

The former competitive swimmer turned artist on solitude, the body in water and how to leave something behind.

Leanne Shapton

In conversation with
Carmen Winant

Photography by
Michael Schmelling



Leanne Shapton's life has had an unusual trajectory. Born and raised in Toronto, she was a competitive swimmer from a young age—influenced, as the story often goes, by an older brother who gave up the sport long before she did. Shapton was good. She competed in two Olympic trials in 1988 and 1992—coming close to qualifying for the Games. As a young adult, she left competitive swimming behind to embark on a whole new kind of life. Since that time, Shapton has worked as an artist, writer, graphic novelist and art director. In addition to founding J&L books with Jason Fulford, she has published five books—*Toronto, Was She Pretty?*; *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*; *The Native Trees of Canada*, and her most recent, *Swimming Studies*. In *Swimming Studies*, Shapton faces her past with the tools of her present; the discipline of swimming—or a life dedicated to athletics—is understood through the prism of an artist. The book, which is difficult to classify, gets closer to promoting the feeling of swimming than anything I've read. Shapton herself has said to this end, "I tried to make the structure feel like water... when you break the surface of water, you see things magnified and telescoped. Everything kaleidoscopes."

Carmen Winant: I'm wondering about the relationship of solitude and discipline. Do you think that the isolation inherent to a sport like swimming somehow prepared you for the life of an artist? That isn't to say that artists are antisocial, but there is a kind of arduous, self-governing routine necessary to making work.

hunched over a desk, in solitude, working. But when given a chance to be social, they open up and are wonderful conversationalists and companions. Athletes can have that sort of exuberance when they're not training or performing too. That need for camaraderie. Just think of the noise on a bus full of athletes, if they're not sleeping...

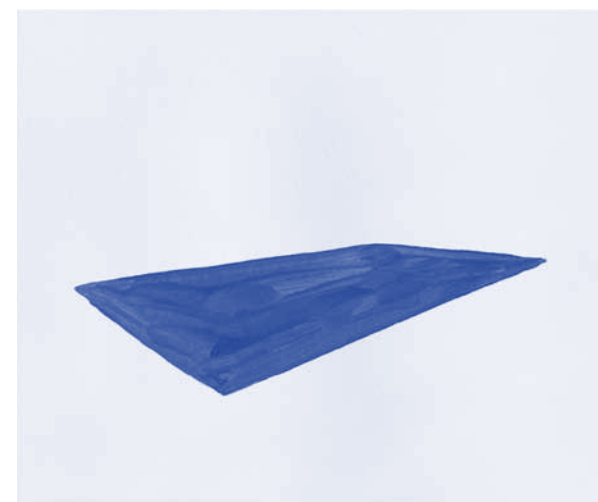
CW: Did you keep a journal during your time in swimming?

LS: I didn't keep a journal until I quit the first time, in 1989. I began one then and have ever since, so I did keep one through the time I returned to swimming and trained for the 1992 trials.

CW: There are so many vivid details in your book, *Swimming Studies*—specific descriptions of smells, tastes, sounds—that I couldn't help but wonder [about the journal]. I was a competitive runner when I was younger, but I ran so many miles when I was competing and training that most of it bleeds together now, years later. What I have left as records are my running logs, which are full of

Leanne Shapton: I think you're right, sure. Artists do need to draw on things that are private and solitary and it's all about putting in hours. I think swimming prepared me to be self-reliant and comfortable with time just spent experimenting, alone, at a table. It also prepared me to look at something uninteresting that needed to be done in order to get to something interesting—with what I think of as a 'workhorse' sort of attitude; as in: "Ok. Here we are at the start of this boring part, just put your head down and go." Which is how you feel at the beginning of a workout when the water is cold and your knees ache.

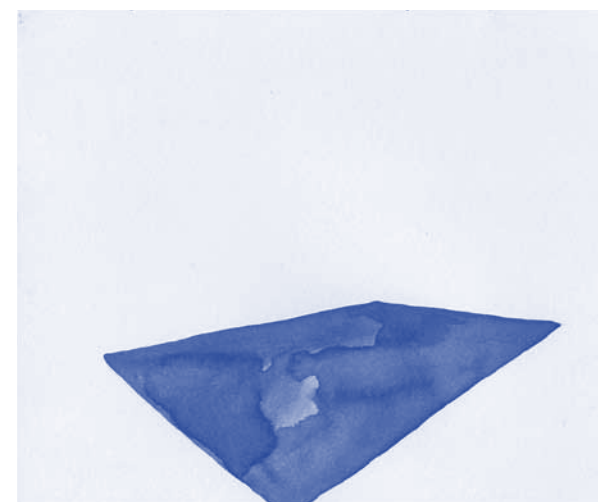
On the other hand I was always struck—when I worked as an art director—by how chatty and social some illustrators were and I realized it was because they spent so much time



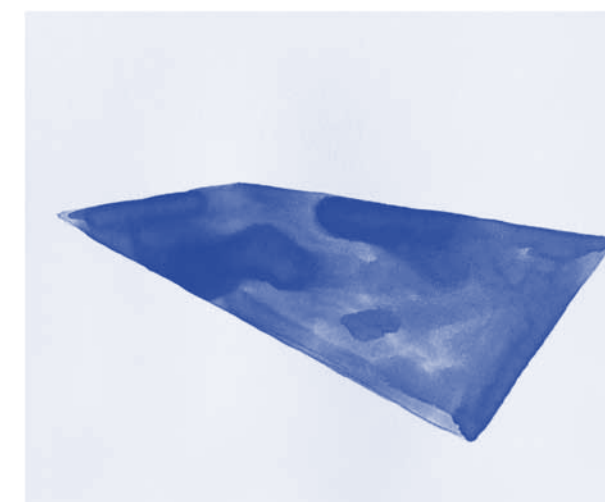
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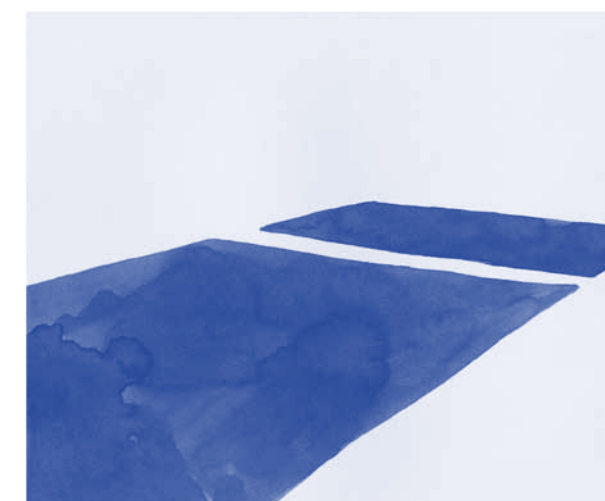
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Swimming Studies, 2012. p. 305.

1. Holiday Inn City West, Berlin
2. Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre, Brantford, Ontario
3. Holiday Inn Express & Suites, Minneapolis

4. Cawthra Pool, Mississauga, Ontario
5. Thermae Bath Spa rooftop pool, Bath, England
6. Pan Am Pool, Winnipeg, Manitoba

numbers and comments about weather. Other than “felt fast today” or “cramped up near the end” there are very few details about what I was actually feeling.

LS: Oddly the most vivid memories came from the time I did not keep one, from when I was 13, 14 and 15. I don’t know what it was about that time—maybe some part of me knew how rare and weird it was to be in that situation, and so my mind crystallized details. There was so much I loved about having that much potential, being believed in and being that *fast*. But at the same time I knew it wasn’t exactly *me*. It’s difficult to explain, somehow I was watching myself in this crazy subculture, but not fully owning it or believing I belonged.

It was funny to go back and piece together, from my journal, what happened at the 1992 Olympic Trials, a meet I remember little of. You’d think such an important meet would register more strongly but it didn’t. I forgot whom I roomed with, that I saw *Lethal Weapon 3* between events, what place I finished. I have vague memories of a brown and white polka-dot dress I had with me. Nothing nearly as vivid as the bus trips, smells, meals and little provincial meets I’d competed at four years earlier.

CW: I am wondering about the idea of deliberately leaving something behind. Swimming was the cornerstone of your young life in many ways. The theme of this issue of WAX is ‘territories,’ and that got me thinking about the territory of self-identification, and the distinct boundary between being an athlete and not being one (the second chapter in your book, after all, is titled *Quitting*).

LS: I like the idea of calling these selves “territories.” There is something about possessing an identity—and then suddenly and very clearly not having that any more—that feels like a crossing threshold or boundary. It was more of a crisis in 1989, when I quit at (what my coach would have said was) the peak of my potential. I got depressed. I wondered who I was. I threw myself into an identity as a hard-working, over-achieving, vice-pres-of-the-student-council, art major at the arts high school I attended. I devoured films and music and gorged on all of the culture I’d missed out on when I was at swim practice. But when high school ended, I went back to the pool. So I never really shook—or wanted

to shake—that identity completely. Walking away from the pool the second time was easier. I wasn’t as fast, didn’t need that fix and I’d established, to some small degree, who I was outside of swimming.

CW: You returned to competition in your 30s, even if just a race here or there within your age division. That was so interesting to me—after I left running I never wanted to compete again! Leaving that part of athletic life behind came as a huge relief (then again, I was never that drawn to competing). What about competition did you miss? Is it the desire to have a metric of your own fitness or athletic facility? Are you chasing that feeling of pure, delightful exhaustion or perhaps something else all together?

LS: Well, I wouldn’t call it a return to competition, it was an experiment. I wanted to see if I had any of that drive left, and it turned out, even though I went relatively fast, I didn’t. The analogy would be like sleeping with an ex. A beloved ex.

It was as you describe—I had no strong urge to compete again, but I was curious to see how I felt if I did. I wondered why, when I had this innate skill, I didn’t want to use it. And I very plainly did not. There was some kind of weird snobbery involved too, as in, why would I bother if the stakes were not Olympic? I was interested in looking at that. I think it goes back to territory, if you’ve left a place on one set of terms, you don’t always want to return on another.

CW: I’m glad you returned to territories. It got me thinking about the borderlines between kinds of water. Namely, the pool versus the ocean. In the book, you describe experiences in both. Obviously, the vast majority of your training was in that pool environment...

LS: The pool feels like an extension of myself, like a pair of roomy, warm Mukluks or an old pair of sweatpants or something. I know exactly where I am and who I am in a pool.

CW: What did and does it feel like to swim in the sea after that? You have some really poignant passages about ocean swimming in your book—all which strike me as wild





and dangerous... people nearly drowning, gasping for air, etc. The pool must feel tame by comparison.

LS: Swimming in the sea feels so much more mysterious and romantic and dangerous. One is so small in that landscape! My imagination goes crazy, thus the games of 'shipwreck' as a kid and the feelings of responsibility and vigilance and fear as an adult. But there is also nothing that can compare to an ocean or open water swim—that exhilaration is part of what makes it so fun. And the waves... I could get buffeted by waves for hours. But if I'm in very deep water I hate to open my eyes until I can see the bottom. It's like a fear of the dark.

CW: I wonder if it's more useful to consider the boundary between bodies and the water, rather than between kinds of water? The first line of the whole book gets at this margin: "Water is elemental, it's what we are made of, what we can't live within or without."

LS: Writing the book did make me think constantly about the body *in* water. How, doing something so physical is all about embodiment, yet water and its properties can lend a disembodied weightlessness and, while not invisibility—though that is part of it—but a hyper-corporality; an exaggerated and simultaneously diminished sensation of limbs and trunk and head. There is nothing like being in water. I like my mind and body to be shifted that way. And there is something concealing about water. It's private, yet you are essentially naked in it. It envelops and soaks you but you are weirdly waterproof. In a sense it is the opposite of territorial, as there is no *terre*.

CW: Does the boundary between pleasurable and painful discipline exist for you?

LS: Just now, in my head, my automatic answer to you was: THERE IS ALWAYS A SLOG. I see discipline as how you approach the slog. Not really pleasure. Pleasure comes after, or might come in a mastering of technique and sharpening of instincts, or pride. But it helps me to see the tough bit unromantically. That it is what you have to be extremely patient to get through. Then [the slog] is not so dreadful and, in retrospect, can even be the most satisfying part.

CW: You say in your book that every time you swim, you do 100 laps. In your honor, I tried to do that in the pool yesterday. I got to 36. One hundred is a lot of laps! I was moved by the way that your mind seems to oscillate between counting and drifting in the pool—the memories that surface feel both random and profound. Can you tap your subconscious mind (if we can call it that) anywhere but in the pool?

LS: When I was pregnant I took that number down to between 25 and 40 laps, and gave myself a huge break. I loved being in the lane marked *slow* for the first time in my life. I bounced along the bottom a lot because that weightlessness felt so good. It was so different to how I usually swim my laps.

I think I sometimes tap that floaty mind whenever I do something that resembles those laps. It was interesting to see that the German publisher re-titled the book *Bahnen Zeihen*, which roughly translates to "Doing Laps." Swimming laps becomes a really creative idea.



While two of our teammates swim a long-distance event, Jen and I pull on their track pants and wide, dirty sneakers, zip up their parkas—Joe and Conrad embroidered on the shoulders—pull the damp hoods low over our heads, and walk quickly through the men's locker room. Afraid to raise my head, I see only bare feet and more wide, dirty sneakers.