Mernet Larsen: Getting Measured, 1957-2017

Jean Marie Carey


Curated by Joanna Robotham, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Tampa Museum of Art. There is no dedicated catalog for this exhibition but *Mernet Larsen* by John Yau (Damiani, 2013) is a monograph focusing on Larsen’s work since 2000.
From the beginning of her life’s work in the late 1950s, Mernet Larsen (born 1940) has assimilated the history of contemporary painting. Beginning with New York School-inflected Surrealist portraiture, she worked her way through photorealistic collage, hard-edge shapes, freehand impasto, and figurative spatial distortion. But Larsen had always already arrived at Larsen; at an original style that expressed the artist’s own vision.

The painter’s oeuvre in this overdue retrospective at the Tampa Museum of Art, invariably distinctive, is both chronological and unpredictable. The entire body of two-dimensional work gives the effect of ideas repeated in clusters rather than developed in sequence, an impression derived both from the work itself and from a spacious installation on the museum’s large-windowed second level, which makes it possible
to study the paintings individually and at a leisurely pace.

In actuality Larsen was not imitative of the movements she moved through, not on the evidence of paintings such as *Eggs* (1961) [Fig. 1], which casts the symbol of life into a vista of empty windows and broken mirrors, or two large horizontal abstracts, *Japanese Landscape* [Fig. 2] (1986) and *Measuring Itself* (1989), experimenting alternately with blocks of color and segments of tonal whites and greys. Even at its most nonobjective, Larsen's painting from the 1980s and 1990s is too considered to be entirely spontaneous; "improvisation" is a better term, since it connotes both intuition and consciousness.

[Fig. 2: *Japanese Landscape*, 1986. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Collection of Peg and Jay Trezevant. ©Mernet Larsen]

Ultimately Larsen refused to purge identifiable subject matter. In 2000 she returned to making pictures of people, albeit in radically modified planes. What Larsen calls "Geometric Figurative" paintings are intellectual and constructive. In them she spurns nostalgic gestural brushwork, creating meetings of disparate characters and incongruous shapes. Oil and acrylic paints blended into tracing paper and augmented with thread and string give tactility to what might otherwise resemble computer-generated animation cels from *Max Headroom*. In *Campers* (2015) and *Raft* (2017) she has experimented with these angular human figures and a cryptic atmosphere that recalls Arshile Gorky's cool psychological landscapes. *Faculty Meeting* (2008) [Fig. 3] toys with scale and recessional hierarchy. The poses of the blocky forms telegraph boredom if not unease while at the same time using a strict linear composition as a formal stabilizer.

[Fig. 3: *Faculty Meeting*, 2008. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Collection of Peg and Jay Trezevant. ©Mernet Larsen]
Roberta Smith, whose 2012 article in *The New York Times* brought international recognition to Larsen, an emerita member of the art studio faculty at the University of South Florida, described the “Geometric Figurative” paintings as “extremely viable participants in an extensive, possibly global conversation about how to portray modern, three-dimensional life on two-dimensional surfaces.”¹ Five years on I do not find this to be the case, and would not have felt so previously. With their rhetoric of optimistic rationality, paintings such as *Getting Measured* (1999) [Fig. 4], for example, which gives the exhibit its title and shows a stylized scene of two barefoot women and a tabby cat engaged in a mundane tailoring task, is orderly and hopeful, and looks out of touch with the contemporary experience of a world gripped by a nightmare of disaster that seems completely irrational.

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¹ For more on Roberta Smith’s review, see her article titled “Mernet Larsen, Painting’s Hidden Conversation: New Paintings by Mernet Larsen,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2012.
What *Getting Measured*, with its oblique allusion to Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, and other works in this series do accomplish is to register Larsen’s interaction with and respect for the history of art, and not just Western art but a careful study of the flatness and materiality of Japanese woodblock prints and 19th Century watercolors. Carefully developing a theme in a sequence of paintings has enabled Larsen to refine an image-idea, testing colours for felt value and formal function while retaining an ambiguous continuity. The central image of *Icon* (2004) is a red shroud encasing a figure on a sarcophagus-like litter, reminiscent of the scarlet bedspread covering the oblong platform of *Reading in Bed* (2015) [Fig. 5], but also refers to the crimson-upholstered chairs in the foreground of *Last Tango* (1975). Red continues as a marker in other paintings, such as the fulcrum in *Hang Glide* (1994) and the puckered, faded café booths in *Walk on a Windy Day* (2001). Incongruous or disembodied biomorphic elements are a critical component of Larsen’s imagery.
One of the most complex and sensational of the works, *Matching of Wits: A Black Comedy* (1974) [Fig. 6], could reasonably have dominated its own room. Though densely populated with a variety of vaguely downtown characters, it lines meander as if doodled and the fluid areas, more like plumes, between scenes are suggested rather than defined. Peppered with personal encounters and references to film and literature, the work is opaque in offering explanations of the art so specific as to negate further examination of the origin and development of Larsen's formal innovations. The careful construction and conflating of references carry far beyond the autobiographical. Indeed formalist-minded viewers might experience some justified exultation at what appears to be this intentional aspect of Larsen's project taken in full.
These works are the residue of a psychological process and have an outward randomness that attests to unfathomable inner motivations. Larsen has made stylistically disparate works, none of which can be seen as a logical formal progression from the one before. There is a tenacity that is revealed not only in each piece but also in the very transmission of modified ideas across new techniques, to form, or to grow, into fresh manifestations. The proof is in Larsen's willingness to keep going, growing, where many of her surviving contemporaries have stopped.

Note

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