

# JOHANNES VOGT

Griffin, Jonathan, "Mernet Larsen 'Chainsawar, Bicyclist and Reading in Bed,'" *Art Review*, May 2015

## ArtReview



*Explanation*, 2007, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 104 x 132 cm.  
Courtesy Various Small Fires, Los Angeles

### Mernet Larsen *Chainsawar, Bicyclist and Reading in Bed Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, 28 February-11 April*

What's the most grindingly dull subject you can think of for painting? How about a college faculty meeting? Seventy-five-year-old Mernet Larsen, of Tampa Florida, has made a whole series of paintings depicting meetings at the art school in which she still teaches. Two of them are included in this exhibition, and boring they are not.

Larsen, who until recently had showed very little outside the East Coast, has devised a parallel semiotic universe in which the ordinary becomes janglingly peculiar. Lines of perspective are inverted or rendered dead parallel, and humans are plotted as amalgams of sharp-edged polyhedrons. In some paintings, figures have close-to-natural proportions, but in others, such as *Sit-ups, Leg-lifts* (2012), the body is drawn as a plank with feet. Larsen's paintings frequently look as if they were programmed by an equation with one or two wayward variables.

What hauls the works back from the brink of unrelatable oddness is Larsen's eye for textured surfaces, and the effects of light upon them. She has developed a technique of painting on panels of tracing paper that she sticks to the canvass, compartmentalising sharp-edged fields of colour. In *Explanation* (2007), one of the meetig pictures, Larsen captures the streaky patterns of institutional linoleum under flourescent light so accurately that you feel like you're in the room- which makes the painting all the more

discombobulating because the perspective is flipped inside out, the biggest floor tiles appearing to be on the cieling. For Greek and Russian icon painters, reverse perspective had a specific theological purpose: to project the sacred image into the spatial realm of the human. For Larsen, it is more of a perceptual puzzle, an order of representation that allows us-compels us, in fact- to climb around inside the picture rather than to stand outside it and peer in.

She does this not in order to be clever, or even to make us conscious of our own process of appreciation. Larsen wants us to look as if for the first time at social behaviors that would normally not warrent a second thought. In *Handshake* (2001), a man and woman dressed in business casual evoke two colossi performing a magnificent slow dance. *Salad* (2013) shows an unremarkable meal being shared by three people and includes an empty chair that suggests you can join them. Boredom and blandness in Larsen's world are nonissues. The world is what you make it, she seems to tell us. Despite Larsen's cool palette and deadened affect, these are not pictures of alienation, but humanist studies for a posthuman age. *Jonathan Griffin*

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## Review Mernet Larsen probes perception and experience

By SHARON MIZOTA  
APRIL 1, 2015

Please forgive me for suggesting that Mernet Larsen's thoroughly remarkable paintings are reminiscent of a Dire Straits video. If you spent any time in the 1980s watching MTV, you know the one: an early example of digital animation, all blocky volumes and stilted movement.

Yet Larsen's work is much stranger and more disorienting. The 75-year-old Florida artist's exhibition at Various Small Fires — her first in L.A. — goes beyond a superficial resemblance to digital imagery to probe the vagaries of perception and physical experience.

Larsen's figures are often more like furniture than people. In "Subway," the flattened arms of a trench coat-wearing rider nearly break the picture into quadrants. Extremely skewed perspectives also twist and upend expectations.

### SHARELINES

Paintings by Mernet Larsen, who has show at Various Small Fires, are called 'thoroughly remarkable'; a review



Mernet Larsen, "Explanation," 2007. (Courtesy of Various Small Fires)

In "Explanation," the same expanse of tiles serves as both floor and ceiling, as figures in at least four different sizes perch at wildly distorted tables. If you've ever sat for hours in a soulless institutional meeting room, you will understand the vertigo.

Although they are perhaps equally reductive, Larsen's pictorial strategies make an end run around Cubism; instead of disintegrating the picture plane in a flurry of facets, the paintings seem to fold and extrude it into ever more concrete volumes. They look like space sometimes feels: thick, unvarnished and bluntly weird.

Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave.,  
(310) 426-8040, through April 11. Closed Sunday and Monday.  
[www.vsf.la](http://www.vsf.la)

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## Los Angeles Times

### Datebook: Art about the aqueduct, marijuana growers, warped perspectives

Carolina A. Miranda | March 5, 2015



Paintings that play with everything you think you are seeing ... photographs that chronicle Northern California's marijuana cultivation industry ... and a thorough examination of that vital piece of infrastructure that gives life to our city: the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Plus, a show that's all about paintings and the latest short films. Here are five new shows to see in L.A. this week, plus a selection of the best ongoing art events:

**"Mernet Larsen: Chainsawer, Bicyclist, and Reading in Bed" at Various Small Fires.** Paintings that distort and bend perspective. Larsen's work is representational — showing blocky, video game-like figures in an array of activities — but her industrial Modernism-meets-M.C.-Escher-style settings will toy with your sense of perception. *Through April 11. 812 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood, [vsf.la](http://vsf.la).*

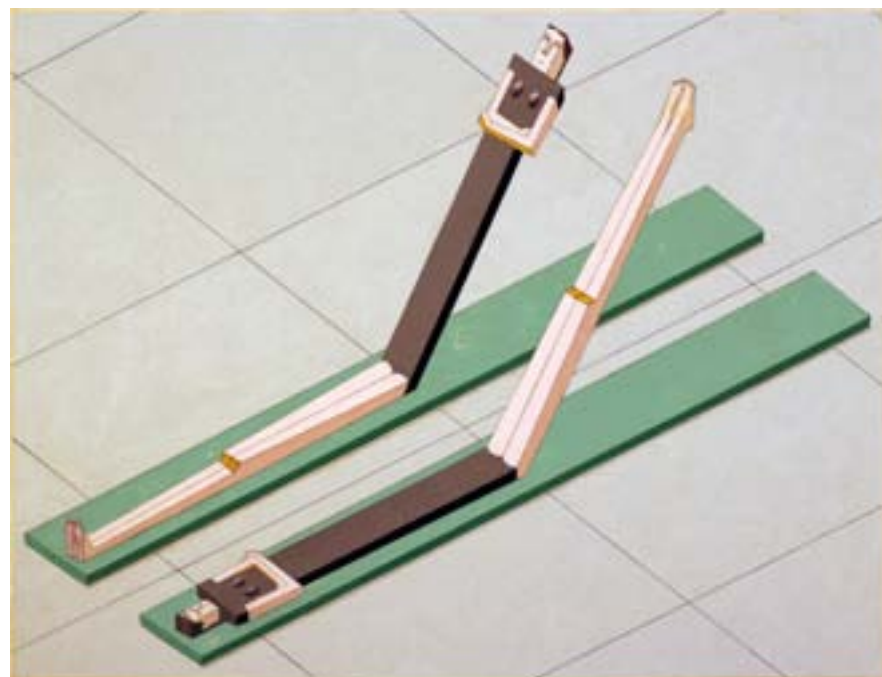
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## HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

**Meet Mernet Larsen, A 75-Year-Old Painter Who's Hosting Her First Art Show In L.A.**

**By Priscilla Frank**

**March 2, 2015**



Reading Tolstoy in bed. Exercising on a sea foam green mat. Enjoying pizza and beer with old friends. These are the humdrum subjects crystallized in Mernet Larsen's paintings. Through Larsen's gaze, the everyday happenings stretch and warp into uncanny structures you vaguely recognize but can't quite pinpoint. Staring at a painting feels like dreaming about an old friend, yet envisioning him with an altogether different face.

Mernet Larsen, at 75 years old, has only recently begun to show her work outside her home state of Florida. The artist has been painting avidly since the 1960s, and has served as an art professor at the University of South Florida since 1967. In 2012, Roberta Smith reviewed her exhibition at Vogt Gallery in New York, contending "her efforts are extremely viable participants in an extensive, possibly global

conversation about how to portray modern, three-dimensional life on two-dimensional surfaces."

Larsen's upcoming solo exhibition "Chainsawer, Bicyclist, and Reading in Bed," is her first in Los Angeles. And it's the artist's first time in the city as well.

When Larsen was first entering the art world, abstraction, concept and form reigned supreme. As artists like Peter Saul have attested, the 1960s were not kind to artists interested in content -- everything was form. "I was kind of discouraged about art because, at that point in time, art was very much abstract expressionism, period," Larsen explained to The Huffington Post. "Very academic, very intellectual, like Joseph Albers."

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Even before Larsen knew for certain that she wanted to be an artist, she knew what kind of art she yearned to create. "I remembered having the thought that I didn't want to express myself through my art. My life was fairly mundane at that point; I was living at home. So I didn't want to *express* my life, I wanted to give meaning to my life. It had to be a constructed thing. Also, I wanted to make it from my experiences. I didn't want to do something abstract, and I didn't want to deal with intellectual issues. I thought, if I can do those things through art, I want to be an artist."

The deciding moment came one day in 1960 when Larsen, disillusioned by the breach between art and life, was determined to give art school one last try. Sketchbook in hand, she embarked on a walk, taking a professor's advice to draw what she saw. After feeling increasingly discouraged, she stumbled upon a pack of cows, in her words, "bright red cows on yellow ground." She started drawing "like crazy," and the drawings eventually turned into paintings.

"They were pivotal paintings for me," she explained. "All the paintings I've done since are kind of like those cows."

The cows illuminated a principle that would carry Larsen throughout her artistic career. "What you see determines how you see it, that has pretty much governed my whole life. The content determines the form. The way I saw cows, for example, was really different from how I saw a sofa in my living room at home. So I started concentrating on one item at a time and thinking -- how will this make me work? I did my sisters jumping in the living room, dancing to the music. I did aquariums, I did the insides of cars. Everything that I did and focused on gave me a different way of working. I had to accommodate my way of working to those things. More or less, that's still true of the way I work now."

Although form's dominion over content is no longer as prevalent today, Larsen attributes many contemporary artists' vocations to that former aesthetic climate. "I feel like a lot of us who are now in our 60s and 70s were trained in an atmosphere of formalism and abstraction, and all that was a springboard for what we did. That seems like the

mantra of my generation, moving from abstraction toward figuration. It was in the air, so we all felt it." In particular, Larsen creates alternate realities in which geometric structures resembling human beings stretched and calcified. The totem-like specimens engage in everyday activities like you and I, though the everyday laws of physics and gravity don't seem to apply. Her wonky perspectives leave the viewer thoroughly enmeshed in the banal yet intimate scenes, whether hovering above a precarious chainsaw or awkwardly close to a leg stretching regimen.

Larsen refers to her depictions as "analogues" rather than "representations," seeing as they are constructed in the mind, not observed with the eye. "I think the idea sort of started with Roland Barthes and some things that he wrote about Japanese art," said Larsen. "The idea is that in Japanese theater, the puppets weren't little imitations of people, they were actually something that ran parallel to people. They weren't little fetishes of people. There were other kinds of structures that were performed like people but in analogous ways, rather than imitative ways."

Because of the geometric semblance of Larsen's pictorial world, it's often associated with the alienation and digital dependence of contemporary life. While Larsen doesn't object to this reading, it was never her intention. "People often look at the works and say, "Oh, these look like computer generated images." But if you look at them, they have no system like that. There's no adherence to anatomy. The structures give you enough clues to think they're conventional figures, but when you look at them, they're not. They're just structures. They're structures that work in an analogous way to people and situations you recognize, but they get at some more essential quality and they also defamiliarize with conventions. You are able to see them in a fresh way, hopefully."

In a statement for Various Small Fires, Larsen explained her series of recent works being "as if I were leaving this life and had to take with me only a very few concrete images: this is what it was, not good, not bad, just what stood out. Not ephemeral,

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not photo or film-like, but memory turned into object, monumentalized.”

When asked, Larsen explained the works aren't reactions against photography in itself, but to the way photography is experienced by the viewer. "I feel like photographs, no matter how I use them, put you in the spectator position. You're always observing things from the outside. And I wanted you to be in a situation, where you were more involved in it. So, what I use are these perspectival ploys -- diverse perspective, parallel perspective. Like Martin Ramirez, whose work I love. You're always sort of moving around inside the painting; you can never quite figure out where you're standing, so you kind of absorb it. Matisse does that too for me too. And a lot of Japanese art, from the 12th century particularly. They bring you inside and outside the space, you have no particular position. You can't quite get your bearings. And yet, I want you to have a sense of orient, a sense of mass, a sense of depth."



In essence, Larsen's paintings let you have your aesthetic cake and eat it too. The canvases capture origami worlds where remarkably familiar details like linoleum flooring, red checkered tablecloths, and unflattering eyeglasses are coupled with bizarre intrusions -- breasts like sideways pyramids, legs that stretch on for days, ears fastened to floating cubes for no apparent reason. What Larsen creates is an alternate reality, assembled, styled and governed on nothing but its own terms.

Stare-at-a-couch-until-you-stumble-upon-a-couch-way of seeing. Stare-at-the-subway-until-you-discover-a-subway way of seeing. Stare-at-a-cow-until-you-chance-on-a-cow way of seeing. Suddenly the stuff of everyday life is looking pretty alien and living at home isn't quite so dull.

*Mernet Larsen's "Chainsawer, Bicyclist, and Reading in Bed" runs until April 11, 2015 at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles.*



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## ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Los Angeles

**Mernet Larsen**

**VARIOUS SMALL FIRES**

**812 North Highland Avenue**

**February 28–April 11**

Encountering the paintings of Mernet Larsen for the first time can feel a bit like discovering a new exotic fruit or hearing an alien tongue: The worldview they picture is strange to the senses and thrillingly outlandish, like a surprise that is meticulously constructed and fully realized, exceedingly complex and fiercely independent. Larsen's impact registers all at once with the force built up from a lifetime spent gradually developing, maturing, and testing her own eccentric visual language in representational painting. It's a language that articulates figures through an abstract declension of simple geometric shapes, turning bodies into exceedingly odd, Lego-like totems. Stick figures of a very high order.

Cartoonish and toylite in the best sense, Larsen's figures are implausible analytic reductions in the manner of academic figure-drawing exercises. Their dramatically stretched anatomies are rendered as flat boardlike surfaces and blocky volumes. The look may have an initial resonance with the digital pixel-thick compression of early video games, but the similarities are mainly morphological and don't begin to capture the hyperbolic weirdness of the spatial illusions and warped, isometric perspectives she achieves. In *Explanation*, 2007, for instance, perspective is inverted in more ways than one as what pass for "bodies" grow larger the farther away they appear and the green linoleum-panel floor expands upward, out the top of the picture plane (with the vanishing point at the bottom), so that it simultaneously represents the ceiling. Space bends over and pops its innie out. In *Rounion*, 2014, the red-checkered table that is its centerpiece seems to wobble drunkenly and tip precariously forward, lurching—in fact, the whole scene threatens to slip off its support.

Larsen's sense of space is both very shallow and very deep. Her hard-edge figures are blockheads with stone faces, clubfeet, and two by fours for limbs, yet they are incredibly tender and full of pathos, metaphor. The effect is woozy, vertiginous, hilarious, and shockingly strong—an everyday revelation.

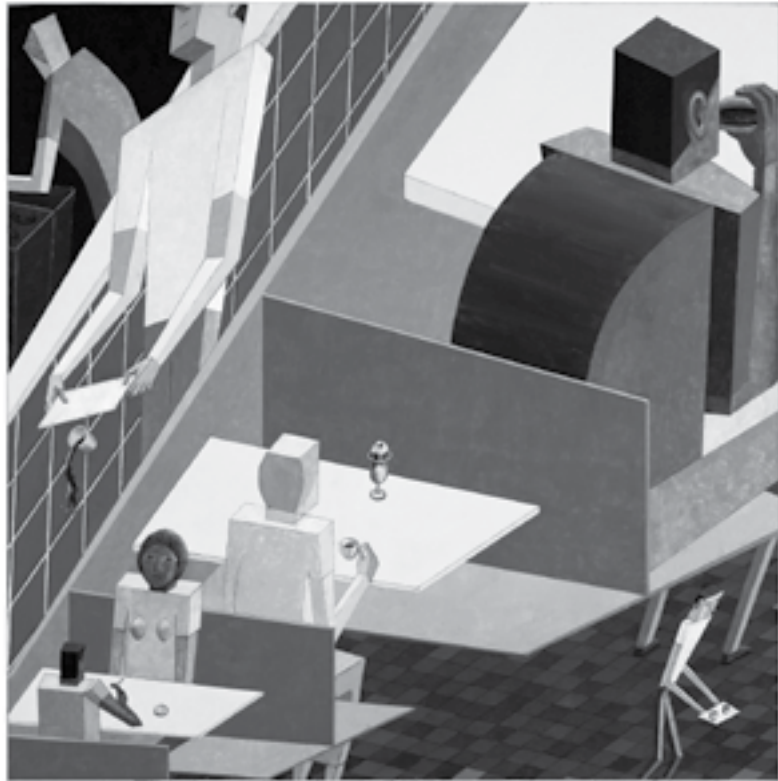
— Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



Mernet Larsen, *Aw*, 2003, acrylic and tracing paper on canvas, 40 x 66".

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The New York Times  
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2012



Mernet Larsen's "Café" (2012), in the Vogt gallery's three-part showing of her paintings.

## Mernet Larsen "Three Chapters"

Vogt  
526 West 26th Street,  
Chelsea  
Through Oct. 27

At 72, Mernet Larsen is making her New York gallery debut with a three-part show of paintings. These works navigate the divide between abstraction and representation with a form of geometric figuration that owes less to Cubo-Futurism than to de Chirico, architectural rendering and early Renaissance painting of the Sieneese kind. They relish human connection and odd, stretched out, sometimes contradictory perspectival effects, often perpetuated by radical shifts in scale.

In "Places" (through Wednesday), the second of the show's three chapters, Ms. Larsen's robotic figures hold faculty meetings, frequent coffee shops and malls, and travel on stretched-out roads whose vanishing points occur in the middle of nowhere. Eyes and gestures imbue her protagonists' blocky forms with unexpected individuality. Occasional details — like the spilling coffee in "Café" — also enliven the prevailing geometry, as do her subtle, slightly bleached-out palette, feeling for surprisingly real light and careful attention to different surface treatments. These contrasting paint textures give the works a firm foothold in reality and reward up-close viewing, which enmeshes the eye in both their spatial paradoxes and everyday moods.

Three decades ago Ms. Larsen's work might have been called regional, as were the paintings of astute figurative stylists like Jim Nutt, Peter Saul and Roy De Forest. Today her efforts are extremely viable participants in an extensive, possibly global conversation about how to portray modern, three-dimensional life on two-dimensional surfaces. I look forward to this show's final chapter, "Narratives," opening Thursday. **ROBERTA SMITH**

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## ART PAPERS

May/ June 2011  
By Felicia Feaster  
"Frances Barth + Mernet Larsen"

In their recent work, painters Frances Barth and Mernet Larsen tackle abstracted landscapes by way of cool, creamy color schemes (Marcia Wood Gallery; February 26—April 9, 2011).

Looking at Larsen's figurative work next to her landscapes, it's hard not to gravitate toward the former's grim comedy, telling details, and air of oddness. The work is simply more fascinating when it examines content instead of form. As if she had run cubism through a technological sausage grinder, Larsen's figures resemble 3D computer-rendered humanoids. Her use of perspective is a gas, rendering the world into exaggerated spheres of importance where some figures are puny and diminished while others reach Japanese-monster-movie enormity. Larsen tends to scrub out extraneous details in her chalky-looking acrylic landscapes, so that the figures and environments become amplified like the punch line in a political cartoon. There is certainly an element of spare humor in her landscapes, but it can't hold a candle to the delicious quirkiness of pieces like *Resurrection*, 2006, which stages her typical blocky people on minimalist backgrounds. As Christ rises from the dead and into the sky, his disciples genuflect below him. The undulating hills behind Christ echo his floating form. A chicken stands on the edge of the picture plane, observing the human drama. Larsen's pleasingly strange juxtaposition of singular personal style and timeless theme creates an effect akin to a crèche done by Lego.

There is a vaguely ominous and foreboding quality to Larsen's work, attributable in part to her peculiar combination of non-sequitur humor and deadly—or undeadly—seriousness. This may be due to the sense that her figures' institutional settings stifle them or that disaster looms at the edges of the work. In *Flat Tire*, 2010, two Western tourists dressed in practical sandals and hats stand at the highway's sidelines in what appears to be a vast Middle Eastern or African desert landscape. Tendered in Larsen's whimsical perspective, their bus is a tiny bug-like thing on a yellow-brick-road curling highway, a flat tire at its side. A barefoot figure in

a long robe stands in the upper left of the canvas—invisible to the couple whose backs are turned—suggesting an imminent change to their situation, good or bad. Larsen's delightful comic juxtapositions are also at play in *Tanks*, 2006, depicting a war room from a slightly elevated viewpoint. This emphasizes both the imposing seated figures and the enormity of the model tanks placed on the heavy grey table before them. Here, perspective enhances the oppressiveness of institutions.

Barth's work aims for a more formalist proposition, combining a whimsical color scheme with a use of line that dabbles in the aridly comic to put forth an analytical study of space. She creates a world that can suggest life seen from above, simplified into grids and borderlines. Yet, her quirky hand-drawn lines add personality and interest. There's something of a subdued Philip Guston sparkle to the work. *Vigil*, 2010, exemplifies Barth in a more whimsical mode. Here, a human-like seated figure—an exceptional insertion in the artist's more typical methodical devotion to landscape and architecture—seems to be contemplating his own likeness on a TV screen.

Though their work is distinct, each artist cuts from her own unique cloth, bringing a pleasing blend of aloof formalism and the occasional assertion of oddball fun to her paintings.

—Felicia Feaster

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## ARTCAT

Jonathan Butt and Mernet Larsen  
Top Pick

Regina Rex  
March 19 - April 17, 2011  
Opening: Saturday, March 19, 7 - 10 PM



In the narrowing chasm between rational and virtual architectures, the works of Jonathan Butt and Mernet Larsen provide a vertiginous perspective on the state of quotidian space. Made of wood, plaster, fabric, paint and modified furniture, Jonathan Butt's sculptures struggle towards figurative self-realization while hosting the intersection of conflicting geometries. Atop plinths that resist the modernist norm, fenestrated surfaces define and erode amalgams of faintly recognizable shapes—imbuing the familiar relationship of sculpture and pedestal with vigor and unease. Rejecting a singular viewpoint, Mernet Larsen's layered acrylic paintings comprehend vision as aggregate form. By relentlessly oscillating between the fulfillment and derailment of Cartesian expectation, Larsen depicts the institution as plural, subject to the liquidity of her representation. Both artists scrutinize the cognitive process of organizing space to reveal the chaos and discord from which it is built.

Jonathan Butt was born in Washington DC in 1975. He received a BFA from the Maryland Institute, College of Art and an MFA from the USC, Roski School of Fine Art. While in Los Angeles, he produced several bodies of work that explored conceptually driven narrative sculpture. Now living and working in Brooklyn, NY, Jonathan has continued his exploration of sculpture with greater emphasis on abstraction through raw material and fractured geometries. He is the

founder of Factice LLC, a design firm that specializes in digital sculpting, imaging, and prototyping.

Mernet Larsen is Professor Emeritus of Painting at University of South Florida, where she taught for 35 years. She has had over 25 solo exhibitions, including recent solo shows at Marcia Wood Gallery (Atlanta) and Mindy Solomon Gallery (FL), a solo show at the New York Studio School in 2005 and a 25-year retrospective at the Deland (FL) Museum of Art in 1992. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Ringling Museum of Art, Tampa Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, FL, and numerous other public and private collections.

Images: Left: Jonathan Butt, Untitled, 2011, Wood, MDF, Hydrocal, yarn, paint, 60" × 21" × 21", Right: Mernet Larsen, Faculty Meeting, 2008, Acrylic, mixed media on canvas, 58" × 40"

Regina Rex is an artist-run exhibition space located at 1717 Troutman, in Ridgewood, Queens. We are open on Saturdays and Sundays, 12-6pm.

Directions: L train to Jefferson, exit, walking along Wyckoff to Troutman. Walk up (north) on Troutman two blocks, passing St. Nicholas and Cypress, to a large brick building on the left. Regina Rex is in suite #329.

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## St. Petersburg Times

At the Morean Arts Center, an entertaining show by Mernet Larsen  
By Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic  
May 2, 2010

"The Sly, Wry Paintings of Mernet Larsen" at the Morean Arts Center is a wonderfully satisfying show. To those grouching about the center's decision some months ago to charge admission, I say get over it and plunk down the \$8. Or become a member and get in free. It's worth the money.

Larsen, now retired, was a longtime faculty member at the University of South Florida. She was part of a remarkable group of painters there; Theo Wujcik, Bruce Marsh and Jeffrey Kronsoble also come to mind.

When discussing art, I, like many, use a "this reminds me of that" comparison. Yet I look at Larsen's work and find such shorthand inadequate. I really can't say she reminds me of any other painter. She has references, of course, and curator Amanda Cooper has laminated lots of them — Asian paintings, snapshots of a faculty meeting, for example — with Larsen's comments about their influence. It's a fun Find the Connections game you can play. But the results seem to spring fully formed from her own internal source. Seeing so many of her works, 26 in all that span the first decade of the 21st century, confirms my belief that she is a painter who has not received her proper due.

Though she was an abstract painter for years, Larsen's starting point now is always a narrative. Her titles make clear she wants you in on the story. She has deftly managed the crossover to the figurative with her block people who inhabit a space that is often highly geometric, and she likes to upend traditional presumptions of perspective. You'll notice there are no shadows. The result are scenes both disorienting and, for all their simplicity and straightforwardness, mysterious. And definitely artificial. Even though they're illusionistic, you're not meant to confuse her paintings with reality.

Mall Event, one of her most recent, features a woman holding something that looks like a piece of wood high above an open space of stairs and walkways. A stork hovers nearby, its wings resembling an open cardboard box. It's a miraculous event, a baby! It's a weird event, a mall delivery! Is it a commentary since the woman holds the infant aloft and passers-by below ignore her? Does the gesture indicate triumph or does it presage tragedy with the precarious positioning on an elevated plane indicating a long way to fall?

Two tourists appear to be stuck in a desert in Flat Tire, also from 2010. A robed figure stands behind them, only partly visible. Below them a tiny bus and damaged tire sit on a disappearing road. There's a possibility of danger and menace — foreigners stranded in a strange land. But as in all her paintings, Larsen diffuses emotional import in the humans as stacks of squared-off shapes rather than personalities.

But she can veer into more traditional representations with telling details. The hands of The Writer (2001) look almost natural on a rigidly geometric female clothed and mantled in pale blue like a madonna. Or maybe like a nun, vowed to an ascetic's life. But her hands on the typewriter might attest to the creative spark from which art comes.

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It would be difficult, though, to muster any anxiety for the covered wagons heading toward a posse in Ambush (2004). The setup looks like a game board rather than a rendezvous with death.

The work that best illustrates her mastery of perspective is Explanation (2007). Three block people sit at a table that narrows in width from the top down to mimic the diminishing size of the figures. This is the opposite of what you'd see in a classically composed painting in which the eye is led from the bottom to the top. The background will really mess with your mind: It somehow morphs from floor to ceiling in a feat of visual legerdemain.

One of my favorites in the collection is Walk on a Windy Day (2001), and that isn't because it features a St. Petersburg Times newspaper box. (It doesn't hurt, however.) Larsen's signature hallmarks are there but take a close look at the woman's hair, created from dark blocks of color. They're askew, the only suggestion of wind, and I find them hilarious.

You get an immediate taste of the artist's work in images reproduced here but what you won't get at all is the subtlety of her technique. Just looking at how she applies paint to a canvas is a pleasure.

Making art is a lot of work, mentally and physically, but I hope she gets as much joy creating as we get consuming. I sense that she does.

*Lennie Bennett can be reached at [lennie@sptimes.com](mailto:lennie@sptimes.com) or (727) 893-8293.*

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**“Mernet Larsen’s Tilting Panoramas: Methodical and Inspired Works” By Mario Naves January 31st, 2005**

Upon receiving the invitation to Mernet Larsen: The Geometric Figure Paintings, an exhibition at the New York Studio School, I took one look at the painting reproduced on its face and promptly deposited the thing in my circular file. I thought to myself: How could the Studio School, that rigorous bastion of high culture, devote precious gallery space to out-and-out kitsch?

The depiction of robotic parents gazing at their equally robotic newborn, keyed to a bubble-gum palette, looked to be some kind of retro-pastiche, combining Cubism, hard-edge abstraction, folk art and futurism – not the futurism espoused by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and put into practice by Umberto Boccioni, but the futurism of DC Comics circa 1963. My New York chauvinism (you know: Nothing exists outside of Manhattan except for a smattering of hip and pricey Brooklyn precincts and then Europe) kicked in. If I hadn't heard of Mernet Larsen, the critic mused, why bother with the paintings at all?

To quote from a Lou Reed song: Just goes to show how wrong you can be. Having stopped by the Larsen exhibition on the way to pick up my son from school, I found myself dumbstruck by the paintings – and late to collect my son. The Studio School invitation doesn't begin to do justice to what is an ambitious and well-crafted art. Desiring to “revisit” the spirit of 15th c. Italian painting.” not to mention Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre, Ms. Larsen – based in Tampa, Fla. – has created tilting panoramas featuring tea ceremonies, cowboys and cowgirls, the hand of God and an interrupted erotic encounter involving two women, one man and a pair of kayaks.

A stern vein of absurdism runs through the work, as do moments of surprising quietude – check out the expression, thoughtful and true, on The Writer (2000) – as well as a predictable alienation (Handshake, 2001-2). A certain remove is, after all, inherent in Ms. Larsen's stylized figures, which are painted as if they were cobbled together from blocks of wood. (Her figures are often softened by naturalistic features.) The pictures are graced by a methodology that's hard to unravel: Ms. Larsen seamlessly integrates acrylic and oil paint, tracing paper, manipulated textures and oddments of string.

Ms. Larsen's art puts me in mind of Richard Lindner, another painter who envisioned humankind as an unceasing parade of automatons engaged in ritualistic narratives. Like Lindner, Ms. Larsen can't be buttonholed – the work is too multifaceted and individual, too damned odd, to merit a convenient peg. It won't appeal to those who like their art quick and slick and easy; I'm not sure it will appeal to those who like their art show. The pictures won't be to everyone's taste. (It's almost as if that's the point.) A couple things are certain: the probity of the artist's vision, the consideration that is brought bear on material means, and the work's deep-seated originality. Mernet Larsen is a find.

*Mernet Larsen: The Geometric Figure Paintings is at the New York Studio School, 8 West Eighth Street, until Feb. 5.*

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**Best Painter**  
**Mernet Larsen**

**Creative Loafing Tempa**  
**September 25, 2003**

The name of the just retired, long-time University of South Florida art professor Mernet Larsen is synonymous with painting, quality, intelligence, meticulousness, honesty, scholarship and artistic inquisitiveness. After joining the university in 1967, Larsen became a revered teacher in the best sense of the word, winning USF's coveted Outstanding Teacher award in 1985. She taught at Yale and participated in summer programs in Rome and Paris. She was also visiting artist at numerous colleges, including the Nanjing (China) School of Art. Over the years, Larsen's paintings evolved as she posed and solved her own intellectual and aesthetic questions. In recent years her forte was a cool, unemotional textured abstraction with linear devices hinting of spatial relationships and hidden memories. Other inquiries involved the visual evidence of structuralism applied onto hints of figuration. Her interest in Bunraku (Japanese theater) and Japanese narrative painting greatly influenced this body of work. More recently, the Larsen universe synthesizes all of her intellectual pursuits. Curious narratives are staged with box-like characters filling claustrophobic spaces, responding mechanically -- in motion yet stilled -- all at the same time. She condenses time with inventive elongated figures conceived in the 21st century, yet reviving her enduring love for the paintings of early Italian (15th century) Renaissance painter Piero Della Francesca. Considering our ever present thirst for fresh work -- a carryover from the 20th century -- Larsen's new series, with its inventive visual vocabulary, represents some of the most challenging painting seen in the Bay area during 2003. We blast the really big canons for our Best Painter of the year, Mernet Larsen. We wish her well during her retirement years, and we'll be watching to see where an innate intellectual curiosity and love of painting take this fine artist.