

## Mernet Larsen

JAMES COHAN

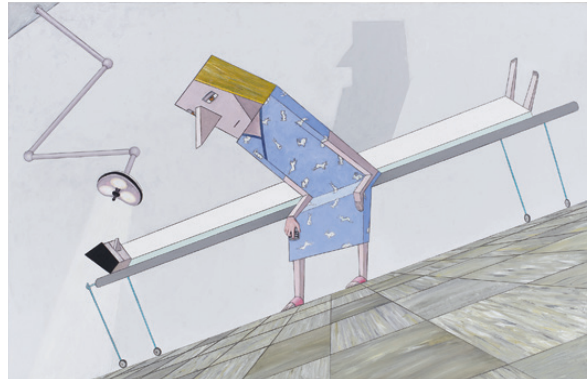
Think back a hundred years ago to the high-water mark of Russian avant-garde art, when, in stark contrast to our present day, utopianism was at a peak. Currents of revolutionary fervor, coupled with industrial expansion and promises of liberation for all workers, stirred a radiant vision of the future: “The people” would be released from poverty and the onerous social conditions they had endured. Everyone could be a creator—an artist!—and manifest their own unique essence. El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich were among those prophets of the new world order, and their radically abstract art mapped ideas of autonomy and freedom. Lissitzky’s “Proun” paintings, produced in the 1920s, are exemplary in this respect.

A painter for more than six decades, Mernet Larsen, who lives and works in Tampa, Florida, and Queens, New York, has had Lissitzky’s “Proun” pieces on her mind since the 1980s, as we learn from a video interview conducted with the artist for her exhibition at James Cohan. Each of the twelve canvases on view had the parenthetical (*after El Lissitzky*) appended to the title. Her idea, which she acknowledges with a twinkle in her eye as “taboo,” was to violate the nonobjective purity of the Russian artist’s imagery by populating her homages to him with blocky, toylike figures and creating narratives regarding precarity and isolation. The approach was a far cry from early modernism’s hopes for the future, which turned out to be more bleak than bright.

What makes Larsen’s dystopian theater riveting is her ability to create pictures that at first glance seem uncomplicated, due to their cartoonish appearance. But upon closer scrutiny, her art proves to be conceptually rich, animated with bizarre mesmerizing effects full of spatial contradictions and visual distortions. Her style of painting is relatively precise, giving her imagery an almost clinical quality. This is heightened by the regiment of grids that subsume her surfaces and function as isometric projection planes connoting control, order. Yet the artist’s soft take on hard-edge formalism, along with the works’ various collage elements and rough graphite details, humanizes her stylized tableaux.

*Solar System, Explained*, 2020, is dominated by a sweeping grid that tilts backward and grounds four flat, origami-like figures who lounge in a circular banquette around a cocktail table ornamented with a Sputnik-era model of the solar system. The canvas is a visual tangle of vertiginous angles and warped perspectives that take time to sort out. Adding to the serene sense of alienation, Larsen tweaks the dimensions of her figures so that some are miniature while others are gigantic. In *Beach*, 2020, the grid gets wild and zooms diagonally across the surface, as if it were a computer simulation of reality. Tiny figures are scattered in the sand, an airplane is in flight, and an ominous skyscraper-size stick man holds a rifle with his finger on the trigger.

Larsen creates a cosmology in which affective dimensions do not exist. There are, however, flashes of comedy, largely in the extraneous details she slips into her pictures: A weary penguin is among the stoop-shouldered workers in *Departure*, 2019, while a spacewalker in his high-tech suit clutches ridiculously tiny toy wrenches in *Astronaut: Sunrise*, 2020. Yet these moments are not enough to mitigate the angst and gnawing vacancies Larsen meticulously crafts into place. In *Gurney*, 2019, the grid of the institutional linoleum-tile floor aggressively eats up space as a female nurse, phone in hand and wearing blue scrubs printed with little leaping white sheep, is totally oblivious to the non-responsive fellow on the titular cot. The examination lamp itself (a three-bulb model, strangely beady eyed) takes the lead, leaning in for a close assessment of the patient. Although nothing is “normal” in Larsen’s world, the disturbing moments she illustrates are oddly familiar.



Mernet Larsen, *Gurney (after El Lissitzky)*, 2019, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 45 1/4 × 70".

She often scales her canvases down to human proportion, making them more relatable (they’re still large, but not in any ridiculously “heroic” way). Maybe this is another aspect of her humor—as if we need any more reason to understand the twenty-first-century dramas and dilemmas she revels in.

—Jan Avgikos