

# BmoreArt

## Particular Placements and Fluid Structures in Liz Larner's Exhibition at SculptureCenter

In "Don't Put it Back Like it Was," Larner explores creative destruction and transformation through materials such as mold, hair, and stainless steel.

Fanni Somogyi. March 16, 2022.



I approach the mechanical box affixed to the metal column near a corner in the gallery. Flick! The Leeson motor swirls on with a low hum. As I adjust the speed to 10, the roughly 2-inch-diameter steel tube begins to turn with a sizable steel ball hanging off a chain welded to its top like a tetherball. The motor is attached at the bottom, and the fixture is chained to the wall to prevent escape. As I increase the speed to 40, I observe a large gash in the drywall from the ball swinging around at chest height. It could easily do more damage.

Thud! Thud! Clink! Clink! Clink!

The sound of metal bashing into the wall and then itself is louder than expected. I cautiously look at the front desk attendant and turn the speed down, but they don't bat an eye. They have informed me that

Liz Larner’s “Corner Basher” (1988) is interactive, but it still feels wrong to be destroying the white wall, which I have been accustomed to thinking is untouchable and pristine. The first object I meet immediately implicates me in a process of dismantling. I proceed with a heightened sense of curiosity.

Liz Larner, born in 1960 in Sacramento, plays with materials to morph and defy their expected attributes. The Los Angeles-based artist constructs her pieces from stainless steel, gauze, paper, leather, hair, ceramic, mold, and bacteria, and her subtle sense of color and form is perceptible throughout her show, *Don’t put it back like it was*, at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City. As if on the ebb and flow of a wave, I’m carried from work to work wanting to touch and feel the sculptures, which undulate between soft and hard, sharp and rounded, heavy and light.



Liz Larner: Don’t Put it Back like it Was, 2022, at SculptureCenter

Liz Larner, Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny

The museum’s building is a former trolley repair shop, and this past as a fabrication space becomes a part of the work, even if it wasn’t made there. In Larner’s largest survey since 2001, the 28 sculptures are evocatively abstract. Their sizes range from a petri dish on a small architectural pedestal to monumental installations. Larner fashions a somatic experience for the viewer through these shifts in scale and purposeful placements, which facilitate a concurrent interaction between her sculptures, the viewer, and the building. Additionally, the characteristics of some of the materials allude to the passage of time and decay, highlighting our fleeting nature on Earth.

An artwork that emphasizes the idea of creative destruction is “Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny,” a sculpture with mold decomposing an orchid, buttermilk, and a penny. The work contains two petri dishes: the original from 1987 and a comparative reproduction from 2022. In the former, the orchid’s form is still visible, but its color is gone. In the

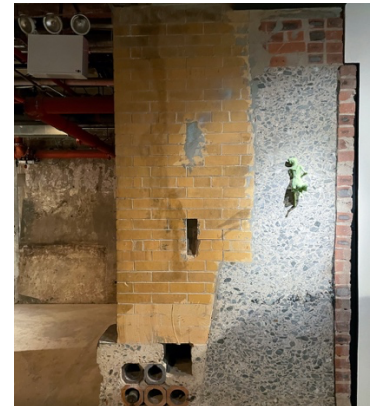
latter, the flower is a vivid violet, and mold blooms like a cloud, slowly taking over. There is a softness to the destruction that occurs in this piece, which encompasses growth and decay simultaneously. Together with the more brutal “Corner Basher,” the tender decomposition of the mold here probes ideas of our sustainable futures and how industry and nature could possibly coexist.

Larner was ahead of her time with her bio-artworks: I’m reminded of Pierre Huyghe’s “Untilled (Liegender Frauenakt) [Reclining female nude]” (2012), a life-size concrete female nude with a beehive as its head. Although formally different, they both contain organic elements: bees and mold, which have their own agency. In both works, these non-human lifeforms act as collaborators to the artists and bring an element of surprise to the forms.

As I stand in awe of the beauty of decomposing mold, I’m jarred by a loud bang that shocks me and shakes the walls. Someone else is wreaking havoc with “Corner Basher,” again threatening to break the white cube.



Liz Larner, You might have to live like a refugee, 2019, patinated bronze



Liz Larner, You might have to live like a refugee, 2019, patinated bronze

Approaching the five distinct sculptures in the main hall, my focus is pulled from the microscopic to the macroscopic as I stand underneath “Bird in Space” (1989), a white nylon and silk string installation that encompasses the majority of the space. Two small stainless-steel blocks, placed about 15 feet apart roughly in the center of the room, anchor these dense strings that arch above my head. Perpendicular to these are more cords, spread apart and stretching underneath the arch to each side of the building’s beams. The soft string becomes taut; the sculpture is concurrently light and heavy. The skeletal structure of “Bird in Space” compels me to study the surrounding environment. A

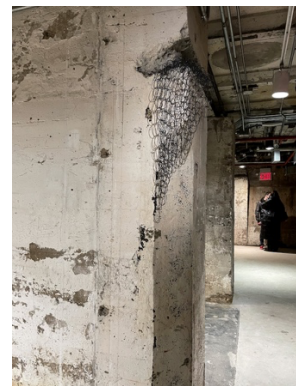
gantry crane above, large steel doors, and exposed brick wall all allure me since few other art venues allow such architectural elements to inhabit the gallery space.

Descending into the basement, I come face to face with an electrical closet and a fire extinguisher. I feel like I'm transgressing and finding a secret passage, but I proceed. Almost immediately on the left, where a portion of the concrete wall juts out at waist height, I find a small delicate sculpture made from dozens of stainless steel hoops linked into a parallelogram shape. As "Guest" (2005) hangs off the wall, it is simultaneously rigid and fluid. It is quiet and almost hidden. Like many of Larner's works, its process was labor-intensive, a fact that the structure's gentleness almost disguises. Metal holds many dualities and Larner explores them all: whether stainless steel, aluminum, or cast bronze, these alloys are durable yet also malleable; they form the structural parts of buildings, but can also adorn jewelry.

After discovering "Guest" in an overlooked nook, my senses become hyperaware as I meander down the hall under a low vaulted ceiling. Small vestibules house ceramic pieces between each arch. Here, the works feel raw, each stretched into a slab and hung on the wall, highlighting similarities between the cracks on the concrete wall and the cracks in the pieces. Both mark time and the artist/fabricator's hand. Near the end of the hall, "inflexion" (2013) is covered with iridescent pigments, resembling a euphoria beetle. Its title references a point of no curvature in a fold, and the form has a smooth surface with a wave in its center. Its colors morph from a bluish-purple haze to a rich burnt sienna, alluding to rock formations like the Grand Canyon. Clay, a material born of the land, transforms from wet, soft, and moldable mud into a hard fired object. Larner's ceramic pieces allude to grander and longer processes of change as the Earth churns and morphs slowly.



Liz Larner, Guest, 2005, silver plated stainless steel



Liz Larner, Guest, 2005, silver plated stainless steel



Liz Larner, Bird in Space, 1989, nylon cord, silk thread, stainless steel

I pass through another corridor, which is empty of artworks and stripped bare of electrical equipment except for the ceramic insulations that had been left as a memento. I find a small bronze cast sculpture of a woman running in a flowing dress placed on a concrete wall textured with aggregate. The sculpture's surface is patinated a perfect light green. Titled "You might have to live like a refugee," the sculpture exists on a wall lush with history, accentuating the building's past as a repair shop.

When Larner created this piece, in 2019, the news was rife with refugees fleeing Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, among numerous other places. With the growing climate crisis and ongoing political turmoil around the world, people will continue to flee their homes, and we will have to collectively respond and alleviate that instability. Even while I was writing this review, Russia brutally invaded Ukraine, spurring an influx of civilians into neighboring European countries.

Larner's doll-size sculpture not only asks for sympathy, but also urges us to understand the circumstances of people who try to escape yet run into a wall. The color of the patina could even be a reference to aliens, represented in science fiction and cartoons as small green humanoid figures. The word "alien" is weaponized by racists and xenophobes, but it is also the legal term for non-citizens in the United States, no matter their reasons for being here. When I moved to the US by choice to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art, this label appeared on various forms of mine and a work authorization card. The language is purposeful and effective in othering and creating a wall between people.

The sculptures in the basement, just as in the main hall, have distinct personalities. They inhabit and claim their space: on the floor, on the wall, or in crevices. Through a variety of materials and forms, both

figurative and abstract, Larner's work is grounded in touch, fluidity, and change. As I progress through the show, I become more and more mindful of the entire space itself, the objects, my body, and the flowing relationship between these entities. The surfaces of the building, like a ghost with unfinished business, keep returning and communicating with the objects and me.



Liz Larner, Inflexion, 2013, ceramic, epoxy and pigment



Liz Larner, Guest, 2005, silver plated stainless steel



Liz Larner, Bird in Space, 1989, nylon cord, silk thread, stainless steel