

Press Reviews

Sarah Cascone, "Painting Was Always My Goal": Former Actress Leelee Kimmel on Why She Gave Up Hollywood for Art', Artnet, February 7, 2018

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'Painting Was Always My Goal': Former Actress Leelee Kimmel on Why She Gave Up Hollywood for Art

With her first show at the Journal gallery in Brooklyn, the former *Eyes Wide Shut* actress has already sold her first work to Leon Black.

Sarah Cascone (<https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25>), February 7, 2018



Leelee Kimmel. Photo courtesy of Elisabet Davidsdottir.

At the age of just 34, Leelee Kimmel has completely reinvented herself. You might better know her by her maiden name, Sobieski, and late 1990s roles in films including *Eyes Wide Shut* (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120663/characters/nm0005447?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t32) and *Never Been Kissed*. Today a mother of two, Kimmel is retired from stage and screen, devoting her time to her children and her first passion, art. You can catch her abstract painting, sculpture, and VR work in her solo gallery debut, currently on view at Brooklyn's [Journal Gallery](https://www.thejournalinc.com/gallery/) (<https://www.thejournalinc.com/gallery/>).

The exhibition marks the culmination of perhaps a decade of work, and the first time Kimmel has gotten up the confidence to show the world what she's been up to since disappearing from the silver screen. "I thought that because of my past, my work would be judged harshly," Kimmel admitted to artnet News. "I had to make sure that if everybody really hated them, I would still feel good about it. This is really what's inside of me, and I'm not trying to be anybody else.... It was almost like coming out of the closet or something!"

For Kimmel, this is no sudden career change. Her father, French actor and painter [Jean Sobieski](http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-sobieski/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-sobieski/>), insured that the visual arts were a major force in her formative years. Though she did not graduate, Kimmel majored in visual arts at Brown. On set as an actress, she was known to sheath her trailer with a plastic lining so that she could paint between scenes.



Leelee Kimmel, *It Started* (2016). Courtesy of Journal Gallery and the artist. Photographed by Thomas Müller.

"I kept working fervently in secret," she said. "Painting was always my goal; I just kept getting distracted with work things and paying bills." Since quitting acting, Kimmel has been completely dedicated to her art, always with the hope of showing it somewhere, someday.

The current works, which feature bold, graphic shapes in thickly pooled acrylic, floating on black or white grounds, are part of a series that she started two years ago. Compared to earlier works, "you can see the loosening of my shapes. They used to be all on top of each other with no space to breathe," said Kimmel. "It was a little bit more manic looking!"



Leelee Kimmel. Photo courtesy of Elisabet Davidsdottir.

After getting her start at just 11 years old, Kimmel took her last acting role at 27, signing on reluctantly because of her finances. "I had a really happy childhood, and had a lot of fun, and did some work that I feel good about. I feel blessed I was able to have these experiences that seem to other people to be very desirable," she said. As Kimmel speaks, you can hear the "but" coming. "In my paintings there's a lot about energy and vibrations and the whole world being connected," Kimmel explained, contrasting that sense of control to the experience of being on a film set. "If you're on a crew and 150 people are pushing for you to fall in love with somebody else, everybody is rooting for it. That's the energy of a lot of people, but it's fake."



Leelee Kimmel, *Lightsaber* (2017). Courtesy of the Journal Gallery and the artist. Photographed by Thomas Müller.

“Actors end up going from one role to another with all this energy behind them, and you just become emptier and emptier and emptier—you end up having no real experiences,” Kimmel lamented. “To cry, you end up drawing on the experiences of another character you played.” She particularly takes issue with onscreen romance, saying, “I don’t want my children to look at Netflix and see me on screen in the arms of someone who’s not their dad.”

Kimmel married fashion designer Adam Kimmel in 2009, and had a daughter that same year, followed by a son in 2014. The couple are passionate art collectors who, according to *Vogue* (<https://www.vogue.com/article/art-of-living-leelee-sobieski-and-adam-kimmels-tribeca-loft>), own works by artists including [Raymond Pettibon](http://www.artnet.com/artists/raymond-pettibon/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/raymond-pettibon/>), [George Condo](http://www.artnet.com/artists/george-condo/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/george-condo/>), Theodor Seuss Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss), John McCracken, [Ken Price](http://www.artnet.com/artists/kenneth-price/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/kenneth-price/>), and John Altoon. “My husband really does the purchasing,” said Kimmel, though she recently picked out a work by [Borna Sammak](http://www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/borna-sammak) (<http://www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/borna-sammak>). “He makes these crazy graphic things that are very torn and multilayered.”



“Leelee Kimmel: Channels” installation view at the Journal Gallery. Courtesy of the Journal Gallery and the artist. Photographed by Thomas Müller.

It was through Adam that Kimmel met Michael Nevin, co-founder of the Journal, although it was quite some time before she allowed him to visit her studio. “Leelee’s approach was so confident,” Nevin told artnet News. “She was making these huge paintings even though in theory they had no place to go.”

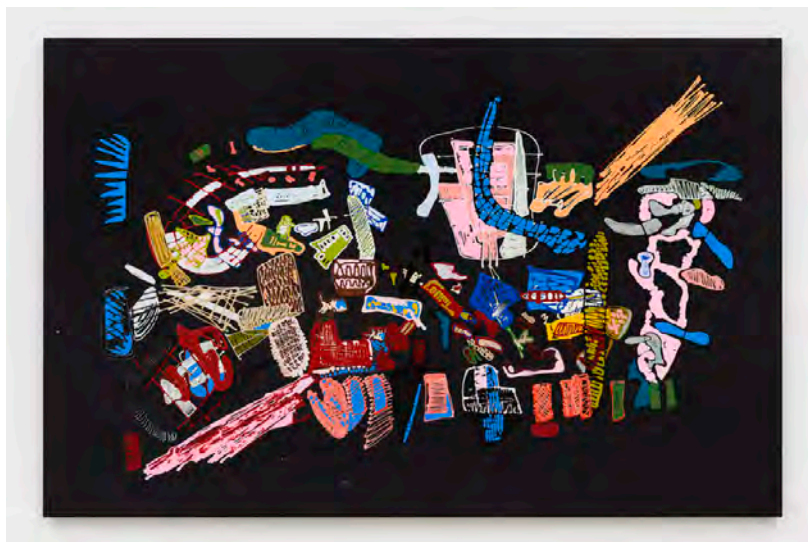
Kimmel has developed her own unique methods of applying paint to the canvas. “I was talking with my dad, and we were both saying literally everything has been done in painting,” she said. “We were talking about using different tools instead of and in combination with brushes. To give yourself a certain freedom, you might paint with your left hand or a very long paintbrush.”



Leelee Kimmel with her painting *Lightsaber* at her first solo exhibition, “Leelee Kimmel: Channels” at the Journal Gallery. Photo courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

The artist works with canvases both laid flat and hung on the wall. “When I’m painting, I kind of look like I’m playing Twister! I’m always in these very uncomfortable, back-twisting positions,” she explained. “There are so many masters of the brush. I couldn’t compete with that, so I just started doing it my own way.”

When her canvases are drying, she works in her bedroom, creating immersive 3-D worlds with Google Tilt Brush. For the current show, Kimmel has created a five-minute journey through a VR landscape, where colorful shapes float like galaxies in a black expanse. “The music is a classical piece of music that I altered and slowed down,” she explained. “It gave it just enough of an eerie feeling, but is also beautiful.”



Leelee Kimmel, *Spreadable* (2016–17). Courtesy of the Journal Gallery and the artist. Photographed by Thomas Müller.

Following the show’s opening, *Page Six* (<https://pagesix.com/2018/01/20/it-girl-of-the-90s-has-first-solo-art-show/>), ran a glowing item on all the bold-faced names in attendance—Klaus Biesenbach, Adam Lindemann, and Jeffrey Deitch (<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/jeffrey-deitch/>), to name a few—noting that collector Leon Black went home with one of the works. Kimmel confirmed the purchase of one her 3-D printed sculptures, noting that the show has already been a commercial success.

“They’ve almost all found new homes,” said Kimmel. “It feels like my kids are telling me they are going to have a new mom and dad. I want visitation rights.”