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Mernet Larsen at Various Small Fires

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Two perplexed parents with skin the color of Cover Girl's "Warm Beige" make-up lean over an infant with heavy lids and unfocused eyes. The infant's head is shaped like a cube because

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all Mernet Larsen's figures are geometric in form. The stylization transports her figures into a video game-like alternate reality, only whatever game they're in is more steeped in quirky feelings and understated power dynamics than *The Sims* ever was. Larsen's exhibition *Chainsawer, Bicyclist and Reading in Bed* at Various Small Fires, her first in Los Angeles, was filled with angular figures and strangely compressed space, although up close the paintings were thicker and more worked-over than you might expect.

One interesting and challenging aspect about the recent success of Florida-based Larsen—who is 75 and has not exhibited very prominently since she began making art in the 1960s—is how well, in theory, her work fits into certain trends at a time when trendiness often gets discussed more intently than actual artworks. She's gaining visibility when putting under-the-radar female artists on the radar seems all the rage.

"[A]gain and again I have seen an eerily similar story structure parroted," wrote Ashton Cooper recently, in her wry *Hyperallergic* article, "The Problem of the Overlooked Female Artist." "Overlooked by the establishment for her entire life, she never stopped prodigiously toiling in obscurity and is finally being given her due."¹

Larsen may have toiled and may well be getting her due. Interestingly, she also works in those spaces between abstraction/figuration and screen-like

flatness/ painterly roughness; spaces, that if gallery press releases are to be believed, we are currently obsessed with ("So much of the contemporary painting dialogue is dominated by a reductive abstract formalism," claimed one recent announcement for a show featuring representational painting²). Larsen seems of the moment both because she's receiving overdue attention and because she's weirdly in-line with a more youthful zeitgeist. And while contemplating an artist's work in terms of trendiness can be short-sighted, it can also be a rewarding effort.

For instance, it's interesting to think about the recent upswing in attention that the 84-year-old Dorothy Iannone's work has received, given that Iannone's own rebelliousness initially prompted the same institutions now embracing her to reject her. In terms of the flatness/roughness conversation, Laura Owen's recent abstractions—including those big fluorescent-colored paintings that launched the warehouse space 356 Mission two years ago—are worth thinking about in terms of the current marketability of "internet-aware" painting. The paintings she made in the late 1990s had a quirky, hand-drawn quality, but the most expressive marks in this new work looks mediated, like she drew them in Photoshop first.

But even if Larsen's paintings appear surprisingly hip at first glance, they quickly sidestep conversations about their own trendiness, mostly because

1
<http://hyperallergic.com/173963/the-problem-of-the-overlooked-female-artist-an-argument-for-enlivening-a-stale-model-of-discussion/>

2
<http://theproperty.gallery/>

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thinking about the artist's age or about "painting discourse" distracts from her meticulous portrayals of human behavior. In *Handshake* (2001), an unbelievably tall woman and man shake hands in an institutional hallway. The tension is palpable: maybe they're professors, and one just got tenure while the other resents her for it?

In *Explanation* (2007), six figures sit at folding tables holding a meeting. The institutional green floor tiles appear to be overtaking the ceiling and walls, while a woman with a tight bun addresses the group, her lanky Pinocchio-like arm outstretched. Although the arm appears to be wooden, her hand is creased and plump in convincing places. You get the sense that she hasn't figured out exactly what she means to say yet, and the others wait, listening politely.

Politeness was a pervasive theme in this show. Often Larsen's figures seem to be reining their feelings in or behaving nicely for someone else's sake. That said, politeness seemed to be missing in the exhibition's namesake painting, *Chainsaw and Bicyclist* (2014). The bicyclist, recognizable as such mainly because he wears a helmet—his "bike" consists of an abstracted pole—rides forward towards a woman in a shapeless dress. She holds a chainsaw in her left hand and stares at him in a way that suggests he's wronged her. The woman leans back as if the ground she's on has tilted, muting her otherwise aggressive

behavior. Many of the paintings have this kind of twisted De Chirico quality; space collapsing, and perspective twisting back on itself.

There's enough angling, attitude, and playful art historical mimicry in Larsen's world to engulf a viewer. And when you're engulfed you don't usually have the time or desire to ask, "How does this fit into the zeitgeist?"



2
Mernet Larsen, *Aw* (2003), acrylic and tracing paper on canvas, 40 x 66 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires.