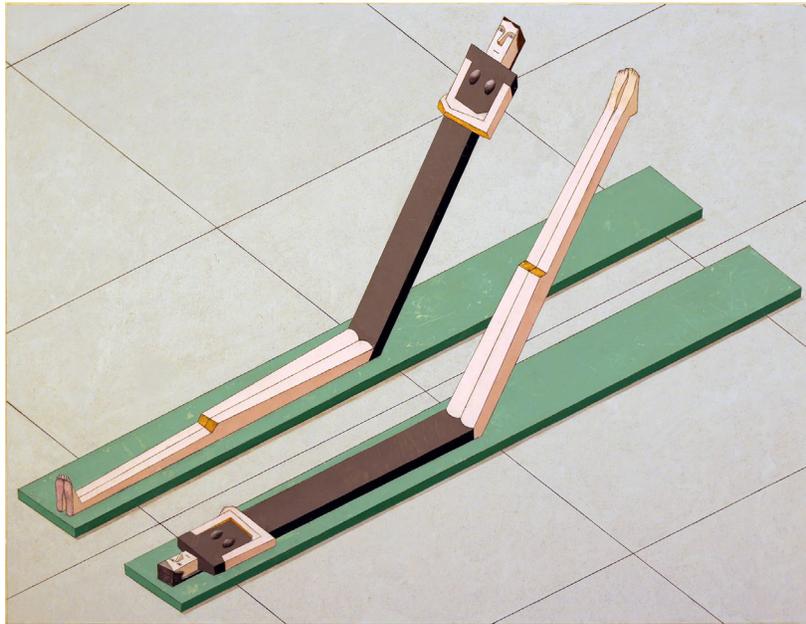


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Like most art these days, my introduction to Mernet Larsen's paintings took place on the internet- either through the endless scroll of tumblr or via another show-announcement email from the gallery, I can't quite remember when it started. On the screen I saw paintings with figures made of sharp boxy shapes and spaces that were in extreme linear perspective, suggesting an artist who ironically uses retro computer imagery to make faux-funky paintings. I shrugged the paintings off quickly, throwing them onto the pile of digital artists currently making paintings- meaning the paintings would optimally be the same in person as seen online. Luckily for me, Larsen got the chance to prove me wrong. A painting in the Various Small Fires booth at Art Los Angeles Contemporary (January 29 – February 1, 2015) made me swallow my assumptions immediately upon seeing it- in person, the work felt like it didn't come from digital sensibilities, but from searching within the space of painting (in history, materiality, and presence).

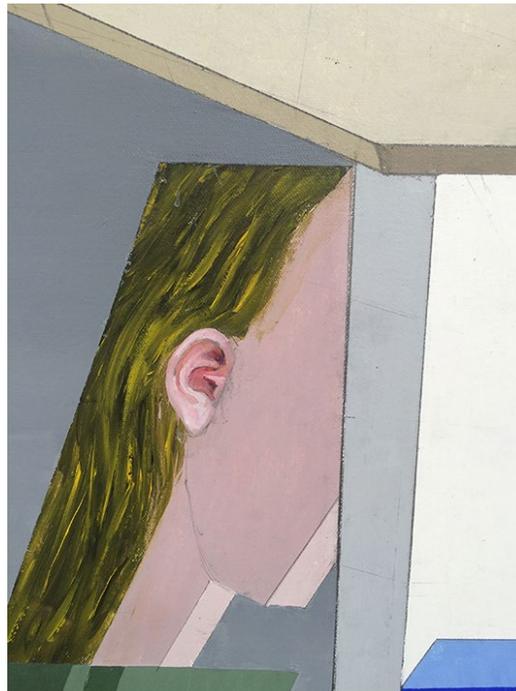


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Looking at work on a screen emphasizes the overall image of the work because of its digital bird's eye view. On screen, Larsen's works were robbed of their purpose of being explored on a human scale, one on one, with the painting speaking directly to the viewer without mitigation.



In the show, *Chainswer*, *Bicyclist*, and *Reading in Bed*, Larsen is painting from the memory of casual perception or daily observations. We have all experienced the fickleness of memory, especially when it is of mundane fleeting moments. On the subway or at a boring meeting, it is easy for your mind and eyes to wander- not snapping a photographic image of the whole scene but taking it in swiftly, almost generically, with pieces of focus lingering to chew on later.



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The act of painting perception, one that Larsen indulges in fully, brings to mind Cezanne. In his essay, *Cezanne's Doubt*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it beautifully:

*Cezanne was abandoning himself to chaos of sensation, which would upset the objects and constantly suggest illusions, as, for example, the illusion we have when we move our heads that objects themselves are moving—if our judgment did not constantly set these appearances straight.*

While Cezanne painted the act of seeing through brushy patches mashed together in such a way that it emphasized the elusive quality of observational painting, Larsen's vision differs in that it is sharp. She describes the way we move our heads from a singled out focal point to another across the room, with our peripheral sight tethered to the lines of long tables, floor tiles, or sharp limbs. This unflinching simplification of memory creates an extreme and disorienting world, one that solidifies the zigzag of perception. Larsen is quoted in the press release, stating, "As if I were leaving this life and had to take with me only a few concrete images: this is what it was, not good, not bad, just what stood out. Not ephemeral, not photo or film-like, but memory turned into object, monumentalized".



In her paintings this movement is facilitated by the long smooth surfaces made from legs, arms, tables, and walls- all with straight hard edges creating slides for your eyes to zip up and down on only coming to rest on lumpy islands -an ear, eye, hand, breast, or food. These bits of organic articulation are a constant in all of the paintings and stand out among the hard shapes and lines making up the rest of the image. For me this decision illuminates the logic that holds the paintings together. These aspects of daily observation are the magnets that constantly draw our attention in public spaces: the ear to speak into, the eye to connect with, the food you would rather be eating, hair which is always shifting, and breasts you shouldn't be looking at.

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Lastly are the edges. The raw canvas that is exposed on the edges of the paintings continues onto the face. Its only a sliver- maybe 1/8 of an inch at most. This specification is not that of an anally clean painter wanting to keep the edge of their painting pristine, but of one that wants the viewer to be keenly aware of the image's edge. Where most painters can use the edge to let the viewer come and go as they please, these feel more like walls where the perpetual movement inside has no way of escape. All of this harmonizes together to foster a psychologically charged space that once you enter, Larsen takes the wheel.



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Again from Cezanne's *Doubt*, Ponty describes the act of the painter who could be both Cezanne and Larsen:

*The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual rebirth of existence”.*

