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ArtReview

Mernet Larsen *Chainsawer, Bicyclist and Reading in Bed*

Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, 28 February – 11 April

What's the most grindingly dull subject you can think of for a painting? How about a college faculty meeting? Seventy-five-year-old Mernet Larsen, of Tampa, Florida, has made a whole series of paintings depicting meetings at the art school in which she still teaches. Two of them are included in this exhibition, and boring they are not.

Larsen, who until recently had showed very little outside the East Coast, has devised a parallel semiotic universe in which the ordinary becomes janglingly peculiar. Lines of perspective are inverted or rendered dead parallel, and humans are plotted as amalgams of sharp-edged polyhedrons. In some paintings, figures have close-to-natural proportions, but in others, such as *Sit-ups, Leg-lifts* (2012), the body is drawn as a plank with feet. Larsen's paintings frequently look as if they were programmed by an equation with one or two wayward variables.

What hauls the works back from the brink of unrelatable oddness is Larsen's eye for textured surfaces, and the effects of light upon them. She has developed a technique of painting on panels of tracing paper that she sticks to the canvas, compartmentalising sharp-edged fields of colour. In *Explanation* (2007), one of the meeting pictures, Larsen captures the streaky pattern of institutional linoleum under fluorescent light so accurately that you feel like you're in the room – which makes the painting all the more discombobulating because the perspective is flipped inside out, the biggest floor tiles appearing to be on the ceiling. For Greek and Russian icon painters, reverse perspective had a specific theological purpose: to project the sacred image into the spatial realm of the human. For Larsen, it is more of a perceptual puzzle, an order of representation

that allows us – compels us, in fact – to climb around inside the picture rather than to stand outside it and peer in.

She does this not in order to be clever, or even to make us conscious of our own processes of apperception. Larsen wants us to look as if for the first time at social behaviours that would normally not warrant a second thought. In *Handshake* (2001), a man and a woman dressed in business casual evoke two colossi performing a magnificent slow dance. *Salad* (2013) shows an unremarkable meal being shared by three people and includes an empty chair that suggests you can join them. Boredom and blandness in Larsen's world are nonissues. The world is what you make it, she seems to tell us. Despite Larsen's cool palette and deadened affect, these are not pictures of alienation, but humanist studies for a posthuman age. *Jonathan Griffin*



Explanation, 2007, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 104 × 132 cm.
Courtesy Various Small Fires, Los Angeles