

Consumed With Valeri Larko's Art

There are painters who, with their brushes, are saying something that's never quite been said before, and Valeri Larko is one of them. What does she paint? The ugliest aspects of our civilization. Yet she finds a curious beauty in rusting boilers, in abandoned factory equipment or, as with the present show, in the acres of crushed and dismembered metal objects, on both sides of a rural road, that constitute the giant Kucharski Salvage Yard outside Hackettstown, New Jersey.

Larko spent the better part of five years working there, from 1999-2004, and her paintings each reflect a different experience of the place and contain just the suggestion of a story. Usually, having taken along a sandwich, she would work all day on two paintings, her morning and her afternoon one, each dictated by the quality of light. From April through December she painted *au plein aire*. She went there in the dead of winter as well, working in her car on small studies for what usually evolved into large paintings with the coming of spring, some taking two to three months to complete. The Kucharski family cooperated by not touching the objects in the area of the salvage yard where she was painting, though sometimes Larko herself added or removed an object or two to give her landscapes, for that is what these paintings are, certain compositional qualities.

Formerly, Larko painted large, rusting objects from a distance, depicting them as forlorn, yet noble, elements in a larger setting. But by zooming in closer to her material, she has given her present paintings a more intimate, almost archeological quality. With these paintings, the viewer is being invited, if not challenged, to explain what exactly is going on here. Seemingly realistic, these paintings have an abstract quality because Larko is not so much interested in depicting reality as in making art out of chaos; to do this, she

dives directly into the wreck. It is noteworthy that in the painting in the current show that Larko finished last, "The Mountain," she has zoomed back out and returned to seeing things from afar, as if the intensity of working so close produced a desire for personal, as much as artistic, distance.

Given Larko's singular obsession with her material, "Consumed" is a particularly apt title for the show, for it has a double meaning. In painting the detritus of our civilization Larko is turning her eye on our culture of consumption and its waste products. But part artist, part explorer, Larko is also consumed with her subject, as anyone would be who was willing to hang out out for five years surrounded by junk.

So much so, that she imbues these forgotten, inanimate objects with sculptural meaning and with human characteristics, as if they remember what they once were and are nostalgic for their pasts. There is a certain operatic tragedy in the painting, "Coca Cola," which portrays a once shiny soda machine fallen on hard times. With "Air Ducts," there is a strong sensation that while one is looking at the painting, the painting is also looking at you. "Locker Number 6" suggests that an object we all used and slammed unconcernedly during our high school days retains a certain sense memory, if not feelings, in its present, ruined state.

Larko has an ongoing love affair with ruins. The classic ruins of the Old World have appeared in some of her minor work, but her major work has concerned itself with ruins in the New World, which have, for the most part, been the products of the concurrence of European settlement and the Industrial Revolution.

Unlike most of us, Larko does not flee from these New World ruins but embraces them and turns a wry eye on them. Nevertheless, while she may not be a moralist, she is

didactic. She insists on breaking down the false dichotomy between humankind and its works on the one hand and nature on the other. She wishes viewers of her paintings to be manifestly aware, perhaps even to take responsibility for, these apocalyptic landscapes, but she is just as interested in them experiencing delight in the least expected places and, also, in their discovering how even that which is destroyed has aesthetic possibilities.

And humorous possibilities as well. One isn't quite sure, looking at these paintings, whether one is expected to laugh or cry. Perhaps both. Art is about ambiguity, and Larko's work, like all great art, and like New Jersey itself, resists categorization.

Thus one might see her paintings as part of the cultural renaissance New Jersey has been going through in recent decades. Her works reflect a certain in-your-face attitude New Jerseyans have developed as they have come to look at their state with clear and unapologetic eyes. Larko's art exemplifies some of the same sentiments one finds in Bruce Springsteen songs and *Sopranos* episodes. When I imagine Valeri Larko, it is with a wide grin on her face and wearing one of those wonderful "T" shirts with the slogan: NEW JERSEY: ONLY THE TOUGH SURVIVE." It takes a certain toughness, if not simple constancy of purpose, to insist that there is both beauty and pathos even in the worst aspects of a throw-away culture.

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