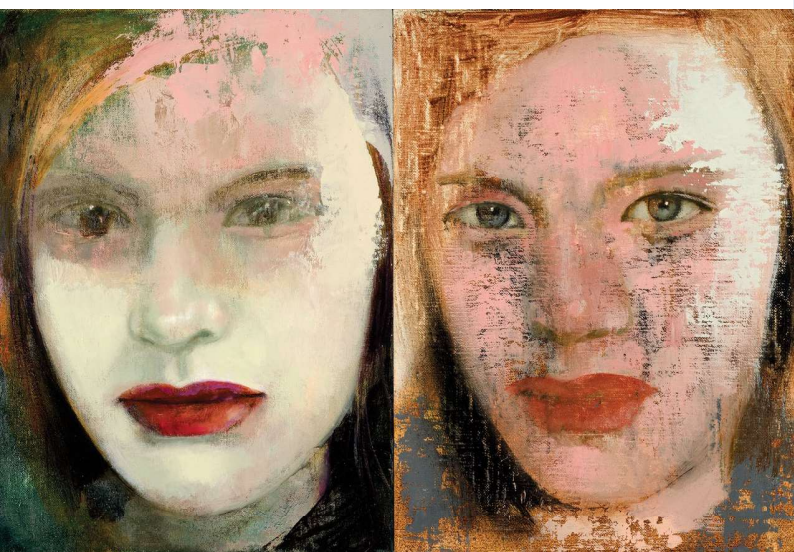


SUSAN MOORE

Likeness #7, 2014
Oil on Panel, 8 x 12 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

West Finding Solace in Ocean Places

pots in my garden to tell me about his medication. He's really talking this stuff up, as if he wants me to join him in these particular pills, as if we could synch our chemistry as well as our geography. We don't vote for the same people, but I'm a good listener, he's a good talker. No conversation with him lasts less than twenty-five minutes. My collar is twisted and my heart is shredded after each one, because I've clocked it and know without a doubt that in the same amount of time spent nodding in mild agreement with whatever he says, I could be at the sandy edge of the continent on my way east by west.

I don't play my cards right; I never have. Rather than crab, I'll order the pollock, cheaper by a dollar a pound. Same with men, jobs: I choose the much worse one to save a buck. Then it takes forever to unsnare me from the trap I laid for myself. That's how I ended up here, alone, at this age: by taking too long to get out of bad situations. I am living and facing west, the direction of optimism, but I am having a hard time getting it to go from the landscape into the bloodstream.

My landlord will not shut up about the drugs, two of them, the way they help him get out of bed and DO STUFF. His message must be for me. No one could be this interested in hearing himself—not even a man, not even an old person. He has daughters my age living far away and a wife divorced long ago. He has no one left to hammer for, no female to curate. He sees me facing west day after day, sometimes heading there with or without my surfboard or my kayak. He watches the mailbox, the driveway: he knows I've received neither letter nor visitor in some time, and I'm not doing much to encourage either.

One afternoon he caught me crying, and he stood there looking at the air just off to the side as my sadness emerged in thin streams. He was wearing a padded flannel shirt and a cap to protect his bald head from the chill. "It'll be all right," he told me, though I had not told him what "it" was. If you spend most of your adult life with daughters and a wife, even if they are no longer in the picture, that phrase must come automatically. And it works, as well as anything. As well as drugs. As well as ocean. As well as west.

Given the choice, I'll take west. Of the directions, of the ways we can face, of the locations for windows and doorways. Not that east doesn't offer rosebuds, even the astonishing bluebird. Also, if you keep heading east you will get west, and vice versa. Such is the physical logic sewn into a globe. Here I am on the very day of the year that the tilt edges back up from its most extreme and fragments of seconds get added onto light rather than dark. I have a window on three directions, all but north—which is a very good direction, one of the best for getting things done, but not so good for letting in brightness or warmth, so if you're going to have a window not facing somewhere, north would be the where. I choose the west window day or night, regardless of sunrise or streetlights or neighbors or my landlord making his rounds around the grounds on his golf cart. If I were to get in my car and drive in this direction, I would hit the end of the continent in twenty-five minutes, and that's with twists in the road. If I were then to board some sort of craft that could withstand many, many days of open ocean—we're not talking a cardboard raft here—and continue due west, I would eventually end up in Asia, a continent that houses countries we call Eastern. In other words, I am so far west the next step is east.

My landlord, who lives next door, catches me staring west and weaves himself through the stones, shells, and