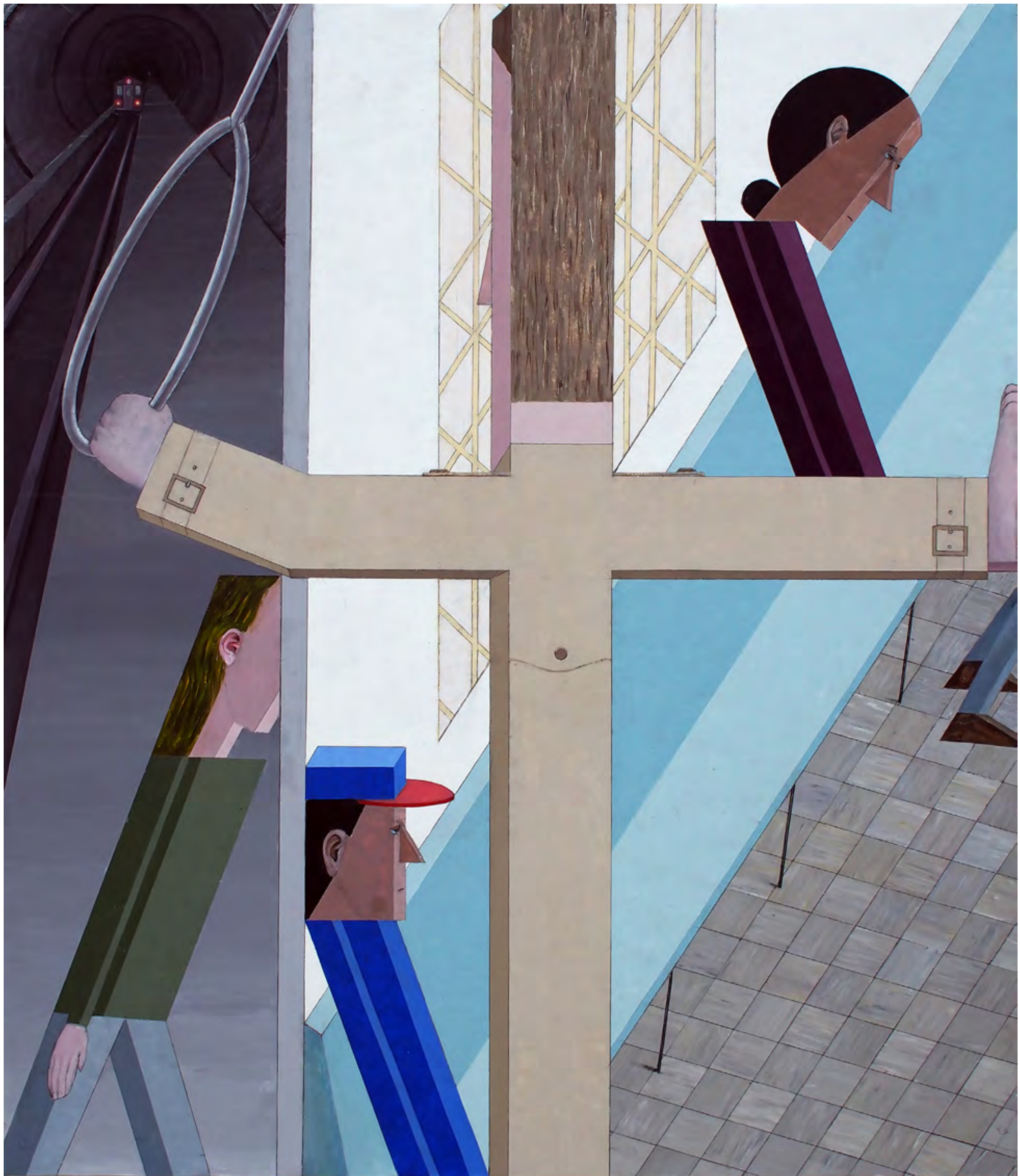

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Mernet Larsen, *Subway* (2014).
Acrylic and mixed media on
canvas, 54.25 × 47 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Various Small Fires.

Interview with Mernet Larsen

Weitz and Larsen met in 2004 as colleagues at University of South Florida (USF) and have been in dialogue ever since. For this interview, the two artists discuss Larsen's early career, the challenges she faced as a professor in male-dominated institutions, the longevity of her practice over a lifetime, international success at a later stage in her life, and the association between her work and computer generated figuration.

Julie Weitz: Years ago I saw a photograph of you from your early days at USF. The strength of your pose and expression immediately struck me. Until then, I hadn't imagined what it might have been like for you as a young woman teaching in an all-male faculty at a Southern university in the '60s. Did anything prepare you for the working environment at USF? Were you self-conscious about being the only woman professor?

Mernet Larsen: In the 1960s, the patriarchy was so "normal," I had little distance on it. Like many women of my generation, I felt proud and grateful to be accepted into the male world, and probably felt somewhat superior to other women because of it. My first teaching job, in 1965, was at the University of Oklahoma. They brought me in for an interview because they thought my name was a man's name; they hired me reluctantly and let me know they were taking a chance: "Women always got married, had babies, and quit." Nonetheless, there was good chemistry at OU then, and I had a great time. Clearly, though, I was never going to get a tenure track position there, so I accepted a position at USF in 1967, where I was the only woman on the studio faculty for about ten years. In fact, I heard later that I was the only woman art faculty in the whole state of Florida at the time.

In the '60s, there was a general mood that art students would learn art history better from studio artists than from actual art historians; we would presumably bring a more formalist approach. I was considered unusually articulate for an artist, so I was hired with the understanding that I would teach studio with the occasional art history course. I ended up teaching 1-2 art history courses per semester and eventually designed my own graduate seminars on Cezanne, for example, or the topic of perception. It turns out, this situation was often the only way women were able to find entrance into art department faculties at that time.

Studying and teaching art history at this intensity was invaluable to me as an artist. However, the preparation dramatically cut into my studio time, so I had a low profile as an artist. I was permitted to supervise graduate students' written theses, but I was not allowed to serve on their committees. Generally, the male faculty members listened to what I had to say and respected me as

Julie Weitz is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her immersive video installation *Touch Museum* premiered at Young Projects last winter and received critical attention in *Artforum*, the *LA Times*, and on *KCRW*. Before moving to Los Angeles in 2013, Weitz taught as Associate Professor of Art at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa, Florida for eight years.

Mernet Larsen is an artist based in New York and Tampa. For 35 years, she taught painting at USF. She recently had solo shows at Various Small Fires (Los Angeles) and James Cohan Gallery (New York). Her work is in the Whitney, LACMA, the Walker, Carnegie Mellon, and other major collections in the U.S., U.K., and Europe.

Julie Weitz

Mernet Larsen

a teacher, but didn't seem to take me seriously as an artist. I once playfully wore a fake mustache to a faculty meeting, sat deadpan through the whole meeting. Everyone else kept a straight face too, and nothing was said.

JW: Wow, that was an Adrian Piper move before Adrian Piper! It also immediately brings to mind your paintings of faculty meetings. Perhaps this is a bit of a stretch, but did the psychology of those early experiences influence the way you construct space? To manage those kinds of situations, you must have developed an observational distance that cultivated imaginative ways of reorienting one's perspective.

ML: Actually, I always rather liked faculty meetings. They were occasions for discourse, and my colleagues were more verbal and intellectually oriented than was usual back then. Meetings could be boring or contentious, of course. I made the faculty meeting paintings after I retired to commemorate something that had been a big part of my life. I took some photographs of the current faculty as my source. Reverse perspective became a way of both defamiliarizing (creating observational distance) and monumentalizing. I have always swung between detachment and involvement, but I guess my mode, as a representational artist, is one of detachment, hopefully with a sense of humor and sympathy.

JW: It's been amazing to see your images proliferate on social media and the internet, particularly because the individuals and settings in the paintings are so familiar to me, but also because your work has been associated with computer-generated figuration used by many younger artists. Writers often discuss your work in connection with video game imagery and I've even heard people refer to you as an emerging artist. There's the assumption that your work is part of a millennial affinity for early computer animation. Do you think these associations are relatable or superficial?

ML: I am a computer Luddite. I've never even seen a computer game, much less worked with computer-generated imagery. I play perversely with reverse, Western, parallel perspective to disorient, not to set up another form of orientation. My characters are reconstructed into impossible constructions and expressive proportions. I see them as analogues to experienced reality, not as mechanical simplifications or dehumanization of the physical world. They have much more in common with early 15th Century Italian art, Byzantine Icons, Japanese narrative scrolls, or even some outsider art!

However, I do feel the world of digital imaging has awakened, or reawakened, an interest in meta-opticality, an infinite 3D grid, where the viewer is no longer located in a specific viewing position, as one is in conventional representation. I felt an affinity with early Julie Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie, whose works are strongly grounded in digital processes, and I love the vastness of their spaces, a melding of information and sensual perception, which my paintings do not have. In general, when I look at the work of many young artists, like yours, I can see that they are seeing such potential with digital image making! So perhaps we are in an early period.

JW: You've been steadily working in the art world for over 50 years. Given your recent success, how has your perspective changed?

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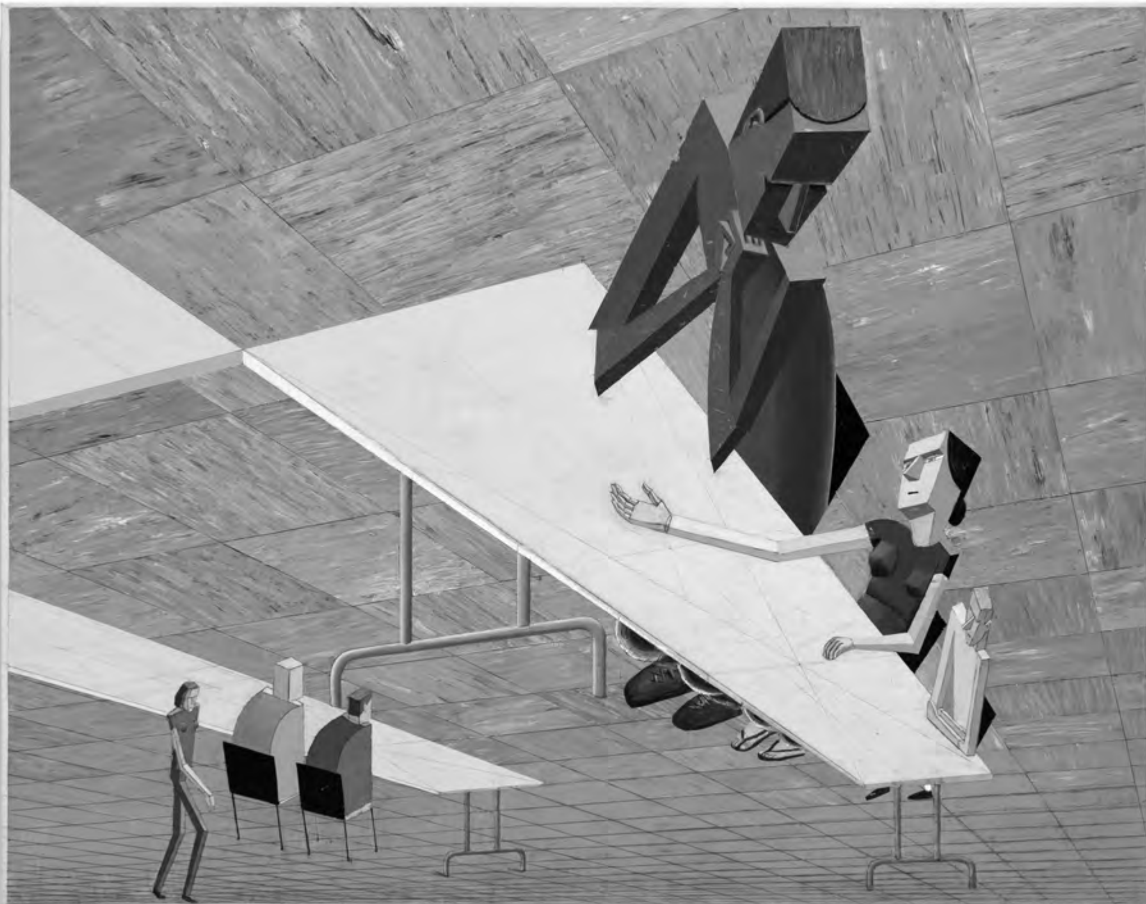
Mernet Larsen, *Explanation* (2007). Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 41 × 52 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.



ML: When I was young, we thought art was progressing. Everyone was vying to be on the cutting edge, and to define the trajectory of art history. Now art is understood as a network, and people seem more interested in the synchronic fabric of art, how everyone is intersecting. What node you or others are on this web. There seems less at stake; people seem less a part of a greater cause, and more concerned with their own ability to find a niche. On the other hand, artists seem to have much more freedom to carve out their own eccentric territory. There is much greater interest in the world, socially and politically. Art used to be much more about the self: private or archetypal. We used to worry about posterity. Now artists worry about relevance. Nonetheless, in talking with students over the years, in some basic ways nothing has changed: most artists want immortality, fame and glory, depth and significance, originality and self-realization. When I was young, it seemed a liability that my work did not conform to any school of thought; now that seems an asset.

JW: That's a beautiful way to put it, leading me to wonder, if there's less at stake, does that mean we care less? Your commitment and impact on the lives of both students and colleagues at USF has been substantial. How do you frame your practice in terms of cultural and communal value, rather than individual career success?

ML: In the '70s, I thought I might quit my job at USF and stay in New York. But I made a decision to commit to USF/ Tampa as my base. The department, and my role in it, had changed—largely as a result the feminist movement (which is a whole other conversation). I felt New York was a bit self-referential. I thought it would be better for me, given my temperament, to be some place where I could think of myself more iconoclastically, but also more internationally; I could get travel grants to Japan, China, India, Mexico, Europe, and these experiences were invaluable to my work. I also loved teaching, and liked being in a place where I felt I could make a real difference, and could support the development of young artists through grad school. I felt that a dynamic university art department could be an art world in itself.

I considered myself a researcher in an institution, where I was paid to work on my art. It gave me a freedom to not have to think about a product, or style, or success in the market. (That isn't possible any more: to get tenure you have to be very successful in the market or an equivalent.) My interactions and dialogues with graduate students were an indispensable part of my working process. I showed at museums and university galleries, but I didn't show in any commercial galleries until I was in my 50s. When I was 50, I had a comprehensive 25-year retrospective in a Florida museum.

As I got older, I began to feel a stronger sense of responsibility for sharing my work, getting it out in the world to do its work. It became clear that if I wanted to have visibility and eventually get my work in museum collections, I would need to work through commercial galleries. The chain of circumstances that led to my recent visibility evolved directly and indirectly from relationships that I have had over the years; none came from the direct pursuit of gallery representation. Luck, serendipity, and the support of friends and allies, were, as they always are, key factors!

JW: In that sense, what has it meant for you to make art over the course of a lifetime? Were you aware of an end goal?

ML: I think most of us, in our late teens and early 20s, are shaping lifelong ideals and goals. We ask ourselves why we want to make art and what we can bring to the world through our art. It seems very important to see one's involvement in art as a lifelong venture, and to remain dedicated and idealistic. It's amazing how much foresight we have, how prescient most artists are about their unique potential. It's important to develop an essential grounding before becoming involved with seeking fame, glory, and commercial success, so that there is always a point of tension, something you can come back to when you lose your bearings. Later, I think the pursuit of external success can be good, it can be almost an ally, give us deadlines, challenge us, spur us on when we are discouraged or stuck. I think artists have a responsibility to share their work with the world, even if it's uncomfortable.

There has to be a constant curiosity, looking for a breakthrough to another level of understanding. As do scientists or philosophers, you share these discoveries, your trajectory, with the world. It's not about you, it's about what your work realizes for you and everyone else. This is your cultural contribution. Success should, ultimately, be about giving this contribution power and effect in the world.

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Mernet Larsen (1967). Image
courtesy of Mernet Larsen.