

MERNET LARSEN

James Cohan

Mernet Larsen makes precise, quirky paintings depicting the seemingly unpromising banalities of everyday, middle-class life. Faculty meetings, drinks at a café, a family snack, reading in bed: all are enacted by boxy figures seen in reverse perspective, shrinking as they approach the picture plane. Larsen's unique pictorial idiom—echoing the dynamic geometry of El Lissitzky's Constructivist compositions and the clunky polygons of early computer graphics—is almost always animated by a narrative force, however slight. Born in 1940, Larsen taught for 36 years at the University of South Florida. Her solo show at James Cohan was her second in New York, and the work on view manifested a sense of confidence and ease honed over decades of painting, often in relative obscurity.

In *Punch* (2016), orange-yellow cheese cubes on wooden sticks splay out, Sputnik-like, from a hemispherical holder set on a table—hors d'oeuvres for a family of five. We see the scene as if from a fish-eye lens above the table: mom and dad lean to the top corners of the picture wearing blue V-neck T-shirts, two teens point at the bottom corners and a sullen boy crosses his arms, his head bowed. All five have fuchsia liquid in their drinking glasses, while the wavy lines of a carpet wend their way toward a vanishing point a few inches below the painting's lower edge. The dinner table is often the setting of family drama or *beimisch* joy, but here the mood is benevolently blank. No one appears to be talking, much less yelling. Indeed, the stiffness is mildly reassuring.

A similar emotional flatline lends dry humor to *Chainsawer and Bicyclist* (2014). The friendly interaction between the two figures (she's doing yard work as he returns from a ride) is offset by the possibility of a much bloodier narrative conclusion. Just about everything that should be round—the drop-bar and wheel on the bike, his helmet, her hair bun—is



Mernet Larsen:
*Chainsawer and
Bicyclist*, 2014,
acrylic and mixed
mediums on canvas,
49½ by 49 inches;
at James Cohan.

Art in America

squared off. Only the end of the chainsaw remains perfectly rounded. It is connected to a thin black line (the curb?) that extends right through the biker's torso.

Larsen's pared-down compositions provide just enough loaded clues for viewers to fill in some semblance of a story. *Misstep* (2015) shows two figures, stiff as Legos, falling off a tastefully taupe-colored ledge. The blonde woman is perpendicular to the ground and seems, Wile E. Coyote-like, unaware that she's standing on air. The man is at a 45-degree angle, his feet a few inches below the precipice, his face blank. In the background, three tiny figures scale a sienna peak.

The stones in the painting are actually squares of painted paper glued to the canvas. The roughly brushed-in hair of the block-people stands in contrast to the Albers-style play of color that defines the rest of their bodies. The man's white shirt shifts to celadon in shadow, while the woman's dress is composed of two small blocky shapes of red and orange. The shifts in facture, careful variations in the thickness of lines and sudden transitions from flat planes to modulated gradients emphasize the taut sense of a constructed reality.

In the back room, Larsen's working drawings, in graphite and acrylic on Bristol paper, reveal the calculations and plans that secure her figures within vertiginous perspectival systems. In the small gouache *Dialog* (2012), two boxes with triangular noses float on a background of sky. Smaller versions of the shapes repeat and appear to overlap with or enter each other. This might be a simple study in geometric form, but, as in so many of Larsen's works, there is also a metaphoric complexity that resists exegesis even though it feels familiar and makes intuitive sense.

—Julian Kreimer