



HIDDEN CITY

Valeri Larko

August 23 – November 17, 2019

SUSQUEHANNA ART MUSEUM

AT THE MARTY AND TOM PHILIPS FAMILY ART CENTER



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Hidden City features the plein-air landscape paintings of artist Valeri Larko. The overlooked sites that Larko selects for her landscapes are places that many people never see. Larko is drawn to the abandoned and decaying structures around the fringes of the city, urban waterways, and graffiti-laced walls.

“Each site has its own story to tell and through patient observation acquired over months of painting on location, I work to bring that story to life and to capture the visual poetry of these places.”

I first encountered Valeri Larko's work on a cold day in New York City. I experienced an unexpected but welcome warmth from her paintings. *Batting Cage Nets, Bronx Golf Center, 2017* instantly brought Andrew Wyeth's *Pentecost, 1989*, to the forefront of my mind. *Pentecost* depicts fishing nets drying in the wind above the coastline of Maine. This ethereal image is symbolically linked to a local young woman who drowned at sea. Like Wyeth, Larko's ghostly nets enshroud the sparse landscape, referencing life that once existed there. In this manner, Larko's otherworldly compositions invite uniquely close exploration. The scenes are somber but alive with encroaching plants reclaiming abandoned spaces.



Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917 – 2009), *Pentecost*, 1989, tempera with pencil on hardboard panel 20.75" x 20.625", © Andrew Wyeth / Artist Rights Society, Private Collection



Batting Cage Nets, Bronx Golf Center, 2017, oil on linen, 26" x 50"
Collection of Kayla and Richard Pechter

Having visited the artist's studio, I am struck by Larko's passion for the stories associated with each location. In the tradition of Wyeth, Larko fills each scene with the symbolism of the people that inhabit or inhabited it. Because of her dedication to painting *en plein air*, Larko's process forges a deep relationship with the environment depicted. These are no ordinary street scenes. She observes the comings and goings of the community so closely that she becomes a part of it. She speaks to curious passersby and befriends local business owners and neighbors, becoming a staple of the setting for months at a time. Like Wyeth did in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Cushing, Maine, Larko closely observes each inch of a place that has been forgotten by society, imbuing it with dignity and celebrating its perceived flaws. Where Wyeth observed from a distance, Larko becomes part of the scene. Her use of perspective solidifies her presence in the environment. As viewers we are invited to retrace her steps.



Batting Cage Nets, Bronx Golf Center, 2017 on site at the abandoned Bronx Golf Center

When discussing her work, Larko emanates the same light I felt that snowy day in New York. She vividly recalls the lives of the people who are indelibly linked to these graffitied walls and overgrown landscapes. Through the process she takes a part of the place with her, and leaves part of herself behind. For the viewer it is captivating to be transported to her side at the easel. Her reverence for these forgotten places shines through.

Lauren Nye
Director of Exhibitions, Curator of *Hidden City*
Susquehanna Art Museum

HIDDEN CITY

Holly J. Hager, Founder, Curatious

Two forces have consistently shaped Valeri Larko's *oeuvre*—nature and humanity's stamp upon it. Her urban landscapes are an ode to the Anthropocene.

Larko has been investigating the intersection of the built environment and the natural world for almost four decades. The new rarely holds charm for her. She focuses on the languor of decay and the joy of rebirth. Whether setting up her easel under a rusted overpass or climbing through a hole in the fence of an abandoned recreational center, she seeks out neglected structures that make the rest of us look away. Through her deeply optimistic lens, she reveals their splendor.



On site at the abandoned Bronx Golf Center, 2016

Hidden City, Larko's fifth solo museum exhibition, encompasses a shift in her work. She's a proud urban dweller, whose practice has always centered on the sprawl radiating from New York City to the tri-state area. Her fascination with the Anthropocene holds fast. She continues to expose the horse-trading in which humanity and nature incessantly engage, and, more importantly, what it means for our cohabitation. In her newest paintings, however, she has added another layer to her exploration by incorporating overt textual messages.

Larko's works have often included text via graffiti, which she depicts as documentation of the historical record. Buildings might go up overnight, but their devolution is painstakingly slow. Even when most of us have forgotten a place, it's rarely devoid of human habitation. Graffiti is one of the many clues she catalogues as signifiers of the effects of societal change on place.

The artist has now turned her eye to the more direct communication of billboards, retail signage, and street signs—vehicles intended for utmost clarity. Often mischievously, she exposes the ambiguous cultural messaging that they actually convey when considered within their environmental context. Despite the cheery red-and-white façade of her *Holiday Motel*, a rusted sign and an equally browned bush are emblematic of its denizens' ill luck. The unlikeliness that travelers actually find respite at Exit 13 is underscored by a glowering black billboard savaged by a red flatline that threatens, "After you die, you will meet God."

Romantic Depot epitomizes Larko's sense of irony. Her emphasis on the "15 minute parking" sign in the foreground casts doubt that romance can really be attained in such short order. Instead, the phallic pipe looming above it suggests that some other impetus might be at play. Both are gently offset, however, with the background of a larger operation that values both the used and the new.

Larko found her voice early. Two decades before the name of our new geologic era was coined, her work had already begun to reveal what has become the defining tension of our age: the needs of human development versus the needs of our planet. Not that the artist has ever described herself as an activist. Her work isn't political, and there isn't a hint of doomsday in it. Her paintings are purely observational, driven by her immense curiosity. She's enthralled by the wisdom that forgotten urban spaces can divulge about the human condition.

Larko's touch is painterly, not photorealistic, so her work isn't documentary in a visual sense. Harkening back to the Impressionists, her images convey her emotional experience of a specific space-time. Through soft brushwork and carefully chosen detail, she evokes the intangibles that define her experience. The poetic drape of dead vines betrays the weariness of one set of turquoise walls. Another set is invigorated by bold pastel lettering and the tireless climb of verdant flora. Woolly clouds streak melancholy across a periwinkle sky, and a lush sweep of wind bends the trees toward a tumbledown structure like a rapt audience awaiting a climax.

The uncertain fate of the Anthropocene is most evident in her *Bronx Golf Center* series, which is the earliest body of work included in this exhibition. To fully absorb the spirit of her subject, Larko created these paintings over a two-year period at an abandoned sports center. Her lack of polemics makes these works simultaneously prophetic and hopeful. In *Late Summer, Bronx Golf Center*, tall grasses gracefully sweep away the pavement while green vines strangle concrete and steel. Once bustling with families and equipment, the derelict 12-acre property is slowly transitioning into an urban nature preserve. Seen through the artist's eyes, nature's reconquest of the terrain feels like a comforting assurance of eternity rather than a menace.

Larko's process is critical to the revelatory nature of her paintings. She always works from life. Because her subjects reside within the hubbub of the city, the artist must remain fully present. This hyperawareness increases her sensitivity to the details that breathe life into her paintings. In *Underpass, Dyre Ave Station, Bronx*, she uses ingenious perspective to transform a rusted roadway into a temple of gothicized buttresses. An intricate tracery of shadows mimics light streaming through stained glass, and welded Romanesque columns stand solemnly in the stillness.

The artist's meditative state also comes across in her positive portrayal of nature as it relentlessly reclaims any human neglect. While some of her images evoke loneliness, none of them ever feel foreboding. *Batting Cages* is a particularly fine depiction of idyllic dilapidation. Nets sag in lyrical line as columns of flowering vines engulf a chain-link fence. The circular motion of one's eye as it moves through the painting is intrinsically soothing. Via the formality of her composition, Larko renders her subject as tranquil as any other pastoral scene.

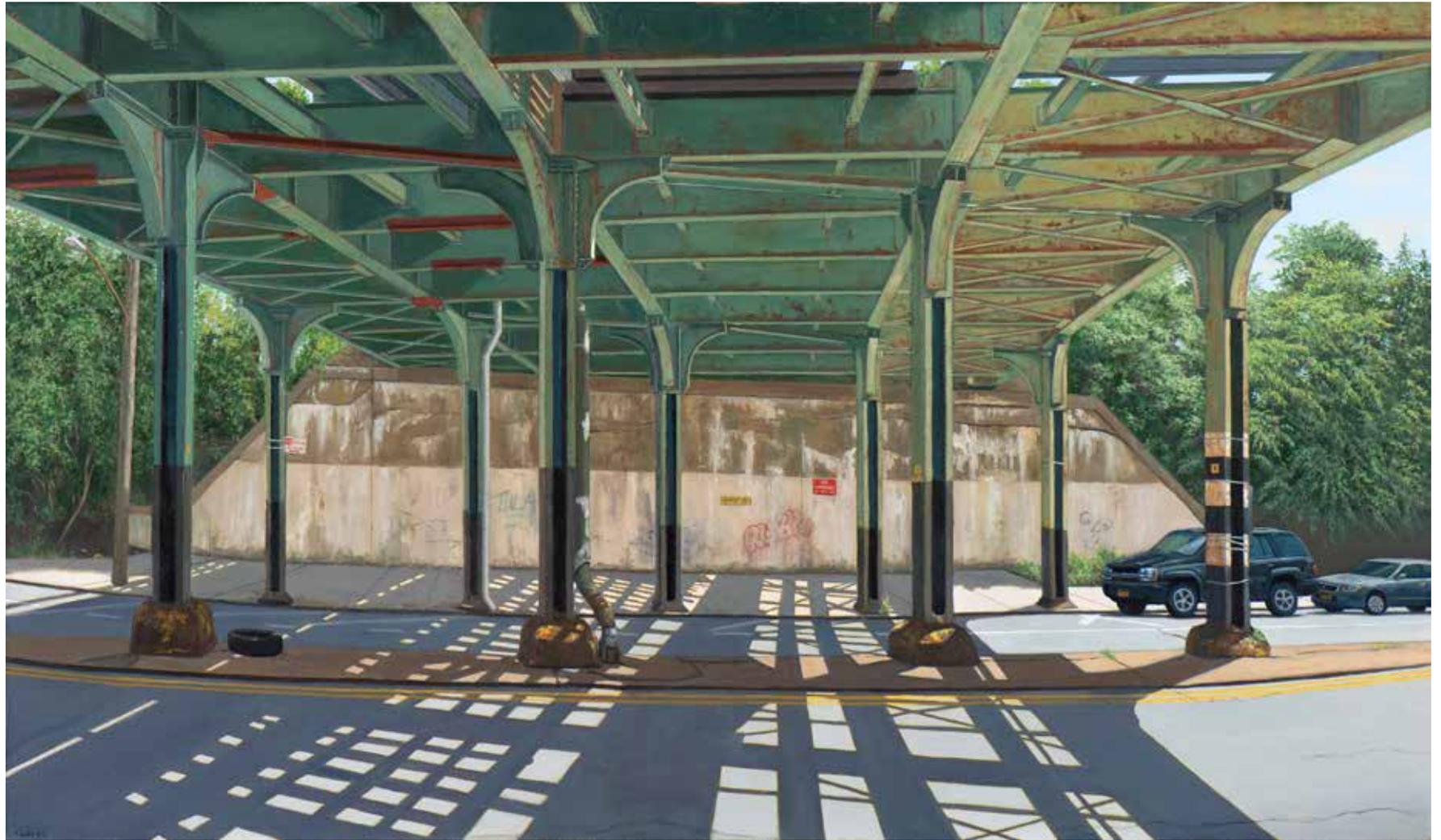
Composition is one of the most important elements of Larko's work. A single work can take up to three months to complete. Before making the time commitment required to channel the essence of a site, she makes preparatory sketches. All of her larger paintings, like *Abandoned Golf Center II*, are also custom sizes. Rather than imposing a composition on each piece, she lets her subjects determine how she will present them and then custom stretches canvases to suit.

Larko's work rarely includes the people she meets on site. Her lack of figuration could be read as a nod to a post-Anthropocene epoch in which humanity no longer exists. But this interpretation is belied by the artist's persistently optimistic representations. Naturally garrulous, she makes a point of creating relationships when she's working. Whether rescuing stray animals or learning how a teenager became homeless, she gets involved. She wants to know and understand their stories, which she retells through the traces that they've left behind. They live on in the folding chair that's placed conveniently close to a sheltering pillar in *Driving Range, Bronx Golf Center*. Their presence can be felt in the wooden pallets heaped into a protected alcove and the bright, bulbously drawn tags that adorn the walls. These scenes whisper of companionship and smokes deep into the night.



On site at the abandoned Bronx Golf Center, 2016

Larko's work is immensely hopeful. She finds vibrant energy in even the most decrepit corners. In abandoned buildings, overgrown parks, and the otherwise down-at-heel, the interconnectedness of our world becomes manifest to her. The resonance of these auspicious revelations lives on in her paintings.





(Left) *Underpass, Dyre Ave Station, Bronx, 2018, oil on linen, 33" x 56"*

(Above) *15 Minute Parking, Bronx, 2018, oil on linen, 32" x 64"*





(Left) *Nelstad Concrete Plant*, New Rochelle, NY, 2017, oil on linen, 24" x 38"

(Above) *Batting Cage Nets*, Bronx Golf Center, 2017, oil on linen, 26" x 50"

Collection of Kayla and Richard Pechter





(Left) *Driving Range, Bronx Golf Center*, 2017, oil on linen, 22" x 34"

(Above) *Abandoned Bronx Golf Center II*, 2016, oil on linen, 15" x 58"



(Above) *CB Jerk Center & Sparking Car Wash*, 2018, oil/linen, 20" x 68"

(Right) *Walkway, Bronx Golf Center*, 2016, oil on linen, 22" x 34"





V. Luan Vit



(Left) *Late Summer, Bronx Golf Center*, 2016, oil on linen, 22" x 34"

(Above) *Holiday Motel, Bronx*, 2018, oil on linen, 36" x 30"



We're Gonna Catch You!, 2018, oil on canvas, 18" x 36"



Valeri Larko grew up in Lake Parsippany, New Jersey and was educated at Du Cret School of the Arts and the Arts Students League of New York City. In the mid-eighties, Larko moved to Jersey City, NJ which heavily influenced her artistic direction. Jersey City is surrounded by miles of industrial parks, highways and shopping malls and these structures inspired her fascination with the built environment. At this time Larko began her practice of painting urban landscapes on location, which she has continued to this day.

In 2004, she moved to New Rochelle, New York, where she has been painting in the outer boroughs of New York City, primarily in the Bronx but also in Brooklyn and Queens.

Larko's paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries in the US and Europe.

She has been featured in solo exhibitions at Bronx Museum, NY; Lyons Wier Gallery, NYC; Wall Works NY, Bronx; Hampden Gallery, University of Amherst, MA; Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA; The Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ; The Hunterdon Art Museum, Clinton, NJ; The Bronx Borough President's Office, NY; The New Jersey State Museum, Trenton; Safe-T-Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; Bronx River Art Center, NY; The College of New Rochelle, NY; and the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit.

Larko has been included in numerous group exhibitions including: The Bronx Museum, NY; Fleming Museum, Burlington, VT; Flinn Gallery, Greenwich, CT; Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, PA; Manhattan Borough President's Office, NY; Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY; Butler Institute of American Art, OH; Addison Ripley Fine Art, Washington DC; Barbara Frigerio Gallery, Milan, Italy; The National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC; Bruton Street Gallery in London, England; and the American Embassy in Minsk, Belarus.

In 2000 Larko was awarded a major commission from New Jersey Transit and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts to paint four murals for the Secaucus Transfer Station, the largest train station in the state of New Jersey. Additional honors include grants from The Joyce Dutka Art Foundation, the George Sugarman Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts Strategic Opportunity Grant, New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship and an Artist in Residence Fellowship from the Newark Museum. Larko's work is in the collections of the Jersey City Museum, The Montclair Museum, The New Jersey State Museum, Johnson and Johnson, Rutgers University, Hudson County Community College and in numerous corporate and private collections. Her art has been featured in reviews and articles in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, ARTnews, Artnet, Untapped Cities, Harpers Magazine and other significant publications. She is represented in NYC by Lyons Wier Gallery.

Learn more about the artist at valerilarko.com.



Valeri Larko painting at the abandoned Bronx Golf Center, 2017. Photo by Amy Regalia

Hidden City is made possible by the generous sponsorship of Highmark.



The *Hidden City* catalog has been made possible by the generous sponsorship of

Mia Andersen

Millie and Jack Cooper

Anne Drennen

Elizabeth and Frank Gump

Jolene Tritt and Paul Herzog

Anthony and Maureen Monaco

Maude Shanley

Janet and Stephen Whitman

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