

Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was

By Bryan Martin, February 1, 2022



Liz Larner, *Corner Basher*, 1988. Installation view: Liz Larner: *Don't put it back like it was*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. Steel, stainless steel, electric motor, speed control, 120 x 37 inches. © Liz Larner. Photo: Cathy Carver.

The first object in the SculptureCenter's *Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was* is a ten-foot-tall steel rod with a hanging ball and chain. The looming structure stands upright in a white-walled corner and is supported by four metal braces with a motor at the base. Visitors can turn on this electric motor from a near distance—at whatever speed—and watch the rod rotate continuously, each revolution raising the ball and chain to pulverize the gallery walls. These harsh, repetitive impacts simultaneously create a hostile and irresistibly hypotonic encounter. We want to engage with the rhythmic degradation, no matter how threatening it may be. *Corner Basher* (1988) serves as a sentinel-like entry point to the 34-year survey of Larner's career across about 30 objects. Entropic, phenomenological, gendered, and ecological ideas are all brought forth to display an exceptional sculptural practice that might otherwise seem disparate. But the strength of interconnected concepts and form presents Larner as an

endlessly fascinating, endearing, and unique sculptor who coolly traverses art historical movements.

Enrolled in CalArts during the mid-1980s, Larner nominally worked as a photographer during a resurgence of painting and postmodern appropriation when sculpture was not in the zeitgeist. Larner's initial study led her to create experimental concoctions in petri dishes, beakers, and jars that she would then document. Eventually, the pseudoscientific cultures took on more interest as objects themselves, which led to a lifelong transition to sculpture. *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* (1987), the earliest work on display, contains everything referenced in the title within two small petri dishes. The dish on the left compresses an orchid flower into a pool of buttermilk, with a penny halfway soaked on the petal. The vivid color and sensuality of the pink orchid petals are emphasized when compared with the dish to the right, where the same three things have been left to decompose for nine years into pale brown mush with the penny standing in its oxidized, fungi-like bubble. Each time the work is displayed, a new petri dish containing the same components replaces the left side, and the last petri dish is saved and displayed on the right side. This bacterial cycle embodies Larner's infatuation with chance reactions, decay, and objecthood, which carries through a variety of materials.



Liz Larner, *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, 1987. Orchid, buttermilk, penny, glass. 43 7/16 x 17 1/2 x 10 1/8 inches. © Liz Larner. Photo: Cathy Carver.

Surgical gauze, false eyelashes, ceramics, bacteria, and steel are examples of the artist's lexicon that might initially appear disharmonious or even random. However, the non-chronological approach in the exhibition's display, with no didactic wall text in the galleries, creates an unmediated opportunity to perceive meaningful connections between diverse works. The center's converted industrial

space also gives each sculpture room to breathe while permitting such associations. *Bird in Space* (1989) takes up the largest area in the open gallery, hovering over several other works, and consists of a parallel row of nylon strings floating in a thin arc suspended above by supporting string jutting diagonally from the walls. Below, standing at eight feet, *V (planchette)* (2013) presents a large, purple abstract shape made of aluminum. Although wildly different in material and composition, both sculptures create similar experiences that remind us of our bodies in space. Here, each work also makes an obvious allusion, one to séances and the other nodding to Brancusi's famous series of birds in space.

Larner has been viewed in the context of the male-dominated post-minimal and installation art of her contemporaries. These reductive readings overlook how the artist mines art history, almost like raw material itself, for which references can make up the composition of a work. *Lash Mat* (1989), a ten-foot-tall thin mat covered in layers of false eyelashes, simultaneously calls to Louise Nevelson's use of fake eyelashes, the geometric patterns of Bridget Riley, and the sensual but unsettling texture of Méret Oppenheim's fur teacup. Optical effects generated by the light hitting the serial cluster of thin black hairs create stunning and lively movement. Gender is present most obviously in this sculpture: Both its allusions and construction underscore that objecthood and phenomenology can be imbued with femininity, offering a powerful contrast to methods of art-making normally associated with an institutional masculinity, such as Robert Morris's draping felt sculptures.



Installation view: Liz Larner: *Don't put it back like it was*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. Steel, stainless steel, electric motor, speed control, 120 x 37 inches. © Liz Larner. Photo: Cathy Carver.

In a further medium pivot that presents Lerner's versatility, ceramics have predominantly consumed the last decade of her output. Perfectly installed on the long hallway walls of the SculptureCenter's basement, Lerner's series of clay slabs evince preoccupations from the start of her career along with a new focus on the treatment of the works' flat surfaces in a manner reminiscent of abstract painting. A slab roller produces these sculptures, making elongated round hunks of clay about two by three feet in size. Each slab's surface is colorfully covered in reflective epoxy or glaze, with some containing stones and minerals embedded into the clay, which create mesmerizing geological and cosmic abstractions. Clay firing, a process in which the artist relinquishes control, becomes the perfect method to embody Lerner's penchant for unpredictability, experimentation, and environmental concerns. And, as in the rest of the exhibition, Lerner's ceramics become another facet of deceptively dissimilar elements that harmoniously come together and represent an artist who wonderfully defies classification.