Art scholar Levin becoming a curator of her own work

By Catherine Fox
Staff Writer

An Atlanta freshman ducks into the flower-filled courtyard of a Boston museum to escape the unfamiliar northern chill and emerges a budding art historian.

The Atlantan is Gail Levin; the museum is the Isabella Stewart Gardner, and the story is not quite that simple. The tours that were required for entry did not spur a nascent interest in art fostered by her mother, herself a painter, and art classes in the basement of the old High Museum of Art. Honed by years of graduate study, that interest has developed into a varied and successful career.

Formerly Curator of the Edward Hopper Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Ms. Levin has organized exhibitions around the world and published numerous articles on that great American realist painter as well as other 20th century artists. She has, for example, contributed several catalog entries on the American artists who became Synchromists for "The Advent of Modernism: Post-Impressionism and North American Art 1900-1918," an upcoming High Museum exhibition, and will lecture on the subject after the show's March opening.

The scholar, curator and college art history instructor expanded her professional experience as well as her potential audience this year when she added talk show host to her resume. Ms. Levin is host and producer of "Art at Issue," a monthly segment of the late night Manhattan cable show, "Midnight Muse." She describes the show as a

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sort of salon, during which she and invited artists discuss their work and issues in which they share an interest.

And that is not all. The publication of her newest book, “Hopper’s Places” (Knopf, $10.95), reveals another dimension of her multifaceted career: photographer. The book pairs Hopper’s paintings of New England subjects with color photographs of those buildings taken by Ms. Levin.

An exhibition of the Hopper photos as well as her independent work at Fay Gold Gallery brought the 37-year-old Northside High alumna to her home town. Over a breakfast that included grits (though now a New Yorker, she hasn’t severed those Southern roots), Ms. Levin described how she segued to the flip side of her career as an art historian.

“I always had a camera. When I started, it was simply taking notes or taking pictures when I travel, which is all the time,” she said. “I studied at the Sorbonne my junior year and traveled to 15 countries. I found myself taking pictures in pairs or series. The idea of comparing probably came out of the double slide projection in art history class.”

She made her first photograph of a Hopper subject well before becoming a Hopper scholar. It was a snapshot of the lighthouse at Cape Elizabeth in Portland, Maine, which she visited while staying with a college friend as an undergraduate.

Most of the others were taken as adjuncts to her research on Hopper. “I wanted to see what Hopper saw, to see how he operated,” she explained.

This required her to don her gumshoes and wander around the areas that Hopper frequented in Mexico, Paris and the Southwest as well as the New England locales that are the focus of her book. With reproductions of paintings in hand, Ms. Levin would wander around a town, such as Gloucester Mass., looking for Hopper houses.

The search was fraught with obstacles. Time had changed many sites. Trees and bushes had grown tall. Houses had been remodeled, altered or altered the original view. And then there was the problem of architectural similarity. “All of Gloucester looks like Hopper painted it, which of course he didn’t,” Ms. Levin said.

Eventually, she hit the jackpot. As she said, “Once I could find one Hopper place, I looked around in the same area I could find more.” Asking area natives for help was occasionally fruitful. A visit to one fireman produced only false leads until one fireman recognized

GAIL LEVIN: ‘I still find his work incredibly interesting.’

interesting,” she said. “He must be a great artist if I’m not bored.”

Comparing the photos with the paintings offered Ms. Levin some interesting insights. She discovered that Hopper manipulated his compositions, especially building proportions, to achieve his expressive aims. For example, he made the buildings appear narrower and taller. Given Hopper’s height (he was 6’5”), this adjustment, she posits, was a means of self-identification. Omitting adjacent buildings or landscaping from his compositions made the buildings appear isolated — a projection of his own loneliness.

The photographs in “Hopper’s Places” are essentially documentary. Ms. Levin has followed Hopper as closely as possible, right down to trying to emulate his point of view. Ostensibly, the other group of photographs are quite different. Taken mostly in exotic places Ms. Levin has visited — from Central America to Nepal and China — the photos include spontaneous portraits, images of religious practices and dolls or mannequins.

Yet, in these photographs, too, life imitates art history. Ms. Levin relates her interest in dolls and mannequins to Surrealist use of these images. (She also noted that she has kept her own dolls, each packed away in its own shoebox with precocious curator’s care.) Her attraction to religious icons has plenty of precedents in art history.

She compares her compositional preferences to Hopper and, through his interest, to Degas. The use of intersecting diagonals and placement of heads and figures above the point of intersection is, for example, a device Degas favored. In “Little Red-headed Buddhist” of the red-shirted Buddhist sitting in lotus position and staring into the camera is a good example.

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Eventually, she hit the jackpot. As she said, "Once I would find one Hopper place, if I looked around in the same area I could find more." Asking area natives for help was occasionally fruitful. A visit to a fire station produced only false leads until one fireman recognized one of the buildings as his mother's house.

Not everyone shared her excitement over her discoveries. "I went up to a man painting a house and said, 'Did you know that Edward Hopper painted this place?' He replied, 'All I know, lady, is that I'm painting it now.'"

That her passion for Hopper is incomprehensible to many people is exemplified by a 1980 newspaper article that began, "The man in Gail Levin's life has been dead for 13 years." Perhaps only another scholar could understand how Ms. Levin could spend nine years studying one artist. She noted that her enthusiasm for the subject has actually grown since she began.

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Ms. Levin is drawn to brightly colored environments and culturally specific scenes. Photographing a festival in Bali, she captures the costumed dancer at the moment his hand is cupped in that graceful, almost double-jointed gesture associated with Oriental dancers.

The exotic locales, rich coloration and expressive physiognomy she captures make for seductive pictures. And the act of photography has seduced the artist. Ms. Levin, who is soon moving to an apartment with a darkroom, said, "After all those years of being an art historian, I'm really enjoying being on the other side."

"Hopper's Places." Fay Gold Gallery, 3221 Cains Hill Place. Through Dec. 31. 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Free. 233-3843.