



**Visiting Artist:
Mernet Larsen**

**Tuesday, October 23, 6:30p
Jacob Sleeper Auditorium**

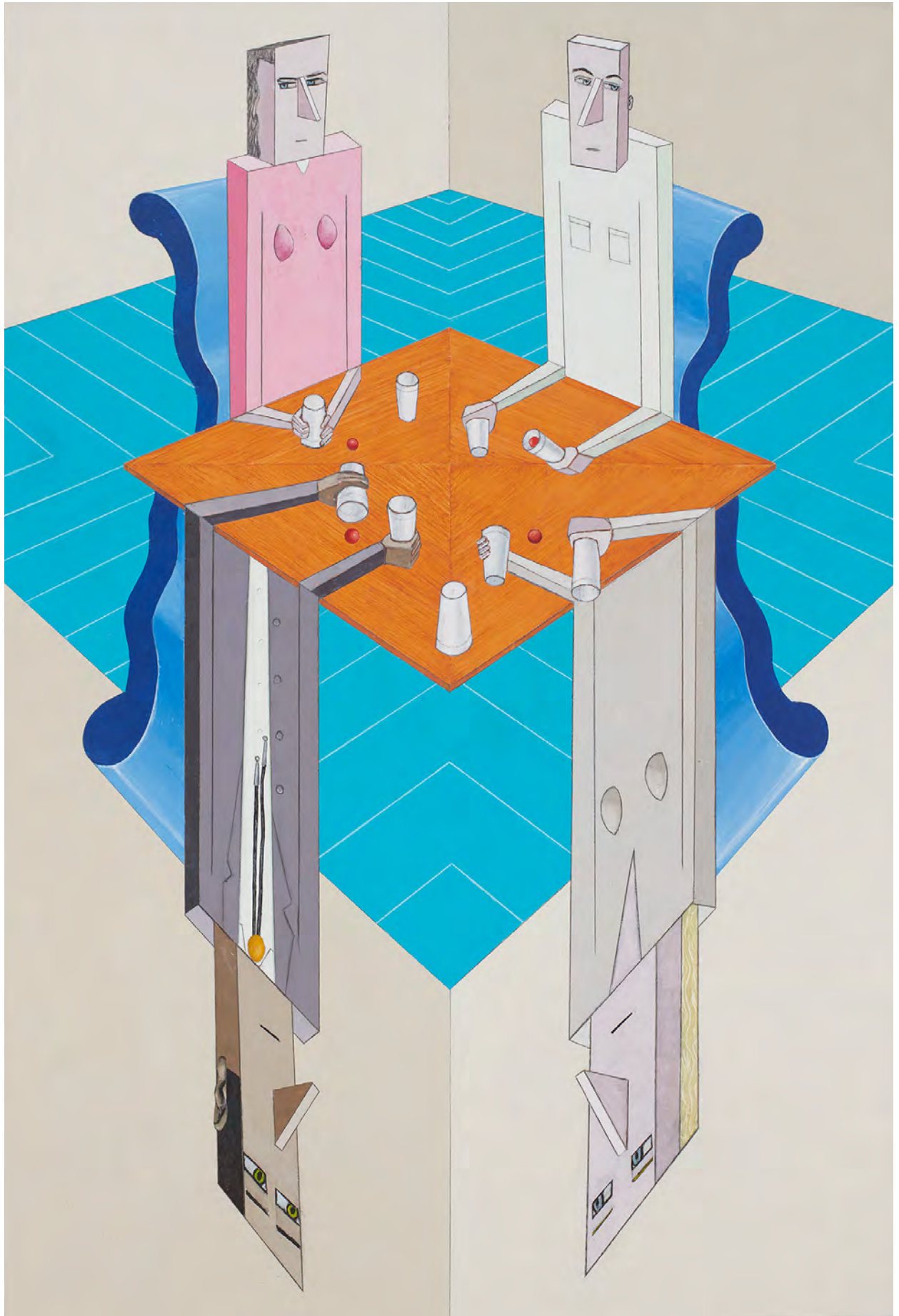


About the artist

Since the late 1970s, Mernet Larsen has engaged with the history and idioms of geometric abstraction. In the early 2000s her work took a crucial turn, developing a unique marriage of abstraction and figuration that has been described as geometric figure painting. Stiff, blocky figures occupy synthetic yet skillfully rendered worlds, in which the mundane is made strange through dramatically articulated or reversed perspective. Larsen's paintings reflect an obsession with the iconographies of power and ritual. She turns her attention towards the seemingly mundane spaces where these dramas play out in the contemporary world—bedrooms, restaurants, subway cars, and most recently, corporate board rooms. A dry humor and a surprising empathy occupy these spaces and figures.

Larsen has been the subject of over thirty solo exhibitions, including *Getting Measured: Mernet Larsen, 1957-2017*, a comprehensive survey of her work at the Tampa Museum of Art in 2017. Her work is in numerous collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN among others. Larsen received her BFA from the University of Florida, and her MFA from Indiana University. Larsen is Professor Emeritus at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She is represented by James Cohan Gallery, NY and Various Small Fires, LA.

Works









Press

**“Mernet Larsen Welcomes You to the Vortex”
by John Yau, Hyperallergic, May 2018**

**“Rock Paper Scissors: Mernet Larsen at James Cohan Gallery”
Blouin Artinfo, April 2018**

**“Meet Mernet Larsen, A 75-Year-Old Painter Who’s Hosting
Her First Art Show in L.A.”
by Priscilla Frank, Huffington Post, December 2017**

**“Mernet Larsen: Things People Do”
by Eleanor Ray, the Brooklyn Rail, March 2016**

**“The Dynamic Distortions of a Formal Painter”
by John Goodrich, Hyperallergic, February 2016**

**“Prolegomenon to an Artist Who—at Seventy-Two—
Is Having Her First Solo Show in a New York Gallery”
by John Yau, Hyperallergic, October 2012**

ART • WEEKEND

Mernet Larsen Welcomes You to the Vortex

Larsen's dry, matter-of-fact humor and eye for the absurd are everywhere in her paintings.

John Yau May 6, 2018



Mernet Larsen, "Drawing Hands" (2017), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 67 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches (all images courtesy James Cohan Gallery)

In the monograph *Mernet Larsen* (2013), which was the first on this artist, I wrote the following passage:

In addition to Russian Constructivism, Larsen brings together Chinese and Japanese art and philosophy, Japanese Bunraku puppet theater, Udaipur palace paintings, 15th-century Italian painting, the heads of Alexej von Jawlensky, and the science of the perspectival organization of space. It's a heady, unlikely brew that few artists are capable of synthesizing into a single, supple approach.

The result of bringing these disparate strands together is an unmistakable view of the everyday world that Larson informs with rigorous perspectival systems and a geometric vocabulary.



Mernet Larsen, "Seminar" (2011), acrylic on canvas, 59 x 40 inches

There are a handful of constants in Larsen's work. The first is the use of reverse perspective, in which things that are farther away appear larger than things that are closer. The second is that all the figures are transformed into geometric forms, so that every part of the body is treated as a distinct entity, each seemingly carved from wood. Heads are depicted as block-like forms with faces depicted on one side, while noses are rendered as sharp triangular planes jutting out from the face. The third is that Larsen pictorially manipulates the body as if it were a sectioned puppet, with every part capable of performing action that ostensibly conforms to its geometric structure. Within this schema, when a back is curved, the figure's posture becomes extraordinary in its ordinariness. Working under these extreme self-imposed restraints, Larsen focuses attention on a wide range of banal human gestures.

Despite all the limitations the artist has set up for herself, she attains a surprising amount of expressive possibilities in her scrutiny of mundane situations, as anyone going to her recent exhibition [Mernet Larsen: Situation Rooms](#) at James Cohan (April 19 – June 16, 2018) will quickly discover. The exhibition includes eight paintings, including the first three she made based on faculty meetings. In the gallery press release, she is cited as saying:

I have always wanted to do a painting of an art department faculty meeting
– having spent 35 years of my life attending them.

Larsen’s dry, matter-of-fact humor is detectable everywhere in her paintings, along an eye for the absurd, not to mention panic, stoicism, boredom, anger, annoyance, and pettiness — often in the same composition. By using an inverted perspective, which can literally everything we are seeing upside down, she is able to get at issues of conformity, hierarchy, and power relationships with straight-faced glee.



Mernet Larsen, “Situation Room (Scissors, Rock, Paper)” (2018), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 62 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches

The exhibition’s title may have come from the fact that Larsen spent many years teaching in Florida. The White House Situation Room was created in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy shortly after the catastrophic failure of Bay of Pigs invasion, which was launched by Miami-based Cuban exiles. The current Situation Room, in the basement of the West Wing, is in operation 24/7, manned by officials constantly checking world events.

In “Situation Room (Scissors, Rocks, Paper)” (2018), Larsen extends the premise of reverse perspective into a territory that has not been explored by anyone else in contemporary art.

The row of figures on one side of the table is uniformly upright and facing in one direction, while their forearms and hands rest on the table at an opposing angle. The row of figures on the other side of the long, narrow conference table is upside down, their faces and hands pointed straight ahead. No one is looking at anyone else. Independent of their heads, the two sets of hands on opposite sides of the table are engaged in playing the ancient child’s game in the painting’s title.

Punctuated by stars, the brownish-magenta wall-to-wall carpet of “Cabinet Meeting” (2017) extends at a diagonal from the top right corner toward the lower left, but stops short of touching the edges of the canvas, diminishing in size as well as tilting away from the picture plane as it travels downward. The powerful thrust of the diagonal carpet infuses the room with a vertiginous perspective. The floor is literally and figuratively dropping away from us.



Mernet Larsen, "Cabinet Meeting" (2017),
acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 61 x
65 1/4 inches

Larsen's genius merges perspectival rules with meaningful content, from the stiff poses of the figures to the disorienting upside-down room. This is a world where the normal has gone off the rails, where everything is awry. Starting with the largest figure, who is seated at the head of the elongated oval table, each black-clad man or woman shrinks in size until our attention reaches the far end of the table, where the smallest person in the room — the figure everyone's face is turned toward — sits upside down.

Look at the hands of the larger figures — clenched fists, hands clasping the table's edge, one hand resting on top of the other, like a pair of gray slippers — and you will get an idea of how Larsen is able to suggest so much through the attention she pays to an individual's pose. The discomfort of everyone in the room is palpable, starting with the larger figures but also including the photographers standing against one wall.



Mernet Larsen, "Committee" (2007),
acrylic, mixed media on canvas, 36 x 68
inches

Larsen's ability to evoke an interior emotional state — which is often one of discomfort — is evident in "Committee" (2007), where all five individuals on the far side of the sharp triangular conference table are depicted in variations of intense boredom — starting with the largest figure, his elbows on the table and fingers interlaced in front of his forward-leaning head and body, to the one two seats

away (and markedly diminished in size) leaning away from the table, to the smallest figure in the row, seated uncomfortably in his chair, wedged into the lower left corner of the canvas. And yet, as sharp as this view is, it is full of sympathy too.

By stretching reverse perspective into fresh territory, Larsen has revived a disregarded organizational device into something absolutely contemporary. Doesn't this qualify as an innovation in a time when everything has already been done? Isn't it instructive to realize that she developed this way of painting around

the time she turned 60, long after one is expected to be trying something new, let alone tackling ever more complicated compositions with such undeniable confidence?

This is what makes Larsen a singular artist: she can be simultaneously critical, satirical, and tender towards figures who, frozen inside their stiff bodies, seem utterly isolated from themselves and each other. Perhaps she recognizes that isolation because, on her journey to this moment, she has felt at times utterly alone in her quest to do something new and astonishing.

[Mernet Larsen: Situation Rooms](#) *continues at James Cohan Gallery (533 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 16.*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

Rock, Paper, Scissors: Mernet Larsen at James Cohan gallery, New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | APRIL 16, 2018



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“Committee,” 2007 by Mernet Larsen, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 36 x 68 in. at James Cohan gallery, New York
(Courtesy of James Cohan gallery, New York)

Opening this week is an exhibition of both new and old works by artist Mernet Larsen. The James Cohan gallery will host the paintings at its New York venue in an exhibition titled “Situation Rooms”. The figurative and abstracted works will be on view from April 19 until June 16, 2018.

Larsen has been active as an artist since the late 1970s and paints in figurative style which is highly infused with abstraction, and re-assesses the spatial conventions. Her painting style reminds us of the twelfth century Japanese paintings.

The title “Situation Rooms” refers to a space where important meetings take place, in which difficult decisions are made, where people commonly sit around a table. In some of these paintings, the hint of governance is apparent. A prominent feature of some paintings such as “Cup Tricks,” “Drawing Hands,” “Hand Slap Game” and “Scissors,” “Rocks,” “Paper” is the human hands, often involved in some kinds of games.

Along with these new paintings, there are also three works from Larsen’s series of paintings presenting faculty meetings, which have been painted with reverse perspective, included in the exhibition, about

which she writes, “I have always wanted to do a painting of an art department faculty meeting – having spent 35 years of my life attending them. But I couldn’t find a way to make it interesting... I didn’t want a collection of portraits, but a kind of psychological essence of particular moments in meetings.” To her, simple “portraiture” is not enough; she intends to portray the physical, as well as psychological presence of her subjects.

This exhibition also presents Larsen’s “studies,” which are used to plot her compositions in detail, before enlarging them on canvas, such as gridlines and measurements jotted in its margins, along with other notations and ideas about titles.

Mernet Larsen was born in 1940 in Houghton, Michigan. She lives and works between Tampa, Florida and New York. Larsen received her BFA from the University of Florida, and her MFA from Indiana University. Her work has been exhibited in more than 30 solo exhibitions since late 1970s.

“Situation Rooms” will be presented from April 19, 2018 through June 16, 2018 at James Cohan gallery, Chelsea, 533 West 26 St, New York 10001.

For details, visit; <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/galleryguide/james-cohan-gallery/overview>
(<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/galleryguide/james-cohan-gallery/overview>)

Click on the slide show to have a sneak peek at the artist’s work.

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Founder: [Louise Blouin](http://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/louise-blouin--2953510) (<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/louise-blouin--2953510>)

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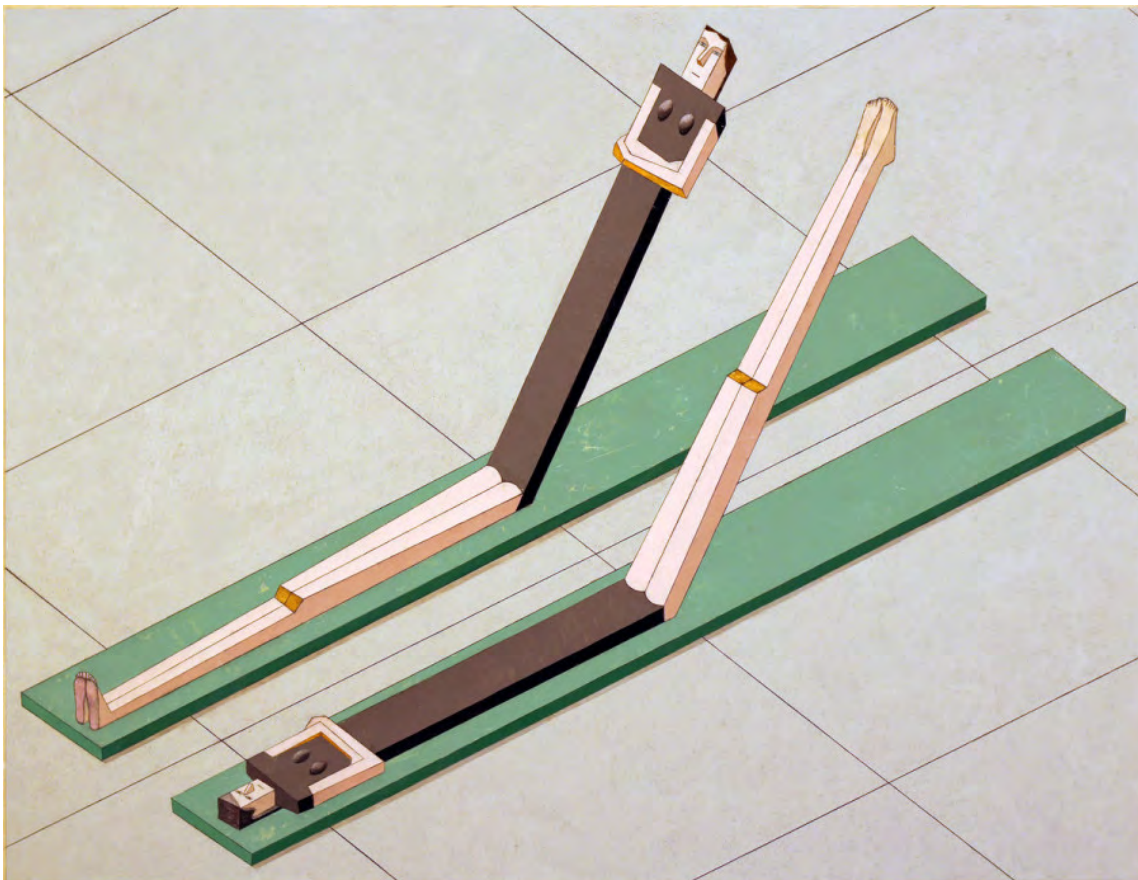
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CULTURE & ARTS

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

By Priscilla Frank

03/02/2015 08:55 am ET | Updated Dec 06, 2017



Sit-ups Leg-lifts, 2012 Acrylic, string, and tracing paper on canvas 46.25 x 60.25 in

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

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.



Reading in Bed, 2015 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas 60 x 38.25 in

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.”

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.



Reunion, 2014 Acrylic and tracing paper on canvas 49.25 x 53 in

Larsen refers to her depictions as “analog” rather than “representation,” 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

“A lot of people look at my paintings and see alienation because of the geometry, but I always see them as somewhat humorous and somewhat warm, in a very quietly warm way. I’m not about trying to convey alienation. I’m just trying to say here it is. This is the way it is. It’s sort of strange, let’s stop and think about it. It’s sort of funny but it’s not moving and emotional or alienatingly horrible or something. It just sort of is.”



Chainsawer and Bicyclist, 2014 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas 49.5 x 49 in

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, 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



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.

PHOTO GALLERY

Mernet Larsen

 See Gallery



BEFORE YOU GO





MERNET LARSEN *Things People Do*

by Eleanor Ray

JAMES COHAN GALLERY | JANUARY 22 – FEBRUARY 21, 2016

Mernet Larsen's *Things People Do* range from the mundane to the quixotic, forming an unlikely index of human activity: reading, sitting, spearfishing, falling, operating a chainsaw. The eight large-scale acrylic and mixed-media paintings (2014 – 2016) and eight smaller works (2004 – 2014) in her first solo show at James Cohan Gallery have a funky variety on a formal level as well, with Larsen alternating between systemization and an open, trial-and-error approach. She matches her figures' preoccupied activity with her own preoccupations of making—each image becomes a visual thought experiment about representational shorthand and spatial construction. Despite this seeming intellectual distance, the paintings have a surprising warmth; their symbolist power is deepened by matter-of-factness.

The breadth of Larsen's influences, from Japanese narrative scrolls to Udaipur palace painting, indicates an interest in diverse approaches to organizing figures in space. She shares with the Chicago Imagists an affinity for 15th-century Sieneese painting, including artists like Giovanni di Paolo and Sassetta, who diverged from the Vasari-endorsed singular perspective of the Florentine Renaissance to find room for more individual solutions. This independence has been important for Larsen too, as she moves between reverse perspective, isometric perspective, and variants of the birds-eye view according to the needs of each image. In his survey *Sieneese Painting*, Timothy Hyman proposes that these alternatives "create an abstraction of space, whose appeal is not to the fixed optics of the spectator, so much as to the winged flight of the dream-voyager. What is conveyed is the child's wonder at the immensity of the world, of life's quest as a game to be played across it."

Larsen's paintings can have a game board feeling as well, with figures placed in strange locations according to mysterious perspectival rules. Her figures occupy the wilderness of abstract paintings, in compositions often drawn directly from El Lissitzky. When she turns his free-floating constructivist lines into figures, gravity serves as a succinct source of visual humor—a danger in *Misstep* (2015), or an anchor in *Frontier* and *Campers* (both 2015), rooting the figures securely to a tilting surface. *Frontier* and *Campers* further articulate ideas that were already present in her near-monochrome paintings of the late 1980s and '90s, when only the titles indicated that compositional lines could be read as figures moving up an escalator,

hang gliding, or shooting an arrow. In the new paintings, a constellation of local details emerges, gently disrupting the rigid geometry—we notice hats, noses, knees, swimsuits, the surface of a piece of lumber and the hands carrying it.

These isolated moments are central to Larsen's individuality, which comes from a kind of selective attention or interest. She appears very engaged with the details of ears but not at all with those of mouths or noses, which she tends to render



Mernet Larsen, *Frontier*, 2015. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 64 × 52 1/2 inches.

systematically as a line and a triangle. The undersides of the chin and nose come into strange focus, treated as simple planes. The figures are rendered in just two or three tones, the color usually getting more saturated in the shadow, where jewel-like oranges, pinks, and turquoises seem to take on force by absorbing light. It's funny to find this system persistently maintained even in *Campers* and *Frontier*, where the figures are barely wider than a pencil and the light hitting them becomes a very thin stripe.

In the best paintings, like *Alphie* (2015), Larsen's descriptive economy feels expansive rather than reductive. Each of *Alphie's* three figures has a distinct presence, their postures animated by moments of detail, like the curving striped shirt and folded hands of the man on the lower right, or the angle of the shoulders of the woman in pink. The specificity of that figure's uplifted head and eyebrows renders her straight-line mouth surprisingly expressive. And, in turn, the neutral, linoleum-like colors of the interior take on a luminous richness in combination with the saturated pink shirt and the deep reds of the wine and tile floor.

Unusual perspectives in *Alphie* and *Punch* (2016) reinforce the mood of selective engagement by shifting the viewer's perceived distance to foreground and background, mirroring the wandering focus of inattention. These are scenes of boredom familiar from Larsen's previous work. In reverse perspective, the lower part of the painting, which would typically appear closest to us, is made to seem further away.



Mernet Larsen, *Alphie*, 2015. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 71 1/8 × 39 1/2 inches.

We identify intuitively with the largest figure—the solitary woman in pink in *Alphie*. The warping of space produces a sensation of empathy heightened by distance; the image seems to reach us from this woman’s perspective, as if from the inside out, as she dreams the scene, perhaps including the viewer. This reversal of emphasis has an intuitive logic that recalls Cézanne’s views of Mont Sainte-Victoire, where the distant mountain feels closer and more important to the painter than the ground.

CONTRIBUTOR

Eleanor Ray

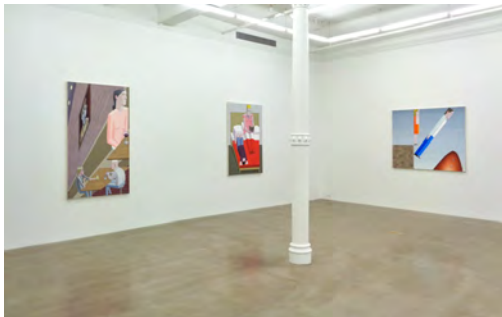
ELEANOR RAY is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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ART

The Dynamic Distortions of a Formal Painter

John Goodrich February 11, 2016



Installation view, 'Mernet Larsen: Things People Do' at James Cohan Gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

[Mernet Larsen](#) claims an unlikely pair of influences: 15th-century Italian painting and the austere abstractions of the Russian modernist [El Lissitzky](#) (1890–1941). But linger a while in front of her paintings, with their blocked-in figures and wildly inverted perspectival lines, and both influences will ring true.

There's a little bit of [Sassetta](#), and a lot of Lissitzky, in the way that her

flattened figures, expanded by a keen sense of color, drive through tense, abstracted environments. Even the yardstick-proportioned bodies and zigzag spaces attain a peculiar authority. In her paintings [currently on view](#) at [James Cohan Gallery](#), Larsen charges a bizarre vision of modern life with the dynamics of traditional painting.



Mernet Larsen, "Reading in Bed" (2015), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 38 1/4 in (image courtesy James Cohan Gallery) (click to enlarge)

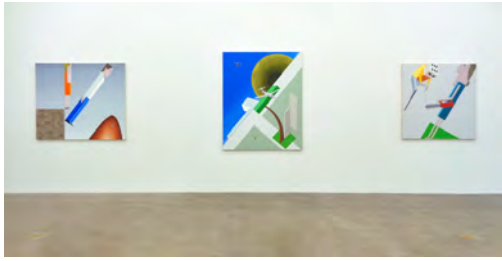
The down-home title of the exhibition, *Things People Do*, is a bit of a tease. Absorbing these bizarre images, in which wildly distended Legoland figures teeter over a cliff and radiate like spokes about a dinner table, one wonders: who but a hallucinating draftsman would have people do *these* things? Beneath the outlandish stylizations, though, lurk some thoroughly human moments. One figure roasts a marshmallow over a campfire. A couple converses at a snack-bar table. Another pair lounges on a bed. All these events are grounded in pressures of color, so that in this last painting, "Reading in Bed" (2015), the livid pink of nightgown and elusive gray-green of floor shift tangibly into their shadowed states: a full-blooded coral hue and an earthy green. The schematic figures become practically fleshy in their transformation under light. Meanwhile, the racing perspectival lines, defying any conventional notion of space but intensifying the pictorial one, measure out intense intervals — headboard-pillow-bedspread-floor — from canvas top to bottom.



Mernet Larsen, *Frontier* (2015), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 64 x 52 1/2 in (image courtesy James Cohan Gallery) (click to enlarge)

Oddly enough, a certain innocence presides over such paintings. Larsen makes no attempt to hide their internal mechanics: the prismatic reduction of forms, the sweeping arcs tethered by radial lines, the thrusting diagonals and pacing parallels. All would become mere textbook devices in lesser hands, but the mutable energy of Larsen's color makes them convincing, inviting us into the conversation of character-forms. The composition of "Frontier" (2015) revolves, literally, about the concept of arcs bracketing a trio of figures/vectors. But the rhythmic energy of the curves — sweeping broadly above one figure, coiling beneath and unloosing the lifted arms of the second, and then barely containing the third — exceeds mere concept; the towering and tottering figures palpably tower and totter. At the same time, tiny articulations — like the shadows at the figures' feet — pin down entire expanses of color, amplifying the sense of scale. Like many of the paintings here, it feels remarkably complete: a unique mixture of faithful observation, pressured distortion, and fantastical play.

Among several works on paper in the gallery's back space, the straitened figure with outstretched arms in "Skier" (2013) doubles eerily as ski lift tower. The much earlier painting "Study for Cubism" (2004), featuring two figures with less exaggerated proportions, seems to catch the artist at a crossroads, poised to leap from naturalism to distortion.



Installation view, 'Mernet Larsen: Things People Do' at James Cohan Gallery

[Mernet Larsen: Things People Do](#) continues at James Cohan Gallery (291 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 21.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

Now and then, an insistent detail adds a narrational twist to a painting. The reading matter of the figure in bed, for instance, turns out to be *War and Peace*. In another painting, a woman greets a bicyclist with a lifted chainsaw. Such mini-plots seem diversionary. Cartoonish as these paintings may be stylistically, they pursue a painter's

language rather than an illustrator's effects, an authenticity of form rather than a beguilement of style and message. What could you possibly add to their vital internal conversations, at once so wayward and so self-possessed?

ART • WEEKEND

Prolegomenon to an Artist Who — at Seventy-Two — Is Having Her First Solo Show in a New York Gallery

John Yau October 14, 2012



Mernet Larsen, "Cafe" 2012. Acrylic and tracing paper on canvas, 47.5 x 47.5 inches (120 x 120 cm)
(all images courtesy of Vogt Gallery, New York)

I.

It is one of those impossible questions that each artist answers differently. How much can you put in? And, of course, the obverse, how much can you leave out?

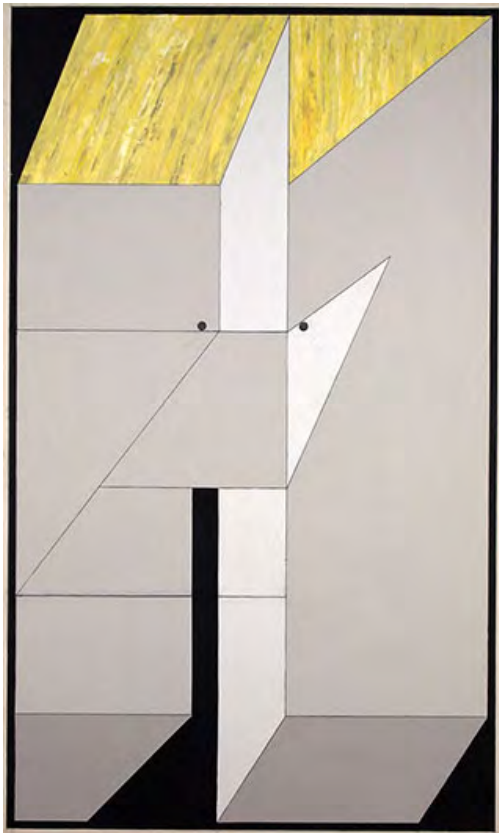
II.

Mark Rothko wanted to make a painting that was naked, a work stripped down to its essentials. Ad Reinhardt believed that he was developing the "last paintings" that could be made, that his

"black" paintings demonstrated that there was no further place for painting to go. This is Reinhardt's thinking in a nutshell: "*The more stuff in it, the busier the work of art, the worse it is. More is less. Less is more.*" In the wake of such thinking, the rise of Minimalism seems inevitable. But that happened in the early 1960s, about fifty years ago.

III.

The idea of the last painting is appealing to many, as it enables them to no longer engage with the kind of messy, open-ended looking (reading) and thinking (reflection) that we associate with poetry. The art world — at least the commercial side tied in with museums — prefers Wade Guyton whose pedigree includes Andy Warhol and Reinhardt. Plus, he doesn't paint, which only verifies that painting is dead, an obsolete practice. With Guyton, you can sit back and hum Frank Stella to your heart's content: "What you see is what you see." Ahh, if only the world were so simple.



Mernet Larsen, "Encounter" (2011). Acrylic, mixed media, 42 x 25 inches (107 x 64 cm)
(click to enlarge)

IV.

What about the opposite problem? How much can you put in? I thought about this question when I first saw the paintings and works on paper of Mernet Larsen. I had never heard of Larsen until I saw her work in the Vogt Gallery. I had been invited to see it by the artist's dealer, Johannes Vogt, who had gotten my name from a curator in Houston and contacted me in July. He wanted to know if I would be interested in writing a catalog essay on Larsen's work. I went and looked at the work in August, and it took only a moment for me to decide that I would.

V.

In the culinary world the combination of elements from different cultures is called “fusion.” I am glad that there isn’t an equivalent term in art, which is already glutted with degraded catchphrases.

VI.

One thing that struck me about Larsen’s work was her imaginative synthesis and restating of radically different artists and traditions. She isn’t a purist and certainly didn’t do the right thing, which immediately appealed to me. In the multiple perspectives she employs in her imagery, I detect aspects of Giorgio de Chirico and El Lissitzky, early Sieneese painting (Giovanni di Paolo and Andrea di Bartolo) and *emaki* (or Japanese picture scrolls). The perspectives do not jibe with traditional spatial relationships but fit together like overpasses, cloverleaves, service roads, and on-ramps.

VII.

The title of Larsen’s debut in New York is “Three Chapters.” The first “Chapter” was “Heads and Bodies” (September 6–September 26, 2012). The second “Chapter” was

“Places” (September 27–October 10, 2012). And the third “Chapter” is “Narratives” (October 11–October 27, 2012). My essay will be about work from all three shows. Larsen is 72 and a Professor Emeritus of Painting at the University of South Florida, where she taught for thirty-five years. In the last few years, a few New York critics have championed her work (David Cohen, Mario Naves, and Roberta Smith).

VIII.

These two paragraphs are from a statement that Larsen has posted on her website:



Mernet Larsen, "Booth" (2012). Acrylic on canvas, 55.75 x 48 inches (141.61 x 121.92 cm)

This painted world must be obviously artificial. It reaches toward, not from, life. The characters and objects are geometric

solids, their structures and proportions reinvented in tension with the event depicted. Components are disassembled, reassembled so that the actions are non-organic collaborations of parts. (I often paint the elements separately on tracing paper, try out different noses, heads, hands — , then paste them on). I want the mechanisms of my paintings to be fully visible, each painting an index of my painting behavior: measuring, layering, carving, texturing, coloring, pasting.

I want nonspecific viewpoints, a sense of vertigo, so that you are holding each situation in your mind almost as if you are wearing it. Renaissance, isometric, and reverse perspectives interact, visible as systems, not illusions. Structures are often inspired by the paintings of El Lissitzky, Japanese 12th century narrative painting, Chinese landscape painting, and the palace paintings in Udaipur, India. My hope is that the paintings will turn each event depicted into a singular, object-like entity, rather than forms arranged in space. A committee meeting, for example, should demand an entirely different pictorial structure than shoppers in a mall.



Mernet Larsen, "Committee" (2007). Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 36 x 68 inches (91.5 x 173 cm)

IX.

In "Committee" (2007), a conference table begins midway up the right side, then angles downward to span nearly the entire the width of painting before tapering to a sharp point. Two other narrow tables are visible along the painting's lower edge, in the foreground. Five figures sit on the far

side of the large conference table, and, with the table they diminish in size. The figures are geometric solids, as if they were made of blocks. Behind them, on a surface resembling blackboard, the artist has painted open and closed geometric forms. There are six small figures closest to us, but we see only their backs. They are seated at the two narrow tables in the foreground, and they are smaller than any of the figures above them.

The diminishing size of the figures at the larger table as well as the uneven row of smaller figures near the painting's bottom edge sum up the endless power struggles that are endemic to committee meetings. The small figures along the bottom all have curved backs — they are slumped over suggesting that they are cowed, defeated, or bored.

The increasingly larger figures ascending from the bottom left corner are more rigid, evoking severity. They are bored as well, but also serious and, to this viewer at least, comical and disturbing.

Larsen understands what a body looks like — the studied pose someone takes — when he or she wishes to be elsewhere. No one understands boredom and being stuck as well as her. She is both sardonic and sympathetic. A social consciousness runs through her work, but never becomes the central focus. The narrative never becomes transparent. Her paintings never dwindle into being about this or that. For all of the banality of her subject matter, the paintings remain mysterious.

X.

Mernet Larsen's paintings do not resemble anyone else's. They are a complete world and, in that regard, belong to the tradition that includes Giorgio de Chirico and Rene Magritte as well as Roger Brown and Judith Linhares. These worlds "reach toward" ours, even as they pull us in. They adhere to their own logic and follow their own rules.

XI.

Her heads are as self-contained and abstract as the ones by Alexei Jawlensky.

XII.



Mernet Larsen, "Mall Event" (2012). Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 50 x 55 inches (127 x 140 cm)

Larsen's subjects include classrooms, coffee shops, vacation spots, and malls — gathering places. She has also explored people sitting in a car, being fitted, exercising in a gym, adoring a child, riding an escalator, shaking hands, and shooting at an unseen target. She paints scenes from contemporary life, conjures up the Old West, and

affectionately parodies well-known religious events, such as the

Resurrection.

XIII.

In another painting, “Mall Event” (2010), a woman holds a baby up in the air. No matter how often we look, chances are we will never know why. The moment is fraught with edginess.

Marnet Larsen: [“Three Chapters”](#) *continues until October 27, 2012 at Vogt Gallery (508–526 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).*

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