

**LIESEGANG**  
selected paintings  
**1980 / 1986**

OPENING- FRIDAY APRIL 4- 8/1 AM

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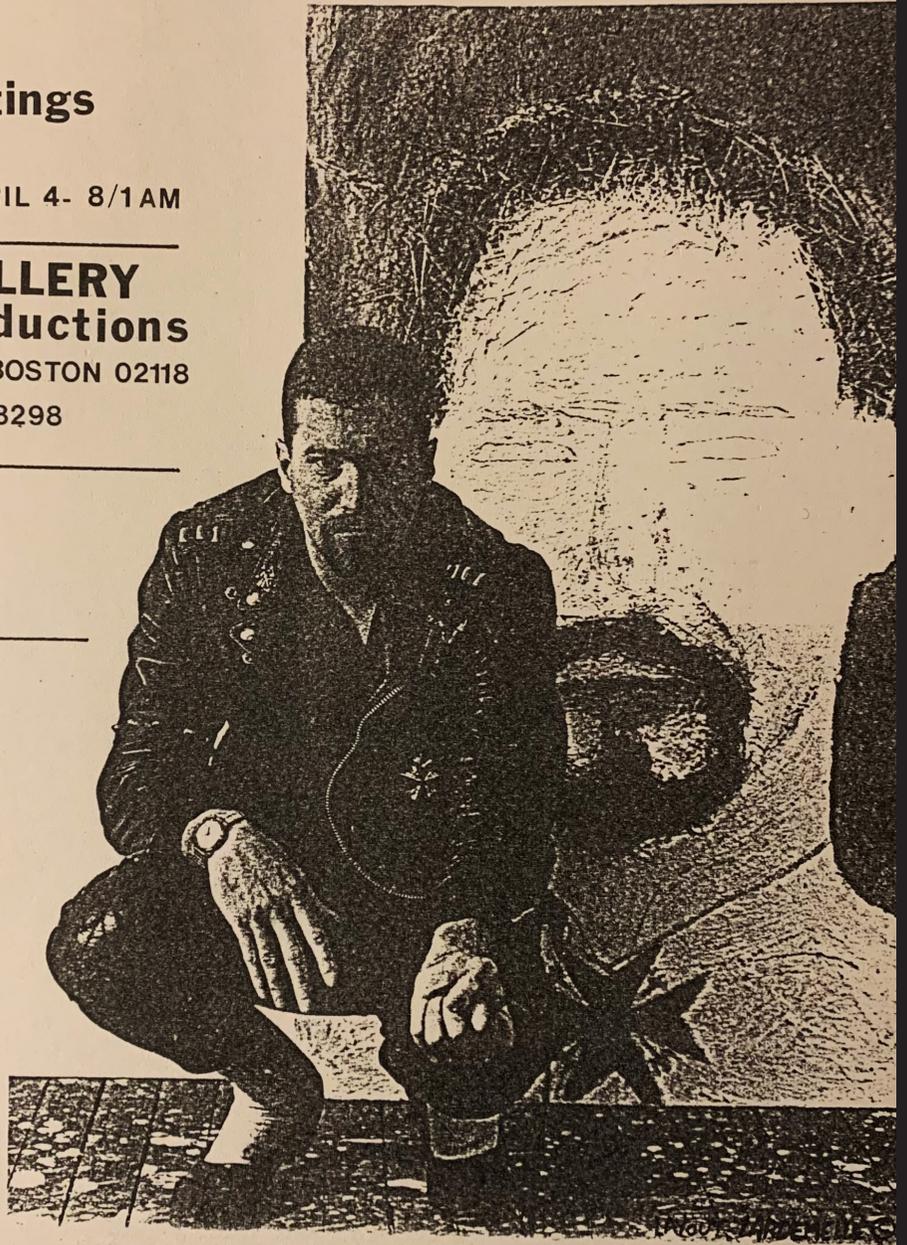
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# SCRATCHING THE SURFACE, MAKING A MARK

*a conversation with artist Tom Liesegang*

**SHANNON WANTS STEVIE.** These words repeat over cloudy white paint, rippling over the ridges of bricks in the right corner of a basement studio. A declaration of adolescent love scrawled in slanted letters: *Shannon and Stevie. Shannon and Stevie.* They persisted long enough for them to be discovered by Liesegang, who set up his easel there in 2019. A near facsimile of this inscription appears in the corner of a 2022 work he titles “LOVE 7,” copied in the same calligraphy.

Liesegang finds inspiration in rudimentary markings like these, from sidewalk drawings to scratches on benches or trees. In them he sees a human desire to be acknowledged, to leave a permanent trace on earthly surfaces. In his most recent work, canvases are constructed as an illusion of stone or concrete, and then transformed into palimpsests: language has been effaced, written over, but not fully erased. Among stick figures or hearts etched in chalk, past phrases whisper behind successive etchings and form layered speech acts. Opposing languages mingle freely in space: ancient and contemporary, literary and colloquial, violent and tender. In many of these pieces, an open ring in cobalt takes center—an emblem that burns, bubbles, and replicates itself like an unshakeable thought or repeated wish. It is a spiritual symbol wrought in more tangible materials, a gesture toward immortality.

Liesegang was born in Boston in 1955. At a family outing to the 1964 World’s Fair, a chance encounter with Michelangelo’s *Pietà* impressed on him a lasting desire to become an artist. Scribbles on the walls of his childhood bedroom soon transformed into more formal figurative composition, later experiments with urbanite textures and cement materials in the 1980s landed his *Street Series* work in multiple solo shows. Moving from Boston to Los Angeles and eventually to New York, Liesegang went on to

cover a broad range of materials and themes. His later cycles incorporated death-related imagery in self-built light boxes with illuminated x-rays, staged scenes of marine battle, and narrated the lives of lesser-known saints using diptych structures. After leaving the states for Europe in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, he studied silkscreening at the Amsterdam Graphic Atelier. The medieval architecture he encountered in Europe—basilicas, cathedrals, places both earthly and spiritual—incited him to create rubbings from intricately carved tombs. This phase of work captured an interest in what he refers to as “ancient graffiti” and the human desire for affirmation, a theme that still defines his work today.

One such piece, the original rubbing for the print “Dom of Utrecht,” commands a space by the front door of the artist’s home. It was the first work of Liesegang’s I encountered, by pure chance—my partner and I had rented his spare room on our way up to the Finger Lakes last autumn. Removing our shoes as instructed, we struck up a conversation with our host. “Oh, you’re an artist,” I said, registering walls adorned with pictures by a similar hand. “This must be all yours.” When we asked for dinner recommendations, he gave us directions to Liberty Street Bistro. “I wait tables there,” he told us. The next morning, as we gathered our luggage and he readied himself for a brunch shift, I shyly handed him my 86 business card and asked him to email me.

In our correspondence I learned that Tom has worked in the restaurant industry throughout the entirety of his career. During his years in New York City, he ran the floor and turned tables at landmarks such as One Fifth and Ken Aretsky’s Butterfield 81. He has always relied on the work as a way to support his craft—not only enjoying the pay and flexibility, but the opportunity to

*Opposite: An exhibiton invitation for “Liesegang: Selected Paintings” (1987)*

INTRODUCTION & INTERVIEW BY KATE MEADOWS

befriend artists, writers, musicians, actors, and the like. One of them was a chef named Tony, yet another creative using the industry to support his craft. Some of us might know him better as Anthony Bourdain.

We weren't sure if it was divine intervention or some law of attraction, but it felt necessary to talk more about his career as an artist and his history in the industry. Tom agreed to chat with Zach and I at his home in Newburgh on January 15th.

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Our twelve-hour day upstate begins with two miniature bottles of Tropicana mixed with Prosecco. I meet Zach at a near-empty Grand Central before dawn. The endless flow of the main concourse has stilled, and we can't help but crane our necks up at the thousands of stars set in gold against the deep teal ceiling. When the Metro North arrives at Beacon, we emerge from the station into the brisk air, groggy but fortified by our DIY mimosas. Tom is waiting for us, one gloved hand shielding his eyes from the sun. We clamber into his Nissan and he chariots us under the double arches of the bridge, across the Hudson, and into Newburgh.

All day we shoot the shit, filling every last

minute with conversation. We're allowed a peek into the artist's process in his basement studio, where Zach snaps photos of Tom posed against his easel. Later in the day, we venture outside for a drive. Rolling over mild hills, the artist gives us a tour of the rundown architectures of Newburgh, narrating local history past bullet-proofed liquor stores and boarded-up buildings awaiting development. As a treat, he takes us down US-9 to stroll through the *Arte Povera* exhibition at local art museum Magazzino. We end the day as we started it—with Prosecco, this time in real glasses.

Reviewing the notes I jotted hastily on a dupe pad during the train ride home, I realize that material we've gathered only scratches the surface of Liesegang's charged body of work. Even so, our exchange feels revelatory. By sharing our conversation, I hope to offer some insight into a breadth of work and range of registers as they unfold across an artist's long career—one which has been bolstered by an industry we find all too familiar.

Tom has generously provided his work for this issue's cover. This piece, made specifically for 86 Logic, summons the old-school dupe pad as a telltale symbol of the industry. By overlaying the surface with remnant paper and the spontaneous slash of his brush, the artist ties together themes



*Above: Tom Linegang poses for 86 Logic in his upstate New York art studio. Opposite: "SHANNON & STEVIE" (2022); substance, acrylic, ink, chalk, on panel; 24in x 24in.*





at the heart of this issue: scrappy resourcefulness, and the beauty of happenstance.

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We begin our interview opposite Liesegang, who is seated on a brown leather couch in his living room. We're wrapped in a tidy interior of framed works, and the late morning light captures dust coiling in the air. The artist speaks from the right side of his mouth in a gruff Boston accent. He gestures with his glasses and eyes us with a squint the same dusky blue as the wall behind him. In the portion transcribed below, he clarifies some of the technical approaches involved in his recent work, talks about his relationship with the spiritual realm, and lets us in on some of the finest Bourdain-isms from the 1990s.

#### 86 LOGIC

To start, we're curious about your creative process. Do you plan your work in advance?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

My work is a continuous process. One series leads to the next, one aspect of a painting leads to another possibility. Every time I finish a piece, I try to envision the different avenues that could branch off from it. Throughout my career, I've done mostly figurative work, but last year was my first venture into abstraction since '79. It's certainly a different approach with figurative painting. For instance, the *Martyr* series—I saw those in my head. I knew what they were going to be before I made them. But with abstraction, you can't see the final product. A lot of famous abstractionists get asked the question how do you know when a piece is finished? Usually they say they don't. William de Kooning famously said, *I ask my wife*.

#### 86 LOGIC

What drew you towards abstraction recently?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

With abstract work, you can convey more through symbolism. If you look at a figurative

piece, you know exactly what it is. It's like reading a book. Whereas with my more recent work, there isn't as clear of a narrative—the narrative only comes from interpretation. It's more open to subjectivity this way.

#### 86 LOGIC

Would you say your abstract pieces are more improvisational? What are you referencing or thinking about when you're working on them?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

My new work is gestural and symbolic. For this recent series, I find one aspect of inspiration in archaic or extinct languages. Ancient carvings, which were essentially graffiti from two thousand years ago, rubbed out, painted over. A new contemporary language takes center stage, but it too will be rubbed out and painted over. I'll often take inspiration from carvings in park benches by teenagers. I'll pass them while walking and take a picture to use as reference. The same goes for sidewalk etchings, like the child-like ones you find in the *LOVE* series. My visual references come from outside—my eyes and ears are always to the ground and sky. I'm always looking.

#### 86 LOGIC

When you reproduce graffiti or carvings in your work, do you take into account the tools used to create the original?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

Yeah, that's very much on the forefront of my mind. The process of how people have made their marks. A lot of these newer pieces are all scratched.

#### 86 LOGIC

What is the scratching a nod to, specifically?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

Permanence. The whole basis of these pieces is a desire for acknowledgement. Human beings always want to be acknowledged. They want to say, 'I was here, I existed.' That's what graffiti is about. That's what kids scratching their names or the names of their love interests is about, that's what rich people giving money to museums is about—having their names on

*Opposite: "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (2023); tree bark, tar, cement, oil, on canvas. 11in x 9in.*



the wall. The same urge can be traced from the caves of Lascaux to the walls of a modern museum.

**86 LOGIC**

What is your personal relationship with the desire to be acknowledged?

**TOM LIESEGANG**

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a famous artist. Now I'm an artist, but I'm not famous—I got half of my wish. But anyway you cut it, I still have acknowledgement, because I'm leaving behind a life's body of work.

**86 LOGIC**

A lot of artists believe their work is their 'life after death.' You pointed out open circles in your work as symbols for continuing life.

**TOM LIESEGANG**

I definitely don't think of life after death in bodily terms. A lot of my pieces deal with traces of humanity, and how we are double-natured creatures. We have a spiritual side, but we live on earth. There's that dichotomy when we confront how to live a life. And what happens

after we live it: does it continue? Does it stop? Nobody knows what will come—nobody's come back to tell us what we can expect.

**86 LOGIC**

Does that bother you?

**TOM LIESEGANG**

I'm kind of looking forward to the surprise of it. I have had some profound spiritual moments that made me believe in the possibility of life after death. Not from drugs or anything like that. One particular out-of-body experience I had years ago was so ineffable, to describe it would cheapen the experience. It didn't transform my life in that it made me go to church. But I suddenly knew that there was more than what meets the eye—a whole different dimension we can't see. It's like looking at the ocean. When you look at the ocean, you can only see the waves, the horizon. But underneath, there's another world.

**86 LOGIC**

Can you tell us more about how that experience changed you, or perhaps influenced your work?

**TOM LIESEGANG**

This breakthrough *did* come into my work. That's why I keep on using that symbolic image of the circle. The spiritual base is important to me in terms of having purpose. When I watched the *Roadrunner* documentary about Anthony Bourdain, it was an eye-opener for me—I never grasped Tony's real despair. In the time I knew him, I never got that impression. In the film, I saw a searcher who never finds what he's searching for, which to me reads as someone without a spiritual base. Tony *was* a hardcore atheist. I've known other atheists who feel like there is a hole in their life, and they don't know what it is, and can never find it.

**86 LOGIC**

You knew Anthony Bourdain. How did you first meet?

**TOM LIESEGANG**

I've always relied on the restaurant industry to support my craft. Restaurant work is flexible, pays well, and you meet a wide array of crazy, creative people. You have to be half-crazed to be a part of it. I've met most of my friends in restaurant work. One of them was Anthony

Bourdain, yet another person using the industry as a support vehicle. Tony was a writer first, and a chef second. We met at the Greenwich Village landmark, One Fifth, when it reopened in '95. I was a server. The restaurant was struggling with payroll and laying off people in the kitchen left and right, and then they brought in Tony. I'll never forget his first day on the line. Vince, one of the owners, took me aside and said: "Look at this fucking guy. He thinks he's a writer." And I said, "Well, Vince, maybe he is—how do you know?"

Vince eventually quit, and the place just slowly unraveled. Utter mayhem, but fun! We drank that place under. Tony would say, "Go to the bar and get five Double Ds!" He'd drink the moment he got in until the moment he got home. His kitchen was a madhouse but a lot of fun.

**86 LOGIC**

Any good stories?

**TOM LIESEGANG**

One time in early May, I went out to Montauk for the weekend to get out of the city and to get an ocean fix. It was overcast and cool when I took a long walk on the beach, but little did I



Opposite: "SORT/FATE" (2022); burlap, tar, pigment, chalk, substance, oil, on canvas. 48 x 54 in. Above: The original matrix on mylar (left) and the final silkscreen version (edition #5, right) of "Dom of Utrecht" (2013); 30in x 22in

know that I got a bad sunburn. As soon as Tony saw me at work the next day, he yelled down the line at the top of his lungs: “Tom, your head looks like a blood-engorged penis!” Everyone in the kitchen lost it. Tony was the quickest wit I’ve ever met my life, and a stand-up guy, no matter what. God forbid any server disrespected a dishwasher. He was brilliant, clever, and he was loved by anyone who knew him. I think I can speak for others: we miss him.

#### 86 LOGIC

What happened for you in the years following your time in New York?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

I moved to Amsterdam in 2001 after a string of personal tragedies and the 9/11 attacks. It felt like it was time to get out, and luckily I had some friends overseas I could rely on. I learned silkscreening at the Amsterdam Graphic Atelier, where I became a member in 2002. Printmaking, like drawing, is an intimate process, and I loved that. It’s about the feel of the paper, the texture and quality of a line. I made prints exclusively from 2002 to 2013 when I moved back to the States.

Then the work took a new turn. After I returned, I felt I barely recognized my own country—a week wouldn’t go by without a cop killing a person of color with impunity. I watched a video of Ernesto Duenez Jr. being executed by cops on the front lawn of his house, right in front of his wife. I could not believe what I was seeing—I sat at my kitchen table and wept. I reacted in the only way I knew how. I created a piece titled, “Justice in the Hands of the Unjust,” a diptych work on paper that lists the names and ages of innocent people killed by police over a short span of time. Shortly after, I came up with the concept for New Art Brut: an international online platform to highlight artists whose work confronts the social ills of our time, injustice in any form. Photographer Whitney Klare and I co-founded it as a non-profit. In 2019, we sponsored a lecture at Mount St. Mary College in Newburgh for Janet Braun Reinitz, one of the original Freedom Riders from 1961, whose art is included on the site. We’re proud of featuring the work of John Heartfield and Leon Golub (with permission from their respective estates). We’re growing little by little, and I’m still looking for artists to join.

#### 86 LOGIC

Does the website function as an online art library?

#### TOM LIESEGANG

To an extent, yes. As it stands online, it’s an educational platform. We have an array of artists from different periods whose work is about social issues. It’s like having a book on the subject, except it’s online, for free. And it has tremendous growth potential—we just need people to get involved, because we can’t do it all ourselves. We see the future of NAB as a political voice.

#### 86 LOGIC

We’ll definitely share that with our readers and contributors. I’m sure many would be interested in getting involved. By the way, we love your dupe pad.

#### TOM LIESEGANG

My what?

#### 86 LOGIC

The dupe pad sitting on the table in your studio. It’s one of our trademarks. [showing him the ones we brought] We use them too.

#### TOM LIESEGANG

Oh yeah, we used to use them at the Italian place I worked at in town. Much better than those tablet devices, I’ll tell you what.

#### 86 LOGIC

They call it a POS for a reason. ■

*Tom Liesegang’s work has been the subject of numerous solo and group shows throughout Amsterdam, Boston, and Providence, and belongs to over thirty museums and public collections including the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the DeCordova Museum in Massachusetts, and the Rose Museum at Brandeis.*

*Check out [www.NewArtBrut.com](http://www.NewArtBrut.com) to learn more about Liesegang’s artist platform and opportunities for involvement. More of Liesegang’s own work can also be found on his website [www.TomLiesegang.com](http://www.TomLiesegang.com) and Instagram @tom\_liesegang.*

*Opposite: “Justice in the Hands of the Unjust” (2016) Silkscreen and ink, 30in x 34in*