



valeri larko
urban edges



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Hunterdon **Art** Museum
center for art, craft & design

Cover: Pier, Bronx, 2007, Opposite page: Elevated Subway, Long Island City, (detail), 2008

Acknowledgments

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Valeri Larko: Urban Edges*, and it is with great pleasure that we bring Valeri's paintings to the Hunterdon Art Museum. By documenting the exhibition with this publication, the Museum strives to give a broader audience access to Valeri's beautifully detailed work. On behalf of the trustees and staff of the Museum, I wish to express our deep appreciation to the contributors who made this publication possible, Millie Cooper, Alice and Bob Dillon, Tony and Gail DiSalvo, Janet Engelmann, Melinda and Steven Fahmie, Elizabeth Gump, Penny and Tom Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Richard McGlynn, Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Shanley, Emily and Gavin Stark, Jolene Tritt and Paul Herzog, and Janet and Stephen Whitman. We are also grateful to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation whose continued support is so important to the Museum.

As the curator of this exhibition, Mary Birmingham deserves our thanks. As always, she has worked enthusiastically to create an exhibition that brings significant work to our audience. She brings an unfailing eye and intellect to each project she develops. Thanks are also given to Ed Chesnovitch for this artfully designed publication, to Michelle Auerbacher, the Museum's curatorial assistant, and to the Museum's installation crew headed by Ingrid Renard. Our staff is small enough in size so that each person makes a difference in everything we do. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Linda Dunsmuir, Pat Koelmel, Ellen Maher, Cara Morris, Karen Pinto, Caryn Tomljanovich, and Hildy York.

Of course, the most important person to thank is the artist. I am very grateful to Valeri Larko for her abundant cooperation and for allowing the Museum to mount a show of her wonderful paintings.

Marjorie Frankel Nathanson
Executive Director
Hunterdon Art Museum



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Valeri Larko's industrial landscape paintings reflect her ongoing fascination with overlooked areas and abandoned spaces on the fringes of the city. Throughout her career she has engaged in an ongoing artistic dialogue with an urban landscape that is often paradoxical. Her paintings reveal places that look familiar but are somehow alienating; her gritty subjects often possess a quiet nobility. Larko finds both beauty and pathos at the intersection of urban culture and nature.

Through her investigation of the urban landscape, the artist explores the effect man makes on the environment. Her paintings often juxtapose the pastoral with the industrial. Man may put his stamp on the natural world, "taming" nature through industry, but nature continually reasserts itself, always trumping civilization. *Westchester Creek, Bronx* illustrates this intersection of industry and nature. The sweeping panoramic view presents a tranquil waterway lined with trees and

flowers along one bank, and a factory on the other. The still water reflects the scene like a mirror. This near idyllic setting is within New York City, the distant highway visible along the horizon a subtle reminder of the locale.

Not overtly narrative, Larko's paintings imply rather than tell stories. What make them dynamic for the viewer are the questions they raise, the curiosity they may pique. Is that water polluted? Where do those overgrown railroad tracks lead? Who worked in that abandoned gas station? What was the purpose of that factory, warehouse, refinery, or dock, and is it still in use? Perhaps the most compelling question is, "What attracts the artist to these subjects in the first place?"

A native and long-time resident of New Jersey, Valeri Larko has deep personal and professional roots in the state. While attending art school in New Jersey she began painting *plein air* landscapes.



• *Westchester Creek, Bronx, 2007*



• *Rusting Gantries, Bronx, 2008*

Working from the model at the Art Students League helped establish her preference for painting directly from life. After moving to Jersey City—a place that she acknowledges had a huge impact on all her subsequent work—Larko turned to the industrial landscape in and around the city for subject matter. She worked outdoors, experimenting with panoramic views of industrial parks and close up “portraits” of tanks and machinery. The artist’s early encounters with New Jersey’s urban landscape solidified a relationship with this subject matter and sparked ideas that continue to inspire her. Relocating to New Rochelle, NY several years ago expanded her geographical reach, and her recent work encompasses the waterways, bridges, highways, warehouses, factories, power lines, and machinery found along the edges of Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Although the locations have changed, she has never altered her method of painting directly from the sites that attract her.

Her primary interest is in capturing the feeling of a particular place, something she believes is best accomplished by immersing herself in the scene. Experiencing the ambiance and spirit of a place is a critical aspect of Larko’s process, and she considers herself an unseen, but important presence in the finished works. Each of her paintings has a unique story—one that only reveals itself to the artist gradually, day by day, through patient and faithful observation. For this reason she avoids crowded places, opting instead for the marginal, unpopulated spaces at the edges of urban areas, where she can settle in for extended periods. She often works on weekends when many areas are less populated.

Larko drives around scouting interesting locations, intuitively searching for places that have strong visual attractions (and good vantage points for her easel.) Extremely resourceful, she carries binoculars to help with close-ups and is prepared to work on small paintings in her car if the weather dictates. She is always willing to chat with the occasional onlooker, believing that this experience enhances the work.

While there are no people represented in her paintings, she considers them important elements in the “back stories” of these works. There are numerous references to human hands in Larko’s imagery. These are, after all, man-made structures imbued with the invisible presence of those who built them. Rust implies use; graffiti requires active street artists; elevated subway tracks suggest riders. To paint *Houseboats, Bronx*, Larko set up her easel in a gas station parking lot across the Westchester Creek from a quirky little marina. She liked the idea of “people living on the water in this very funky urban center.” One of the residents waved to her from across the creek, which led to a subsequent conversation. Although this person does not appear in the painting, his boat does, and Larko believes that her experience talking with him informs the final painting.

Another important feature of Larko’s art is her practice of making preparatory studies for her paintings. Before embarking on any large-scale painting she makes small ink sketches, and once she determines the final subject, she paints a small study in color on canvas or prepared paper. This study does not serve as a direct source for imagery, but instead helps clarify the composition, forms and proportions of the final painting. Making smaller studies allows her to “see” the finished painting in her mind, and plan any adjustments she may need. Because her large paintings require more than two months to complete, the study also helps her decide if the subject is worth the time commitment involved. Once she gathers all this information she moves on to the larger canvas. It is equally important for her to complete the larger work on-site as well, since she relies on her direct observation and personal engagement to convey a palpable sense of the place.

Larko’s paintings are not timeless—on the contrary, each one is firmly situated in a specific time and place. Her subjects often seem on the cusp of some change, perhaps a new stage of deterioration, of rehabilitation or even ruin, and her paintings encapsulate these transitional

moments. The man-made structures she paints are not permanent, and if she returns to the site of a painting after completing it she may find subtle or even profound changes. When Larko first visited the cement factory pictured in *Edgewater Road, Bronx* in 2006, a rusting fence hid a salvage yard where prostitutes conducted their business, and the tumbled rocks reminded her of classical ruins. But unlike the Egyptian pyramids and Greek temples her “contemporary ruins” are as fleeting and transitory as the buildings they once were. When she returned to the site later, the derelict lot had been cleaned up and a new fence was erected to keep out intruders. For Larko, the spirit of the place had changed, but her painting holds the embedded stories of the altered landscape. Discovering a kind of visual poetry in just such overlooked places, she documents small segments of their histories.

Larko has always found beauty in decay. (She once spent five years painting detritus in a salvage yard in Hackettstown, NJ.) Drawn to contemporary ruins, she considers herself a kind of artistic archeologist who observes and explores artifacts of contemporary culture. *Rusting Gantries, Bronx* displays two arch-like structures that span an abandoned ramp. These decommissioned gantries were once used to load ferries traveling to nearby North Brother Island. In Larko’s painting they are silent rusting sentinels watching over the shoreline, looking for barges that are long gone. The encroaching hand of nature softens their industrial edges. Unlike classical ruins, they are relics of the not-too-distant past, cultural remnants from a post-industrial society. These structures are charged with a presence that is both poignant and poetic.

From an art historical perspective, Larko’s paintings defy categorization. Her work invites comparisons with Precisionists like Charles Sheeler, Elsie Driggs and Charles Demuth, who also depicted mechanical and industrial subject matter rendered in bright, clear light. But their synthesis of abstraction and realism and their use of

photography set them apart from Larko. To some viewers her meticulously rendered scenes may suggest Photorealism, but a closer look reveals a more painterly approach on her part. Larko does not aim to replicate the look of a photograph, as evidenced by her brushwork. Like the Impressionists she is committed to the concept of *plein air* painting, although she does not share their interest in capturing changing light and atmospheric effects. Perhaps as a way to distance herself from this association she prefers to call herself an “on-site” painter. What she seeks most through her direct process is the ability to convey to the viewer the rich visual experience she felt in a particular place.

Almost one hundred and thirty years ago, the American artist Winslow Homer explained his preference for pictures composed and painted entirely outdoors, espousing a working method and philosophy that closely matches Larko’s:

*Very much of the work now done in studios should be done in the open air. This making studies and then taking them home to use them is only half right. You get the composition, but you lose the freshness, you miss the subtle and, to the artist, the finer characteristics of the scene itself.*¹

Homer recognized the value of the artist’s direct engagement with subject matter, a belief shared by Valeri Larko. For nearly thirty years this belief has permeated her work with a unique vision and powerful spirit. It has never lost its freshness.

Mary Birmingham
Curator

¹ Quoted in Helen A. Cooper, *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, p. 55.



• *Digester Eggs*, 2007



• *Queensboro Plaza East*, 2008

• *Opposite page: Elevated Subway, Long Island City*, 2008



• *Third Ave Bridge, Bronx, 2008*



• *Houseboats, Bronx, 2007*



• *Edgewater Road, Bronx, 2006*

• *Opposite page: Graffiti, Zerega Ave, Bronx, 2008*



Valeri Larko

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 2009 Hunterdon Art Museum, Clinton, NJ, *Urban Edges*, (catalogue)
- 2008 College of New Rochelle, NY
- 2007 Domo Gallery, Summit, NJ
Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ
- 2006 Safe-T-Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
Bronx River Art Center, Bronx, NY
- 2005 Arts Guild of Rahway, Rahway, NJ, *Consumed*, (catalogue)
- 2003 Secaucus Transfer Station, NJ,
Permanent Installation of NJ Transit Murals
- 1999 Kent Place Gallery, Summit, NJ
- 1998 New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit, NJ
- 1997 Johnson & Johnson Gallery,
Corporate Headquarters, New Brunswick, NJ
- 1996 New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ,
(catalogue)
- 1994 Tomasulo Gallery, Union County College,
Cranford, NJ

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS Since 2000:

- 2009 Mikhail Zakin Gallery, Old Church Cultural Center, Demarest, NJ, *Our Present Planet*
- 2008 Prince George Gallery, New York, City,
Group show curated by Lise Curry
St Joseph College, Brooklyn, NY, *Two Artists, Two Realities*, Two Person Exhibition
Jersey City Museum, NJ, *Sprawl* (catalogue)
Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ,
New Jersey, Then and Now
- 2007 Art Now Miami, FL, Art Fair showing with Safe T Gallery, Brooklyn
Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, New York, *Green*
George Billis Gallery, New York City, *Good Night Sun*
Affero Gallery, Newark, New Jersey, *Our Man in Havana, The Vacuum Cleaner in Art*

- 2006 The Studio, Armonk, NY, *Winter Solstice V: Expressions of Our Time and Place*
Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, *Palpable Painting*
- 2005 Jersey City Museum, NJ, *Jersey City Interprets (Works from the Permanent Collection)*
Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY, *Artistic Fragments* curated by Benny Andrews
Victory Hall, Jersey City, NJ, *SKYway* curated by Rocío Aranda-Alvarado
- 2004 Newark Arts Council, Newark, NJ, *Mix in the Bricks* curated by Chakaia Booker
Art in Embassies Program, Minsk, Belarus
- 2004-present
Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, New York, *Paper 2003*
Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ,
NJ Fine Arts Annual, (catalogue)
- 2002 Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit, NJ,
Preview: NJ Transit Murals, Two Person Exhibit
NJ State Museum, Trenton, NJ,
Women's Works: Fine Art from the Museum's Collection
Bruton Street Gallery, London, England,
Gallery Artists, (catalogue)
- 2001 Bruton Street Gallery, London, England,
New Year, New Talent, (catalogue)
Rutgers University, Newark, NJ,
15E: Contemporary Art and the NJ Turnpike, (catalogue)
Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ,
From the Slide Registry,
Three Person Exhibition

AWARDS:

- 2009 Joyce Dutka Art Foundation Award for painting
- 2006 George Sugarman Foundation Grant for painting
Strategic Opportunity Grant, New York State Council on the Arts and New York Foundation for the Arts

- 2002 Artist in Residence Fellowship,
Newark Museum
- 1998 Residency Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center,
1992 Painting Fellowship, New Jersey State Council on the Arts
167rd Annual Julius Hallgarten Prize, National Academy of Design, New York City (catalogue)
- 1988 163rd Annual Julius Hallgarten Prize, National Academy of Design, New York City (catalogue)

PUBLIC & CORPORATE COLLECTIONS:

- Jersey City Museum, NJ
Montclair Art Museum, NJ
The New Jersey State Museum, Trenton
New Jersey Transit, Secaucus, NJ
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
Johnson & Johnson Corporation, New Brunswick, NJ
Fox Industries, Foster City, CA
MacArthur Petroleum, Newark, NJ
IMTT - Bayonne, NJ
Cooper Alloy, Hillside NJ
Monmouth Bonding, Newark, NJ
Kuehne Chemical, Kearny, NJ
City Hall, Summit, NJ
Latham & Watkins, Newark, NJ
Broad Street Associate LLC, Newark, NJ
Wolff & Samson, West Orange, NJ

PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS:

- Fragmented Glass Murals for Bus Shelter, Summit, NJ
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
New Jersey Transit Murals, Secaucus Transfer Station
Veterans Administration, Metuchen, NJ
Commission for Mayor's Office, City Hall, Summit, NJ
Veterans Administration, Paramus, NJ



Photo: David Cajigas

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS since 2000:

- Ins and Outs Magazine, Long Island City, NY, Winter 2008/2009, Feature Article, Rachel Kalina
- The George Washington Bridge, Poetry in Steel*, Michael Arron Rockland, Rutgers University Press, 2008
- New Jersey Star Ledger, May 16, 2008, "Something in Jersey That Deserves Laughs," Dan Bischoff
- New Jersey Star Ledger, March 28, 2008, "Living Large in New Jersey," Dan Bischoff
- New Jersey Star Ledger, November 15, 2007, artnotes, "Jersey realist," Dan Bischoff
- Harpers Magazine, June, 2007
- Jersey City - A Monumental History*, Randall Gabrielan, Shiffer Publishing, 2007
- Summit Magazine, October 2006, "Finding Beauty in Industrial Landscapes," Jacqueline Herships
- Waste Age Magazine, August 2006, "Queen of the Heap, Artist's paintings inspired by NJ landfill," Patti Verbanas
- New Jersey Star Ledger, May 19, 2006, "A faculty for diversity," Dan Bischoff
- The Riverdale Press, March 23, 2006, "Overlapping Images, Two artists examine complex layers of urban life"
- New Jersey Star Ledger, March 15, 2006, Artsnotes, "Jersey vistas in Brooklyn," Dan Bischoff
- Courier News, November 24, 2005, "Junkyard Beauty: Valeri Larko Paints Waste Into Wonder," Ralph Bellantoni
- Worrall Newspapers, November 17, 2005, "Artist highlights lost items along the state's landscape," Jeff Cummins
- New Jersey Monthly Magazine, January 2003 "Bruce Springsteen and 40 More New Jerseyans We Love," Maggie Bruen
- New York Times, November 10, 2002 "Think Modern Art is Junk?" Margo Nash
- New Jersey Star Ledger, August 16, 2002, "They've been working on the Railroad," Dan Bischoff
- New York Times, August 11, 2002, "Murals for a Rail Hub Evoke Power of Transportation," William Zimmer
- New Jersey Star Ledger, October 2, 2001, "Asphalt Artery," Dan Bischoff
- New York Times, November 12, 2000, "The Sounds of Creativity: Artists' Studios Are Not So Still," William Zimmer

Exhibition Checklist

Unless otherwise noted,
all works are courtesy of the artist.

Abandoned Gas Station (study), 2007
Oil on prepared paper
10 3/4 x 17 in.

Convergence (study), 2006
Oil on prepared paper
8 x 20 in.

Digester Eggs, 2007
Oil on linen
12 x 32 in.
Collection of Antionette S. Larko

Edgewater Road, Bronx, 2006
Oil on linen
26 x 56 in.

Elevated Subway, Long Island City, 2008
Oil on linen
32 x 32 in.

Graffiti, Zerega Ave, Bronx, 2008
Oil on linen
42 x 35 in.

Houseboats, Bronx, 2007
Oil on linen
22 x 52 in.

Pier, Bronx, 2007
Oil on linen
20 x 62 in.

Queensboro Plaza East, 2008
Oil on linen
25 x 52 in.

Rusting Gantries, Bronx, 2008
Oil on linen
30 x 50 in.

Third Ave Bridge, Bronx, 2008
Oil on linen
30 x 55 in.

Westchester Creek, Bronx, 2007
Oil on linen
20 x 74 in.

Opposite page: *Zerega Ave, Bronx, (detail), 2008*
Back cover: *Pier, Bronx, (detail), 2007*

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