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From Pedestal to Petri Dish, Liz Larner Makes Sculptures for a New Era

The artist, whose installations and sculptures run from microscopic to immense, is having a midcareer survey at SculptureCenter, her largest exhibition since 2001.

By Karen Rosenberg, January 26, 2022



Installation view of “Liz Larner: Don’t Put It Back Like It Was” at SculptureCenter. Foreground from left, “V (planchette),” 2013; “Bird in Space,” 1989. Background from left, “Too the Wall,” 1990; “2 as 3 and Some, Too,” 1997–98. Back wall, “Wrapped Corner,” 1991. Liz Larner; Cathy Carver

Liz Larner’s exuberant midcareer survey at SculptureCenter begins with a bang, or a few of them: a motorized steel ball, tethered to a rotating column, smashes into the gallery wall. The piece is called “Corner Basher,” and its speed is controlled by the viewer; turning the dial all the way up results in an increasingly loud and frequent thwacking noise, a growing dent in the architecture and a gleeful sense of transgression.

Not everything in the show is as forceful as “Corner Basher” (1988), but other works also play up underused spaces in ways that can seem just as rebellious: the thick industrial chains that curve around the wall in “Wrapped Corner,” for instance, or the nylon and silk cords that extend to the upper reaches of SculptureCenter’s soaring main gallery in “Bird in Space” (a 1989 piece that shares a title and sleek lines with a famous Brancusi sculpture while defying the whole idea of sculpture as an object on a pedestal).



Larner's "Corner Basher" (1988), a motorized steel ball tethered to a rotating column. When the motor is activated, it smashes into the gallery wall. Liz Larner; Cathy Carver

"Liz Larner: Don't Put It Back Like It Was" is the artist's most significant New York show to date, and her largest survey since 2001. It travels to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in April, although it's hard to imagine a more ideal venue for Larner's protean oeuvre than the lightly renovated former trolley repair shop of SculptureCenter, with its varied building materials (from Cor-Ten steel to exposed brick) and its capacious central gallery flanked by more intimate spaces.

The Los Angeles-based, Sacramento-born Larner, who has been working and exhibiting steadily for three decades, has no easily identifiable style. Her sculptures and installations run from microscopic to immense and make use of materials including plastic, metal, paper, leather, volcanic ash, surgical gauze and bacteria. Her work can be rough or refined, and sometimes both at once, as evidenced by a stunning group of ceramic wall reliefs with jagged edges and silky iridescent glazes. It can be abstract or, like the disembodied cast-pewter appendages of "Hands" (1993), uncannily figurative.



“2 as 3 and Some, Too” (1997–98), the steel frames of two open cubes. Larner has wrapped them in sheets of mulberry paper, which she has also tinted with watercolor in Easter-egg hues. Liz Larner; Cathy Carver

But there are a few through lines in this beautifully installed exhibition of about 30 works. The most apparent one is a playful referencing of other sculptors, particularly post-minimalists like Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis but including Louise Bourgeois, David Smith, Cady Noland and Ken Price, among others. In “Lash Mat” (1989), Larner glues hundreds of pairs of false eyelashes to a wide strip of leather that trails from wall to floor. It’s impossible to look at this lush pelt without thinking of the Surrealist Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined teacup, although it could also read as a more contemporary feminist critique of the beauty industry. Larner has said that she was also thinking about the thick-fringed eyes that were a signature look of the sculptor Louise Nevelson, as well as the wavy patterns of Bridget Riley’s painting “Crest.”

And in “2 as 3 and Some, Too” (1997-98), the steel frames of two open cubes — a form associated with the rigid geometries of Sol LeWitt, among others — seem to have been smooshed together as easily as one might crumple a foil candy wrapper. Larner has wrapped them in sheets of mulberry paper, which she has also tinted with watercolor in Easter-egg hues. The piece is large, measuring 137 inches at its widest point, but appears extremely delicate.



In “Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny” (1987), which takes the form of two petri dishes presented under glass, microorganisms ravage buttermilk, the petals of an orchid and a copper penny. Liz Larner; Cathy Carver

Works like these may seem oriented toward sculpture's past, but Larner has also been thinking deeply about the medium's future. As this show and its catalog make clear, posthumanism is just as important to her as post-minimalism. In an interview with the Walker's executive director, Mary Ceruti, who organized the exhibition along with the SculptureCenter's interim director, Kyle Dancewicz, Larner elaborates on her interpretation of the term "viewer": "It could mean an individual or any number of people, maybe even animals, plants, insects or minerals."

Back in the late 1980s, Larner was experimenting with bacterial cultures — an idea now being explored by a new generation of artists, notably Anicka Yi. In a 1987 work by Larner that takes the form of two petri dishes presented under glass, microorganisms ravage buttermilk, the petals of an orchid and a copper penny.

As Larner tells Ceruti in their interview, she gives a lot of thought to how her art — and all art — will decay over time. "Most artists don't want their work to disappear, to biodegrade. But I think this is something that artists, like everyone else, will have to start dealing with," she says. In a floor sculpture presented last spring at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, which will be expanded in an exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich this summer, Larner created a sprawling assemblage of three years' worth of plastic refuse from her household.



Some of Larner's recent wall-based works in ceramic, from right to left: "Marthe," 2019; "xiii (caesura)," 2014–15; "calefaction," 2015; "inflexion," 2013. Liz Larner; Cathy Carver

Although this body of work isn't included in the survey at SculptureCenter, it's hinted at in a gorgeously dystopian sequence of pieces made over the last decade and installed in the cryptlike basement galleries. Here, ceramic slabs encrusted with minerals and stones suggest extraterrestrial landscapes, or perhaps a post-Anthropocene view of our planet.

In everything from the aggressive wall-thumping of Larner's "Corner Basher" to the rotting orchid petals of her bacterial cultures and her deft de-materialization of Brancusi, the exhibition's subtitle, "Don't Put It Back Like It Was," sticks in the mind. "It" might be the gallery space, or the sculptural canon, or the way we were before the pandemic, or life on earth