside formal atmospheres that are often daunting and exclusionary toward younger children. This installation acts as a counterpoint, creating a space for friends and family.

The introduction of bean bag chairs and accessible books invites children to interact with the space in a familiar, less intimidating manner. My work recognizes children not merely as spectators but as active participants in the art experience.

This transformation of the gallery space is not just aesthetic. Here plants are an allusion for growth. By engaging with the blue lounge, we are fostering a new mode of accessibility and inclusivity within the art world. By breaking down barriers often associated with high art, this installation extends a warm welcome to both parents and children while democratizing the art experience.



Lounge, Installation View. Photo Courtesy the Artist.



Self Portrait. Photo Courtesy the Artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

(he/they) is a multi-disciplinary artist, curator, parent, children's book author, and community organizer. Born in Jerusalem Israel Lahav was raised in the United States and resides in Lyme CT.

Lahav's work investigates community, belonging, and cultural history. With solo shows at Richmond Art Museum Indiana, Longview MFA Texas, Saginaw Art Museum Michigan, Florence Griswold Museum Connecticut, Lahav's work can be found in multiple public collections including the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, Mount Holyoke Art Museum, Jewish Museum NY among others.

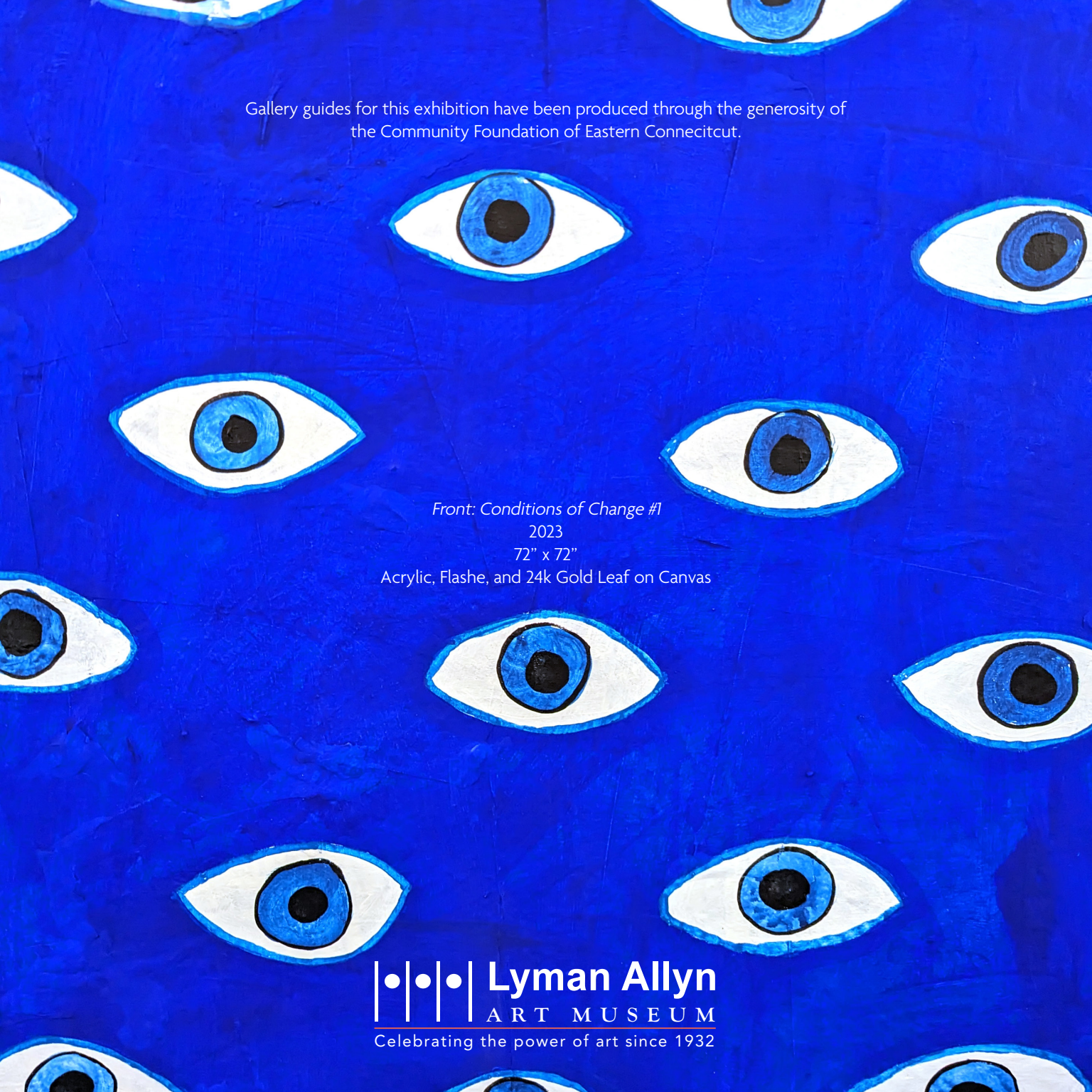
For the past 8 years, Lahav's social practice and curatorial projects have been written about in Hyperallergic, New York Times, Gothamist, Artnet, among others. During the pandemic, Lahav expanded their social practice, becoming an advocate for foster parents and helping start the group Public Art For Racial Justice Education (PARJE).

Through their community work, Lahav has helped facilitate large-scale mural projects, host educational artist talks, and run children's art projects to educate about under-represented narratives and equity in America.

www.jaclahav.com

Instagram @jaclahav

If you have questions about foster care or how you can help, call 1-888-KID-HERO.



Gallery guides for this exhibition have been produced through the generosity of
the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.

Front: Conditions of Change #1
2023
72" x 72"
Acrylic, Flashe, and 24k Gold Leaf on Canvas