



[CULTURE CORNER] BY ERIC LEVIN

## Agony and Ecstasy of the Outmoded

**THE ODOMETER ON VALERI LARKO'S** trusty Paintmobile had passed 200,000 when the car's roof began to leak. "When it rained outside the car, it rained inside the car," is how she describes it. Which was not good for the canvases, pigments, brushes and easels she transports in the Camry wagon to the atrophied industrial sites she paints. So she junked it and bought another, with somewhat less mileage.

Less than two years later, Larko was driving along the Henry Hudson Parkway in New York when Paintmobile II spontaneously caught on fire. She pulled over, grabbed her purse and hopped out just as flames began to spurt from underneath.

"Then the tires exploded," she says. "Several fire engines came, they had at my Paintmobile, and that was the end of that one."

The car was reduced to a smoking hulk. "Several people said, 'Are you going to paint it?'" she recalls. "I said, 'No, I had it towed.' But it did look like something I would paint."

At that point, 2011, Larko had been setting up her heavy-duty, outdoor easel at desolate sites in her native North Jersey

and more recently New York City for a quarter century. "I have an interest in contemporary ruins," she says. "They're going-gone, but they're still part of the present."

Her pictures of hulking storage tanks, defaced factories, blackened trestles and rusted gantries are technically landscapes; but the structures' sad, slow slip from icons of power and progress to tattered elders left to rot gives them the poignancy of portraits. On one level, Larko's subjects are symbols of industrial exploitation—of workers, resources, the environment. Yet far from kicking them when they're down, she embraces them as emblems of the human condition. In her essay for "Two Decades," Larko's 2010 show at the Morris Museum in Morristown, curator Rocio Aranda-Alvarado detected in Larko's early Jersey City paintings "mixed emotions of mourning and exaltation, sorrow and rapture, loss and fulfillment."

By the time Paintmobile II consumed itself, Larko had enough of a following that she no longer had to prowl used car lots or eBay listings for the next one. A fiendish saver, she paid cash for her first new car, a Toyota Venza crossover.

Last fall, she slid 15 paintings, separated by sheets of cardboard, into the shiny blue PIII and drove to Jersey City to hang her current show, "Valeri Larko: Tanks, Trash and Graffiti." (For an appointment to see the exhibit, which continues through February 22 in the lobby gallery of the Majestic Theatre Condominiums, 222 Montgomery Street, call 201-435-8000.)

Born on Long Island, Larko and her family moved to Lake Parsippany when she was three. She grew up there, displaying an observant and inquisitive nature that eventually led her to art. "Even as a kid," she says, "I was a pretty curious person in general. I think it serves me well overall."

After graduating in 1983 from the Du Cret (rhymes with pray) School of the Arts in Plainfield—"They gave me a real foundation to grow on. Du Cret was pivotal for me"—Larko emerged from

**DIVA OF DESUETUDE:** Valeri Larko at the Kucharski salvage yard in Hackettstown, top right, where from 1999 to 2004 she painted piles of appliances and other castoffs of consumer culture. "It's like being a bit of a cultural archeologist," she says. More recently she has turned attention to New York, as in *Bronx Drawbridge* (2010), left, and *Scrap Metal, Gowanus Canal, Brooklyn* (2012).

PHOTOS: LARKO PAINTING—DAN MARSHALL; REMAINING IMAGES—PARKLANE PHOTOS & IMAGING, CHATHAM



the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League, both in New York, in 1986. "I went to school to be a figure painter," she says. "I liked doing people."

Art schools hire models to pose. Out on her own, Larko discovered, "Nobody likes to pose unless you pay them, and I didn't have much money, and the boyfriend only wanted to pose so much." As "a side thing" in school, she had enjoyed painting outdoors with fellow students: "Go to some pretty place and paint and bring some lunch."

The strands came together in 1986, when she moved to Jersey City. Driving around the Heights, she noticed, in the distance below, the city's decrepit industrial fringes. Some would have been repelled. "For me, it was the opposite reaction," she says. "Like, 'Whoa! What's in there?'"

The epiphany launched her career. Still a figure painter at heart, she works on location, not from photographs. Her pictures are painterly, with visible brushstrokes that eschew the icy per-

fection of the photorealist style. When autumn strips the leaves away, opening vistas, she will spend weeks scouting locations in the Paintmobile. In winter, after zeroing in, she will sit behind the wheel doing studies for the large-scale oils she paints in summer in the classic manner the French call "en plein air" (in the open air). Each major canvas takes three to four months to complete.

What she loves about being rooted in one spot for so long is "becoming part of the fabric of the neighborhood. People tell me their stories. Have I got stories!" Married since 2004, she notes, "I dress like a bag lady, so usually people don't hit on me." A guy in the Bronx who wouldn't take no for an answer kept trying despite her cursing him out. ("I have a very big mouth.") Finally it came down to the Paintmobile. "I started it up and yelled, 'If you don't get lost, I'm going to run you over!' I meant it too. You've got to let them think you're crazier than they are." He never came back. ■

