

# Finding Beauty in Industrial Landscapes

Summit artist Valeri Larko focuses on cultural and environmental changes in the world we live in

BY JACQUELINE HERSHIPS

**L**ove is a big motivator for oil painter Valeri Larko, one of those fortunate souls who gets to do what she really loves. This Summit artist spends as much of her time painting as she possibly can. When she isn't painting or teaching workshops in foreign countries (last year it was Oaxaca, Mexico; this year it will be Spain), she spends a good deal of time teaching oil painting at Summit's Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. In addition to painting large canvases, she works as a sculptor. Her luminous installations of fragmented glass have been installed in the Summit train station's central bus shelter for all to enjoy.

Valeri, your fragmented glass installations at the Summit Train Station are a departure from your usual choice of materials. Can you tell us why you went from oil painting to glass sculpture?

Actually, we were told that fragmented glass was to be the medium because it's so sturdy. The shelters are outdoors and our pieces had to be strong enough to withstand the elements. I'd never worked with glass before. My job was to create the designs for the installations. The rest was done by Willet Glass fabricators who brought them back here for installation.

As an artist who normally paints urban and industrial subjects like factories, junk yards and recycling centers, why else were these installations so different for you?

I'm very attracted to the man-made landscape. My art is usually about urban New Jersey and the cultural and environmental changes that we visit upon the world we live in. However, I used to take my painting at the Reeves Reed Arboretum in Summit. The Reeves Reed Arboretum is a very important part of Summit. I went there one afternoon and made watercolor sketches, took photos and went back to the studio to create my proposal. The two images I picked for these installations were based on the beautiful weeping cherry tree and the flowering path I saw there.



**From glass to oil and other mixed media**, Valeri Larko with her latest installation at the Summit train station. She also finds beauty in industrial subjects as seen above.

You are known for painting subjects which are not usually thought of as beautiful, and yet you make them beautiful. A recent New York exhibition featured your work, *Mountain*, a 38x76-inch oil painting on linen depicting a pile of scrapped metal, junked computers and other appliances. Your collectors covet your images of factories, dumps and discarded junk. What motivates you to paint as you do?

Following my studies at the DuCret School of the Arts in Plainfield, I moved to Jersey City and after a short time started driving right into the industrial parks to paint what was in my own back yard. Those structures were fascinating to me because, while I had no idea what they did, they all had an effect on our lives.

It's something we don't think about as a consumer society. We go to the store, pick up a bottle of shampoo, and never think about where it came from. But I think about it because I painted a shampoo factory. Over time, my consciousness grew to include bridges and cityscapes from Newark, Elizabeth and Linden to as far south as Sayerville, and as far north as the George Washington Bridge.

*To find out more about Valeri Larko, visit her Web site at [www.valerilarko.com](http://www.valerilarko.com)*