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Review Mernet Larsen probes perception and experience



Mernet Larsen, "Explanation," 2007. (Courtesy of Various Small Fires)

By **SHARON MIZOTA**

Please forgive me for suggesting that Mernet Larsen's thoroughly remarkable paintings are reminiscent of a Dire Straits video. If you spent any time in the 1980s watching MTV, you know the one: an early example of digital animation, all blocky volumes and stilted movement.

Yet Larsen's work is much stranger and more disorienting. The 75-year-old Florida artist's exhibition at Various Small Fires — her first in L.A. — goes beyond a superficial resemblance to digital imagery to probe the vagaries of perception and physical experience.

Larsen's figures are often more like furniture than people. In "Subway," the flattened arms of a trench coat-wearing rider nearly break the picture into quadrants. Extremely skewed perspectives also twist and upend expectations.

In "Explanation," the same expanse of tiles serves as both floor and ceiling, as figures in at least four different sizes perch at wildly distorted tables. If you've ever sat for hours in a soulless institutional meeting room, you will understand the vertigo.

Although they are perhaps equally reductive, Larsen's pictorial strategies make an end run around Cubism; instead of disintegrating the picture plane in a flurry of facets, the paintings seem to fold and extrude it into ever more concrete volumes. They look like space sometimes feels: thick, unvarnished and bluntly weird.