



December 31, 2022  
By Tom Teicholz

## The Art of Lisa Edelstein



Lisa Edelstein in the Studio PHOTO BY HOLLAND CLEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

During the pandemic, Lisa Edelstein, the actor best known for her roles as Abby McCarthy in *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce*, Dr. Lisa Cuddy on the popular medical drama series *House*, and as Alan Arkin's wayward adult daughter Phoebe on *The Kominsky Method*, took to painting. Seriously. Seriously and so well that her paintings are being exhibited at art consultant Lisa Schiff's exhibition space, sfa Advisory at 45 White Street in New York's Tribeca.

The paintings in the exhibition, *Lisa Edelstein: Family*, are inspired by old photos that Edelstein found of her family and relatives (and the occasional Poodle). They are candid shots – fugitive moments — often the mistaken shots that occurred in the days when there was no “delete” button on the camera. Her works is not photorealistic but does render by some strange alchemy the decaying colors and qualities of the old photos, as well as the feel of familial reminiscence, of time past. At the same time, they are painterly works as much about exploring the forms present, the patterns and textures in relation to each other. and the spaces in between them.



Beach Day by Lisa Edelstein. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

In some ways, Edelstein's work reminds me of British painter Leon Kossoff and his painting *Two Seated Figures No. 2*. This may be because their subject matter is similar: Older Jewish relatives and friends – all looking nothing like their children, the forever-young Baby Boomers, who endeavor to be toned and stylish. There is a vividness and a familiarity in the work as if we've been transported to the past. They are like figures from a lost world, figures from the old world happy to be in the new, a generation of Jews flourishing in America. At a time when few painters claim their authentic personal history and roots, Edelstein has put hers on display.

At the same time, given how recently Edelstein has taken to painting seriously, the work is evolving. Edelstein's watercolors started as works made with magic marker, and then she began to use refill ink and sometimes a combination of the two. As the work got bigger, her husband the painter Robert Russell said, "Why don't you use paint?" So, she began to use watercolor because it was most similar on paper. "You're leaving your negative space and building the color. As opposed to oil paint where you're building it up to the negative."



Dessert by Lisa Edelstein. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

The determination with which Edelstein has pursued painting and the excellence of her results should come as no surprise to anyone paying attention to Edelstein's odds-defying artistic career. Like the heroine of a Victorian novel, she has consistently been the engine of her own success defying society and the world at large's expectations. Yet, in person, Edelstein is very down-to-earth, thoughtful and mindful, equal parts funny and earnest, as I discovered when I sat down with her in her home studio on the East Side of LA.

After looking at her most recent works, made while waiting out a bout of Covid, we began by talking about her childhood: Edelstein was the youngest of three children raised in a New Jersey suburb and from a young age she had a need to be seen. In many ways, Edelstein has always been a performer and always been an artist.

"Most people who become actors or performers or artists of any kind," Edelstein said, "there's a break in the line of communication... You find another way to communicate. You find another way to have a presence," Edelstein said. "And that is really true for any art form."



Mrs. Abo's Class by Lisa Edelstein. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

As a junior in high school, a teenager of 16, Edelstein was proficient enough as a dancer that she was recruited to be a cheerleader for the New Jersey Generals, the short-lived United States Football franchise team owned by — yup, Donald Trump; and whose star player was — you got it: Herschel Walker. Working conditions there were bad enough that the cheerleaders went on strike. And that was back then. But Edelstein was undeterred from seeking celebrity.

She enrolled in New York University. By day she was a theater student. By night, she was "Lisa E" a presence on the club scene. New York City was in financial crisis but was creatively thriving. "Going from a conservative suburb, 25 minutes outside of the city, to that world was... I felt like I could finally breathe... [it was] a reflection of how I wanted to live — which was much freer, expressive imagination gone wild, and a certain wildness that I was desperate for." By her own account, for her 18th Birthday, 3000 people showed up, most of whom she didn't know.

Today, she laughs recalling it. "You know, it's been a journey... that that was probably my first real performance gig... becoming this nighttime creature, Lisa E. And trying to figure out how to make my way in the world."

By 20, Edelstein was so ubiquitous a celebante that Maureen Dowd profiled her in the New York Times Magazine. What's more, Ms. Dowd, who can be downright snarky, was very kind and generous to her in



the piece (which you can find easily online). “She was extremely careful and recognized my age... I'm so grateful for that.”

Let's take a beat here to say that many, many kids want to be famous. Very few become well-known, and among the few who do, many become notorious for one reason or another and very quickly fade from public view. If I think back to the late '80s New York Club scene, there are almost no people who were prominent then that still are – that Edelstein is one, is one sign of both her remarkable talent and her ability to walk through the door when opportunity knocks.

Her co-conspirator in club-launched celebrity, as mentioned in the Dowd article, was James St. James who would go on to write the book that became “Party Monster,” and who continues to be a TV personality to this day.

“There was definitely some fairy dust there. I don't know that I'm the person who could define what that was. because I was in that experience. Some of that was James St. James He really was a man with a plan. I met him in an elevator at our dorm and I just fell in love with him immediately.”

“He was studying Details magazine [to] know who everybody was,” Edelstein recalled. “He made flashcards. He desperately wanted to be part of this scene .. and I jumped on his bandwagon. He had these exercises. He talks a little bit about it in his book [Disco Bloodbath which became Party Monster]; Once we get into Area (a popular but hard to get into club in the day) ... James and I. who didn't know anybody, his plan was that we each go the opposite direction and ask people if they saw the other person. We find the other person, and then we walk around the whole Area club saying, we found them. By the end of the night, everybody would know our name. That's James.” She said, laughing.



Lisa Edelstein by Mitch Stone. PHOTO BY MITCH STONE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Edelstein became a recognizable figure known to all the other late-night denizens of the club demi-monde, Michael Musto, Stephen Saban, Patrick McMullan frequenting the world of parties at clubs such as Area, Danceteria, Madame Rosa's, Milk Bar.

The Dowd article cemented Edelstein's fame but also made her a target. Being famous for being famous, as a young woman had horrible consequences, then even more than now. We may complain about internet trolls, but back then personal phone numbers were easily available. There was this thing called a phone book where most everyone's phone number was publicly listed; and there was no way to delete messages on your answering machine without listening to them first. Stalking was not an offense the NYPD saw as dangerous until there was physical harm and the psychological consequences of being treated as prey were not considered as they are today.

“What was traumatizing was the resentment that I experienced afterwards. Edelstein recalled. I had really intense and dangerous stalkers. I had no one to talk to about it because I didn't come from a family that had any experience with that.” Edelstein was only 20 years old and still in college. And men would berate her in messages and pleasure themselves while doing so. “It was rough. And they were showing up at my building and it was really disturbing. So, I backed off.”

“What happened was it changed my life,” Edelstein recalled. “I backed off from going out to clubs, I'd say 90%. And I volunteered for The Gay Men's Health Crisis.” Edelstein attended a workshop where they taught her everything that was known at the time about the AIDS crisis.

At NYU, Edelstein was taking a class with Elizabeth Swados, the creator of socially conscious plays such as the Tony nominated “Runaways.” Swados had given the class the assignment of writing a politically satirical song. “So I wrote a song about the sodomy laws and she loved it. She was like: you have to keep going. She changed my life.”

New York in the late 1980s became grim as the scourge of AIDS spread among the gay community, decimating night life. Few understood the disease and many of those who were not part of the gay community saw in AIDS a sort of divine retribution for homosexuality. Even following Elizabeth Taylor's 1985 public call for AIDS awareness, there were few straight celebrities speaking out, much less creating work about the crisis.

“I got really inspired and I wrote the first version of a musical called Positive Me that was an AIDS awareness musical,” Edelstein recalled. Ellen Stewart, the doyenne of experimental theater with her LA Mama ExT, let Edelstein stage a workshop weekend in their black box theater, convinced Edelstein's fame would draw a crowd. Stewart loved the production so much she gave Edelstein a full production the next year. “She gave me notes for my rewrite, gave me a rehearsal space, matched the funds that I raised.” To Edelstein this was her chance to “finally show them what I could do.”

“The funny thing was that James, his whole plan, was you get famous in this weird underground world, and then once you are, you sidestep and show people what you can really do, which sounds great, but in practice was a remarkably painful experience.”

Positive Me led to a short-lived gig hosting an MTV program which in turn led to getting an agent. However, Edelstein decided she needed a break from New York and all the backwash of being Lisa E. She went out to Los Angeles in 1991 and never came back.

In Los Angeles, Edelstein was living in East LA, near Echo Park and Loz Feliz, in a neighborhood so funky at the time that Messengers would not deliver scripts to her there (she often had to have them faxed to her). But after a year, Edelstein started to find work typecast as “the sitcom friend” or the comic foil, with parts on Mad About You, Wings, Seinfeld, The Larry Sanders Show and Almost Perfect. She was considered “ethnic” or “too Jewish” never the lead. However, in Jason Katims' Relativity where she was cast as Rhonda Roth – the gay Jewish friend – although it was another marginalized person, Edelstein proved her drama acting chops.

“You have to constantly demand the right to be more than one thing,” Edelstein says about her acting career. “On every level you have to demand the right to drive in all lanes.”

Over the next several years Edelstein bounced between drama (E.R.) and comedy (Just Shoot Me) playing an episode here and an episode there, with several notable high-profile appearances that, in the moment, held the potential to be career altering – such as playing Laurie, the call girl/law student who is Rob Lowe, the presidential speech writers' lover in Aaron Sorkin's West Wing or as one of the main characters in a 2002 sitcom Leap of Faith that aired following NBC mega-hit Friends only to be cancelled after one season.



Sisters by Lisa Edelstein. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

It would take until 2004 and the role of Dr. Lisa Cuddy on David Shore's medical drama *House* for Edelstein to be a hit. As the Dean of Medicine and Chief Hospital Administrator who is *House*'s boss, antagonist, and at times his romantic interest, Edelstein played Cuddy for 153 episodes over seven seasons. It is worth noting that Edelstein was 38 when she took on the role – again defying predictions and stereotypes about actresses and their careers.

In some ways, being part of a long-running successful network show was “a dream.” Still, it was not without its personal challenges. “For me, the hardest part was that we were shooting 10 months out of the year. But Cuddy did not shoot very much. All my stuff could be shot in a day, but that day tended to be the day that somebody else couldn't be there. So I never knew my schedule.” Edelstein found it difficult, and at times annoying, when she would try to do something as simple as making a doctor's appointment. So, instead, Edelstein embraced the spontaneous and the impulsive. “I would confirm what days I had and I'd leave the country... It was the first time in my life I knew I had money and a job... So, I took myself all over the world. It was fantastic. That was the best gift I gave myself during those years.”

The steady pay of *House* also allowed Edelstein to buy a home up on a hill with great views of East Los Angeles. “This is the House that *House* bought,” Edelstein says with some satisfaction.

Following *House*, Edelstein continued to appear in episodic TV, while also doing voice work for animated series such as *The Legend of Korra*. Another major milestone was the series *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce* in which for the first time Edelstein was the lead (and for which she won the Women's Image Award for best comedy actress two years running in 2015 and 2016). Edelstein describes working on the show as “truly a dream”: “I'm the lead. So I'm working 14 hours a day, which I love. It's up to me to make the tone of the set a great place to be, which I love.”

To state the obvious, Edelstein makes the point: “I was 48 when I got that job. To play a sexy, viable woman at that age... Doesn't happen much.” But more since then, as Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon all take a swing at TV. *Girlfriends' Guide* also gave Edelstein the opportunity to take her talents and

knowledge into new areas. During the course of the last season, she co-produced six episodes, wrote two episodes and directed one, as well as making several shorts.



NEW YORK, NEW YORK - DECEMBER 07: Lisa Edelstein and Robert Russell during the Lisa Edelstein: Family Exhibition Opening at SFA Advisory on December 07, 2022 in New York City. (Photo by Udo Salters/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images)

Another cliché Edelstein exploded was that a woman in her forties has somehow missed the boat on finding love or having a family. It was also during this same post-House period a decade ago that Edelstein married artist Robert Russell and became stepmom to his two children. And if you thought having a family was going to stop Edelstein from continuing on her journey of artistic exploration – well, you have not been paying attention to this article!

Recently she got to work with Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin as Arkin’s wayward daughter Phoebe on Chuck Lorre’s *The Kominsky Method*. “I got on that set, and it was without question made known to me that I belonged on the set... that is, for any actor, really all you need.” As opposed to super-functional Dr. Cuddy, Phoebe is just a mess, which was a welcome change for Edelstein.

During the early part of the pandemic, Edelstein appeared on *Lone Star 9-11*, which reunited her with Rob Lowe from her *West Wing Days*. Edelstein also worked on *Little Bird*, a limited series created by Jennifer Podemski and Hannah Moscovitch that has yet to air. Podemski’s father is Jewish, and her mother is from Muscowpetung First Nation in Saskatchewan. “It is about a woman who is searching for her birth family originally born in Saskatchewan. She was raised in a Jewish family in Montreal and on the eve of her engagement to a beautiful man, she decides to embark on a journey to find the truth of her past,” Podemski told APTN National news. Edelstein plays a Holocaust survivor. The series deals with the story of First Nation children taken from their families and given to families to adopt. “It was a really

profound experience to be there shooting on reservations with a mostly indigenous cast, hearing these stories [and] playing a Holocaust survivor.”

However, during the pandemic, Edelstein found herself during the first six months of the pandemic in total silence. At first, Edelstein said, “I did so many puzzles and I gave them all away.” She also watched every zombie apocalypse movie ever made. But then she started to make her magic marker drawings, and then the ink refill, and then watercolors. “I gave myself permission to really start making stuff again. I made a lot of drawings in high school, and it stopped because I didn’t want to ruin the paper.’ She said laughing.

Turning to making Art was a revelation: “One of the first things that I realized in the process of starting to draw and paint was that I didn’t have to wait for somebody to give me the opportunity to do it. And I learned how much I need to be doing things.” The vagaries of being an actor often means waiting for the right script and never knowing what will or will not work out. Even in the best of circumstances, there is plenty of waiting and downtime. In painting, Edelstein found something she could do that made her happy regardless of what else was going on. “Having this has been just a dream come true because I paint. I just had Covid. I made all of these paintings instead of just sitting there like a log.”

Being married to artist Robert Russell also gave her confidence to make her own work. “My husband is a remarkably talented man and a brilliant painter,” Edelstein wrote in a recent email. “I love watching what he does and have learned an enormous amount from him.”



NEW YORK, NEW YORK - DECEMBER 07: Lisa Schiff during Lisa Edelstein: Family Exhibition Opening at SFA Advisory on December 07, 2022 in New York City. (Photo by Udo Salters/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images)

When two different people recommended Edelstein’s work to Lisa Schiff, a prominent art adviser based in New York, Schiff decided she needed to check it out. She found much to love in Edelstein’s work, Schiff told me recently, beginning with how Edelstein captures the offhand quality of snapshots from an earlier era, the ‘70s quality to the furnishings and colors. “The layering of different textures and patterns is so interesting,” Schiff said. As well as the added Jewish dimension to Edelstein’s portraits, which Schiff finds important in this moment of renewed antisemitism.



"I definitely don't lean away from my Jewish roots" Edelstein wrote by email. "They are in my bones, literally. And, therefore, they are in my paintings." Those paintings are just the latest expression of Edelstein's life as an artist.

"I have always been a creative person.... I still get giddy when I drive on to a studio lot to work," Edelstein wrote me. "In the past few years, I've written and sold a few scripts, I've directed a few projects because I love storytelling and don't want to stop doing it, ever." And with Lisa Edelstein: Family she continues to write, or in this case, paint her own story as an artist. Her work is being seen. Lisa Edelstein is being seen.

Lisa Edelstein: Family will be on view at sfa Advisory until the end of January 2023. For more information see sfa advisory.