



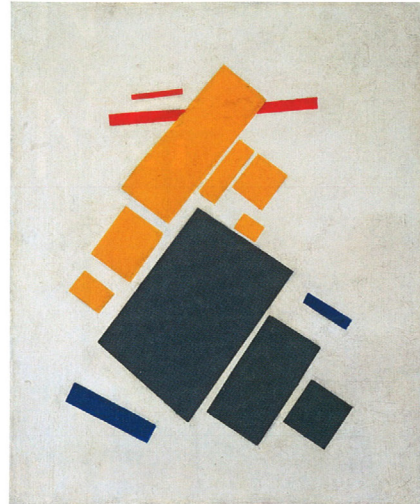
# THE VERTIGO EFFECT

AN ARTIST CONSIDERS HOW A LITTLE SHIFT IN  
LINEAR PERSPECTIVE CAN CHANGE THE WAY  
WE SEE THE WHOLE WORLD

BY MERNET LARSEN

BLOUINARTINFO.COM MAY 2017 MODERN PAINTERS 61





FROM LEFT:  
*Walk on a Windy Day*,  
2001, was one of Larsen's  
first return forays into  
representational imagery  
after many years of  
painting abstractly.

Larsen was struck by  
the diagonal lines of  
geometric abstraction,  
like Kazimir Malevich's  
*Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915. Oil  
on canvas, 23 x 19 in.

WHEN I DECIDED to start painting representationally again 17 years ago (after 15 years of painting abstractly, and more than 20 years of painting representationally before that), one of my first decisions was that the represented objects or situations should not be posing for or facing the viewer. I wanted the situation objectified somehow, so the viewer felt she was knowing—almost wearing—it, rather than “seeing” it. I wanted the monumentality and volumetric solidity of Renaissance painting; but the proscenium stage, the location of the viewer at a point outside the painting, conventional perspective, and photographic vantage points all had to go.

At first I was inspired by 13th-century Japanese narrative scrolls, like the famed diary of Lady Murasaki, with their parallel diagonals, which gave

the sensation of depth without illusion and conveyed the objectivity that architects, too, employ to communicate measurable structures. But just as important as the parallel perspective was the drama of the direction of the diagonals, the interplay with other oddly competing diagonals, and interjecting curved volumes.

Similarly, the diagonals in the paintings of El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich invoked, at least for me, a sense of infinite depth. The shifting, unanchored diagonals created a sense of instability, even vertigo. Turned on their sides and upside down, this sensation was amplified (as it was in Japanese scrolls, similarly rotated). These sources became touchstones for me, and often specific compositions were springboards for freshly imagined subjects.

RIGHT:  
A detail from  
the 13th-century  
Japanese scroll  
inspired by the diary  
of Lady Murasaki,  
a Heian era writer and  
lady-in-waiting.





Balletto, 2006.  
Acrylic and tracing  
paper on canvas,  
65 1/2 x 39 in.

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In 2004, I decided to paint faculty meetings. I had just retired from teaching at a university art school and meetings had felt like a big part of my life—worth commemorating. I took some pictures of a meeting and did a painting in parallel perspective (*Taking Notes*). I wanted a large group of people, however, and this became redundant and boring fast. So I thought, what if I make myself the vanishing point and make everything grow larger as it moves away from me, in literally reverse perspective? I traced the tables in the photos, turned them upside down, and then constructed the characters to fit the new situation. I loved the resulting psychological situation: the looming distant figures, the tiny groups in the foreground. Yet when I went from my studies to the large paintings and had to deal with “details” like the legs under the tables, the legs of the big characters went off the bottom of the painting, flattening everything out. So, I dramatically shifted the scale under the tables (it is a different world under there), made the legs relatively small, and introduced floor tile in parallel perspective or with different vanishing points. This started to get the kind of vertiginous, disorienting space I sought.

Since then, all of my paintings have been playing with various perspectives as if they are all toys, with no claim to “accuracy.” The paintings announce their artificiality in various other ways, as well. Rather awkward, often impossible, human bodies are seen as collaborations of parts rather than organic wholes; they are hopefully understood as analogies to the concrete objects or people, not simplified reductions. There are always visible traces of my process: pencil and measuring marks, tracing paper body parts and details pasted on, textures and inlaid elements, like fake linoleum tiles laid in, one at a time.

FROM TOP:  
A photo from one of Larsen's many faculty meetings, which served as inspiration for the artist's subsequent series of paintings on meetings.

*Taking Notes*, 2004. Acrylic and tracing paper on canvas, 48 x 50 in.

*Faculty Meeting*, 2008. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 58 x 40 in.

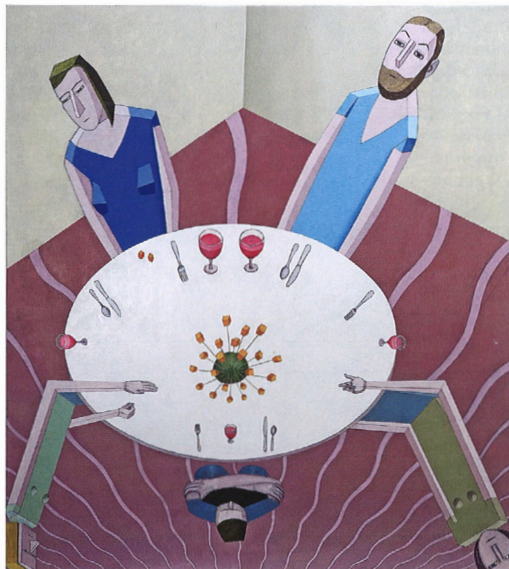
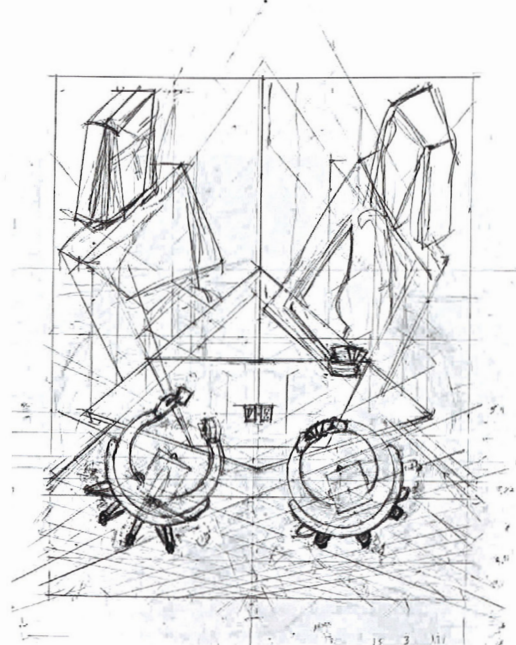
Exploration, 2007.  
Acrylic and mixed  
media on canvas,  
41 x 52 in.





TOP:  
On the left, a study for  
*Cardplayers*, 2013,  
and an initial drawing  
for the composition  
on the right.

BOTTOM:  
*Punch*, 2016.  
Acrylic and mixed  
media on canvas,  
68 1/2 x 61 1/2 in.



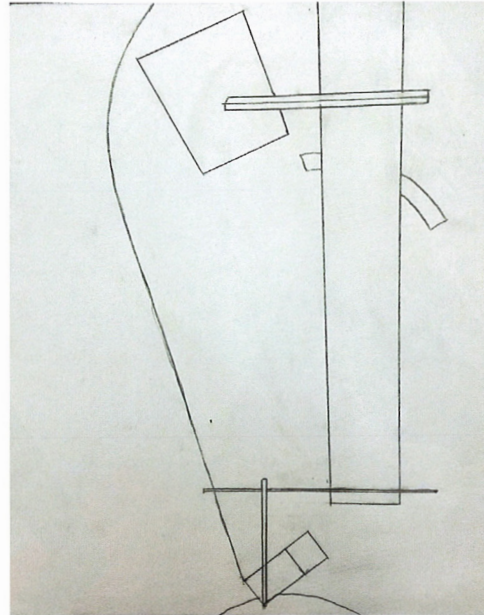
After the faculty meetings played themselves out, I experimented with reverse perspective in landscape situations. But I soon returned to more psychologically oriented narratives, often friends or family around tables. *Cardplayers* was triggered by a photo I took of my husband and a friend, a square table with tablecloth I saw on Google that reminded me of a Kenneth Noland painting, and a deck of cards with Egyptian cats my mother brought me from the British Museum decades ago. We often play cards at get-togethers with my husband's family, and I thought, why not jump into the age old tradition of painting card players? I was stuck for a couple months, though, on the bottom of the painting: how to make the bottom figures not distract from the color and pattern of the table, how to deal with legs. I finally decided to make the bottom two characters symmetrical and seen directly from above, sitting in swivel office chairs with little wheels, so there was a sense of potential scuttling and movement at the bottom. Also, they struck me as humorous. Floor tiles in slightly different reverse perspective allowed hidden legs. Ultimately, I achieved the kind of monumentality I wanted, while also giving the viewer a vertiginous sense of dislocation (or even omnipresence).

I often use El Lissitzky paintings as springboards (or Rorschachs) because of my love of their space and my desire to recontextualize them. Looking at his *Proun 6*, 1923, I instantly saw a bunter, triggering childhood memories of playing baseball and collecting baseball cards. My challenge became to stay as close to the Lissitzky as I could, to see what potential it opened up spatially in dealing with this subject matter. I started by making a very small and unstable pitcher on a mound, in the process of pitching, while the batter/bunter is huge, frontal, monumental. He wears a 1940s uniform: a decision born of my nostalgia, perhaps, but also as an excuse for stripes and red socks. I wanted Lissitzky's arc to be the catcher, but how? Should the catcher be larger than the batter to continue the reverse perspective between the pitcher and batter? I decided no, because I wanted to maintain the monumentality of the batter.

However, the perspective now became "normal" on the top two-thirds of the painting. To overcome that to an extent, I opened up the space in the catcher's body: The head is very small compared to the feet and the knees lunge forward. Also, the sky needed to be a participant in this world, not just a background. I turned the sky into graded stripes, a sunset partially obscured by clouds. I considered using the curved line in the Lissitzky as a trajectory line, but chose instead to make a moon that suggested another ball. Should it be a stadium or simply bleachers? I opted for a stadium to expand the depth and separate the evening darkness from the artificial daylight of the ballfield. Horizons, at least horizontal ones, are always the enemy in my paintings, but I saw no way out of this one.

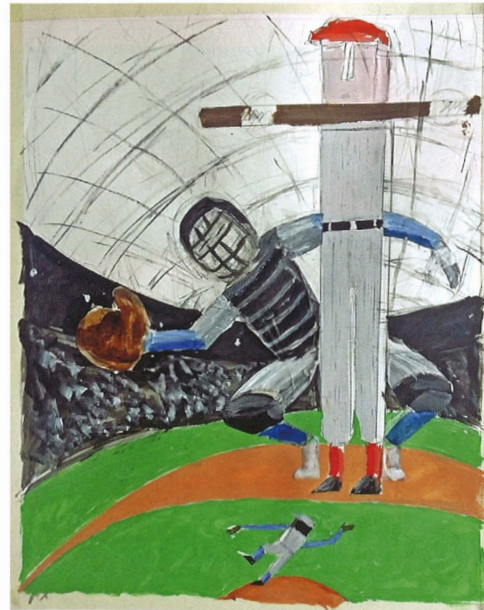
An unintended, but acceptable, consequence: Bunting can be seen as a metaphor, perhaps for the sacrifice of personal glory made for the greater good of the team. I have had in my mind painting a bunter for at least 20 years, so it must have some psychological significance for me. Generally, I don't interpret my paintings. I want them to exist in some indecipherable yet recognizable psychological state.

My paintings aren't "about" space, but the space is a strategy for conveying a possible way to know the world: to defamiliarize the most mundane situations; to reclaim and re-solidify the immediate world from spectacle and photographic information; and to move away from direct observation to a constructed, deliberately artificial, analogy for an objectified world, outside time, not unrelated to the intent of traditional Indian, Asian, Medieval, and early Italian Renaissance painting. MP

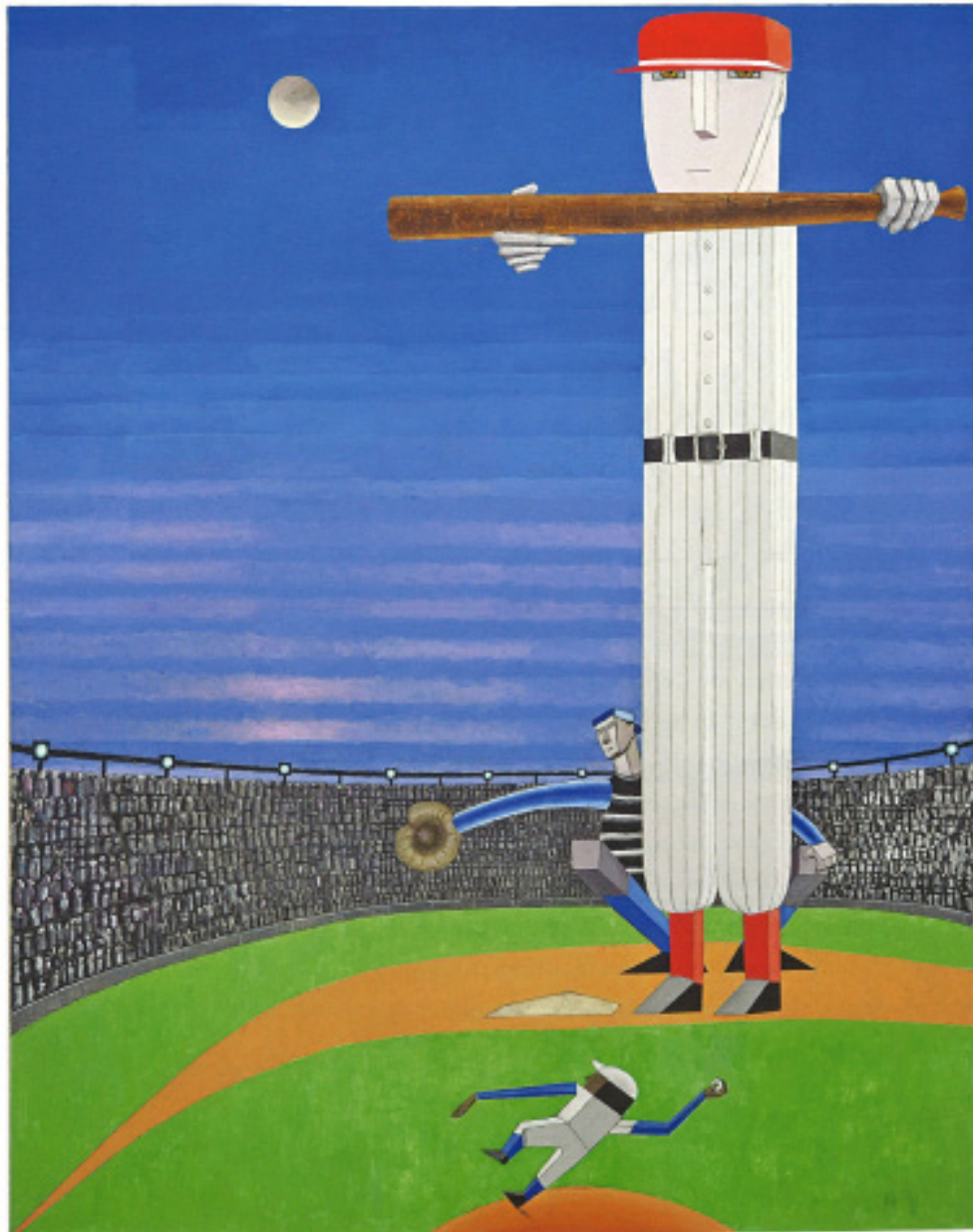


LEFT:  
A copy Larsen  
made after  
El Lissitzky's  
*Proun 6*, 1923.

BELOW:  
The artist's study for  
her painting  
*Bunt*, 2016.







June 2016.  
Acrylic and mixed  
media on canvas,  
64 x 50 1/2 in.