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Does art keep you young?

At some point, our author began to ask all the young artists beyond the eighty what keeps them so fresh. It's the hands of 93-year-old June Leaf.

Hans Ulrich Obrist (The Magazine)

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Every character in June Leaf's work is always on the move - as is the artist herself. "Untitled" (coastal line with figures), circa 1980.

Image: Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni

At the end of last year, I visited the artist June Leaf in her studio. She is a person with a magical charisma, and her work also has something magical - her paintings of landscapes and portraits, some of which are real, partly invent-

ed, her drawings or her wire sculptures, which are like in constant movement and seem to lead a life of their own. Leaf was the life partner of the famous Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank until his death, and although she is 93 years old, she has been working on her art day after day for over seventy years now.

There is no statistics I know about how old artists become compared to other professions, but my impression is that many grow exceptionally old and also look surprisingly young in old age, like Leaf. At some point I started asking all these young people beyond the eighty what keeps them so fresh.

Among the answers are general attempts at explanation such as exercise or good nutrition. Luchita Hurtado, she turned 99 years old, completely dispensed with sugar. However, most of the answers contained reasons that are more or less directly related to artistic work.

Above all, curiosity, many say, keeps her fresh. Trying out new things all the time and always standing in front of the white canvas, at a zero point, that challenges her and is enormously invigorating. When I asked June Leaf what she was so young, she thought about it for a while and then said something very nice: "Lucky hands." Happy hands - that means two things for her: that she is lucky enough to have such gifted hands that can draw, paint and model the most incredible things. *Lucky hands* but also because it makes the hands and their owner happy that they remain so active and in motion.

The work of June Leaf is really extraordinary - and there is still so much to discover in her oeuvre. For example, the old, iron Singer sewing machines, which she integrates into her mechanical, movable sculptures. Or their figures, who are always on the road, who balance, climb stairs, sometimes even fly.

Or the small metal objects that are intended to hold them in your hand. If you press a trigger, they begin to move. When I tried such a work, my hands were very happy.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries in London.