

← Back to Original Article

ART

## She's Back. But She's Never Been Away . . .

*Liz Larner's sculptures, on view again locally, use color, odd material to convey illusions of volume.*

June 28, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Anyone who visited the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the Geffen Contemporary last winter or spring saw a 1991 sculpture titled "Corridors" by Liz Larner, consisting of bright red pennants made of fabric and steel.

"Whatever happened to her?" might well be a question that would come to mind. Larner made a splash as part of MOCA's renowned "Helter Skelter" exhibition of L.A. artists in 1992, but although she still lives here, her last solo show in the area was in 1991, at Regen Projects in West Hollywood.

A visit to Larner's Highland Park studio reveals that she has been plenty busy since then making sculpture, but in recent years her shows have been in Europe and New York, not here. Until now: A hollow shelf topped with yellow tissue-covered rings seen at the Kunsthalle Basel in December, along with some newer pieces, went on view this weekend at Regen Projects.

Larner, 37, stands a statuesque 5 feet 10 and has a face that turns into upward curves and dimples when she laughs, which is often. Sentencing her tan dog, Suge, to the backyard, she flops onto a sofa and begins to contradict the perception that she has been missing in action. "I've shown almost every year except 1996," she says, "when my studio burned down and my Dad died. I had to teach a lot to make money. And I was making a transition. I think I was thinking about stuff. I did some work I didn't like, so I didn't show it."

No two pieces that Larner makes look alike, but her goal is consistently to upend the traditional ways that we look at abstract sculpture. Using color, for example, to outline forms rather than to define shapes, she often tricks the eye. Her materials include chrome chains, torn fabric and broken mirrors, through which she creates illusions of volume.

For example, a recent sculpture comprising 400 aqua-and-chartreuse polyurethane teardrops is currently stacked in the corner of the Vienna's MAK Galerie. The title, "I Thought I Saw a Pussycat," refers to the malleable, invented space of cartoons.

"The teardrops link together to make a pattern, which disappears due to the color," the artist says.

Larner first came to the attention of critics and collectors when she exhibited her "Corner Basher" at the 1987 LACE Annuale here. A motorized tetherball-like contraption, the work included a steel ball, suspended from a chain, that whipped furiously against the walls of the gallery. Viewers determined the speed and velocity of the ball's movement by a switch near the work, and the dynamic of the installation changed with each new venue. "Everywhere it is shown, it leaves

a mark, but that mark is made by the audience," Larner explains. "In France, there were a few black marks on the wall. The audience there decided to see it more as a metaphor. In Germany, it left a mark about 6 inches deep."

It may have been the potential violence of "Corner Basher" that led Larner to be included in "Helter Skelter." For that show, she wrapped chrome chains around a gallery corner to play with notions of vanishing-point perspective.

Looking back, Larner muses, "My work then had more to do with my ideas about two-dimensional work than it did about three-dimensional work. The chains relate to what I'm doing now, but they were more like drawing. They didn't have the color, but they had the openness. I was trying to figure out how not to have a sculpture give itself away in terms of how you sense its density by its scale."

Larner came to sculpture from the two-dimensional field of photography, which she studied at CalArts, where she earned her undergraduate degree in 1985. "It was the 'High Appropriation' era, and I felt that images were so pervasive. I wanted to see if I could make art without relying on imagery."

She studied at CalArts with Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, now a colleague in the graduate program of Art Center College of Design, where Larner has a full-time teaching position.

"I wanted to try to work in physical space. I loved Donald Judd and all those artists from the '60s and '70s, but I felt there was all this extra room, territory that wasn't explored at that time," she says. "I also felt that formal issues were being disregarded. But formal issues are just as cultural as anything else. I thought all that theory could be applied to formal or abstract operations. I'm really interested in visual experience. I don't make the distinction that Conceptual art is smart and the other stuff is dumb. The way something is put together can have the same impact as content-driven work. The content of my work is the structure and how you perceive it."

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The artist may feel protective of art's visceral impact because of her own experience. Growing up on a rice farm some 60 miles northwest of Sacramento, she had no exposure to art early on. In high school, she was thrilled by her first art history course, at the San Domenico School for Girls, a Catholic boarding school in Marin County. Although she went on to study philosophy at USC, which her parents hoped would lead her to become a lawyer, she made a detour during her junior year and transferred to CalArts.

"Even with my background in classic philosophy, it was a shock when I encountered the new philosophy of [French Post-Structuralists] Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. I was fascinated, but I think it's been misapplied a lot in art. The idea of deconstruction has been taken literally. It's really more about play than it ever got to be in art. The political work based on it seems boring and didactic to me. The thing I love about art is that it's something else. That's what I was interested in rather than a sociological perspective. I was really happy when the word 'beauty' came back into the art vocabulary, because it was something to be scoffed at for so long."

Getting up and walking over to a work that consists of a pair of interconnected cubes made of pipe titled "2 as 3 and some, too," she explains, "I wanted to work on how you could use color in sculpture so that it doesn't just reiterate the form." The two shapes, standing about 10 feet tall, appear slightly mangled as though pressed upon by invisible forces. They have yet to be wrapped with Thai mulberry paper and painted in the pale watercolor that Larner herself makes, all crucial applications. "Due to the use of color, you see the outlines of the cubes but you see all these other forms as well."

As Gilbert-Rolfe observes in a catalog for the Basel exhibition, this sculpture brings together Eva Hesse's grid and Sol LeWitt's open cubes. He adds, "She's making it be something in which an idea of surface need not be continuous with the idea bound up in the form."

Larner says, "Color, in general, hasn't been a big part of abstract sculpture because the main thing is form. Calder might have color on one shape and that's how color usually seems to operate in sculpture. In my case, one colored element interferes with another, and the only reason it seems confusing is because of the way that we accept how we look at sculpture, as an object in the middle of the room that you can grasp in its totality."

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Larner's concern with perception makes sense when she cites the influence of Light and Space sculptors Robert Irwin and James Turrell, as well as Op artist Bridget Riley.

The notion of wrapping 10 feet of cubic sculpture with paper and then painting it with watercolors seems somewhat antithetical to the machismo often considered to be synonymous with big abstract sculpture. Asked if she thinks being a woman has contributed to the appearance or the methods of her work, Larner unhesitatingly says, "I think it's had a huge effect."

"I just don't know if it would occur to a man to do the kinds of things I want to do. It's not technically driven. I always have to come up with a new way of doing something. Probably a guy would never do this because it is not efficient," she says.

"I think there is something in that gap of not knowing how to do things where you can come up with other ideas. You are not so facile, but also you don't know that you can't do it, right? A lot of times, men who have been educated in the discipline of sculpture learn what's possible. There are all these things they may not think of. On the other hand, there is a reason why people like straight angles. They are easier to work with. Maybe being a woman, I didn't have such a grasp of the difficulty of that.

"It's cool now that there are so many great women artists and all of them have a different approach that hasn't been seen simply because most of the art we see historically has been made by men," she adds. "That's why some of the art made by women looks so fresh and different."

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LIZ LARNER, Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive. Dates: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Ends Aug. 1. Phone: (310) 276-5424.