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CRITICS' PICKS

MERNET LARSEN VARIOUS SMALL FIRES



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

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 toylike 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 *Reunion*, 2014, the red-checked 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 block-heads 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.