

PATRICIA LARSEN: CELEBRATING THE ABSTRACT

By Jonathan Goodman

Although Patricia Larsen comes from Vancouver, her forthright, evocative paintings are best seen as examples of the ongoing evolution of the New York School, or abstract expressionism. Critics have characterized this movement as moribund, but that is not truly the case—individual painters such as Louise Fishman and Pat Steir come to mind as practitioners still deeply involved with painting as recording both inner life and outer activity. These artists are New York-based, but more importantly they effect a bridge between the great painters of the 1940s and '50s and artists today. The transition remains valid because the artists have staked their integrity on painting as procedure, evidencing the process of its own making. In a similar fashion, Larsen invigorates what is by now an august tradition of several generations. She is continuing a language whose integrity remains available to the committed artist. Her explorations of a brilliant legacy advance abstraction to the next step that can be taken in painting. In this way Larsen opens up a new course in art even as she maintains a dialogue with an established practice. She is not so much traditional as experienced in a style that remains luminous, in part because of its contact with the masterful painters preceding her.

Of course, the struggle facing an artist like Larsen concerns the development of motifs that may be called her own, even as she makes sense of the pathways established by those before her. This is not a matter of easy creativity; instead, it involves the internalization of style and theme in order to enliven one's own art. Abstract expressionism was a powerfully abstract, and also powerfully American, moment, but now that there are painters in this style from all over the world, we see how difficult the rigors of independence have become. Much to Larsen's credit, the viewer senses that her originality remains within the domain of her painting history, which has enabled her to develop along lines both similar to and different from earlier painters. As her work suggests, we are not islands, complete unto ourselves. Instead, we connect with prior practices in order to make better sense of our current position. Larsen clearly understands that she is working inside a highly achieved language, but it is also true that she is devoted to an idiom that exercises its independence from the past. Ever since the poet Ezra Pound advised the world to "make it new," the burden has been on the artist to find a contemporary vernacular, no matter what the style. Larsen's muted earth tones, drips, and thin stripes can be connected to art historical origins, but she has rendered this speech colloquial, part of current culture.

What is it exactly that we find in Larsen's art? Her palette consists of tan and brown in "Earth Bound", with thin, cracked lines forming a rectangle at the top of the composition. The rest of the work is almost completely taken up with light and dark striations that are vertically aligned beneath a mostly red horizontal stripe. The raw energy of this and other works is compellingly played out in both, the grand design and acute particulars of the paintings. This specific piece looks like a palimpsest, on which the artist has recorded the movement of her thought repeatedly on the same surface. Thus, Larsen creates her own history in a way that doesn't circumnavigate the past of abstract painting so much as transform it from within. Black drips invigorate the work and tie its atmosphere to paintings done before this one. Yet the quotation is not one-sided. Larsen, like any gifted painter, is developing a conversation whose creativity looks both to the past, for its accomplishments within the field she has chosen, and to the future, for its hints of what is yet to come. The present moment is captured, made still, in the painting as it is. Larsen's skill is such that the instant is made to last as such in the viewer's gaze, which completes the activities recognized in the painting by bonding with them.

It should be emphasized that Larsen presents us with the documentation of her involvement with paint. The surface becomes alive with a personal history—the energy and time she has put into painting. At the same time, her ties to art history remain true; the work progresses along a continuum of effort that shapes and structures the work that she makes. In "Sacred Field", Larsen has set up a strong vertical stripe that moves down the center of the painting. It is encased in a rectangle of light tan, but it also has an eye-shaped image—a dot in a horizontal oval—that looks like the rendering of the third eye encountered in mystical practice. Beneath the rectangle, the lower part of the painting is composed of long, light lines against a darker background. In this work and others, it is possible to speak of an enduring spirituality—a spirituality that is never spoken but only implied. The creation of an abstract art requires a strong commitment to the inherent language of paintings: lines and shapes that stay nonrepresentational, pointing to a self-contained world. Larsen often dwells on paint's ability to transform a surface without suggesting a particular object. In this way, she is consistent from piece to piece as she puts together an imagery that owes its structure to the imagination and to the history of similar efforts over time.

One of the strongest components of Larsen's art is its consistency, which demonstrates a strong independence of mind. Her works follow a sequence that enables us to note the visionary quality of her thoughts; they are experienced as true. Authenticity, a quality that underscores her independence because of its inherent strengths, becomes the basic structure within which Larsen makes her peace with the world. Her art consists of an affirmation of the ideal, so that we encounter her as asserting a realism of a different sort, one in which the imaginary counts as certain. One hesitates to speak of the spiritual—the term has been so much used, and misused, by well-meaning but naïve viewers—but that is what Larsen's paintings confirm. Her insight into that realm connotes an acquaintance with the history of abstraction, made that much more intense by a contemporary integrity. Larsen speaks to our need to find an art that neither negates nor glorifies the past. Instead, she looks back so that she can report accurately on the conditions of the present. The atmosphere in her paintings is moving; it enacts the insight that the elegy keeps what it celebrates alive. Her compositions offer us an imagined space in which nothing is forgotten, but everything is transformed.

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