

“Surfaced Forms, Ted Larsen”

By Scott Rothstein / March 2014



Endless Form, 2012. Salvaged steel, marine-grade plywood, silicone, vulcanized rubber, and hardware, 3.5 x 26 x 5 in.

Ted Larsen’s sculptures are intimate and self-contained. His simple geometric forms resemble found objects, suggesting a past, reminiscent of something previously encountered. Though understated, the objects demand consideration: proximity encourages examination, which then reveals the nuanced complexity.

Born in 1964, Larsen has lived in New Mexico since the age of 15. He currently maintains a studio in Santa Fe and exhibits locally, as well as at galleries in Miami, New York, and Philadelphia. Unlike many artists associated with New Mexico—their work influenced by the monumental and dramatic landscape—Larsen turns inward to find direction. His sculptures appear hyper-personal, like notes in a diary, lyrically brought into form and enhanced by a poetic sensibility.

A soft geometry defines these works. Constructed with the hand and orientation of a craftsman, the shapes are gentle, but direct. Fabrication begins with Baltic birch, a marinegrade plywood, cut into forms that are then glued and screwed together. The intense focus of this process results in an object that could be viewed as a completed sculpture. “Consider it stacking beauty,” Larsen says of his method, “subversively layering beauty and denying beauty at once.”

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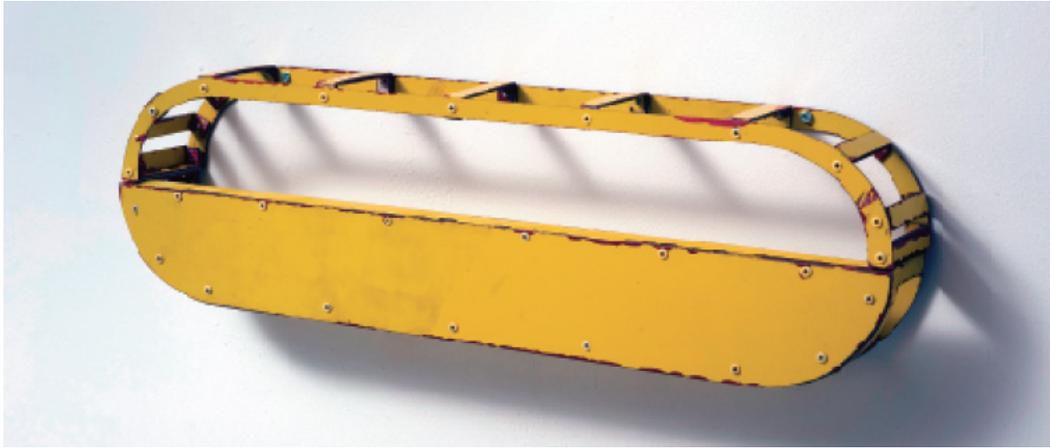


Return Policy, 2011. Salvage steel, rivets, and spray enamel paint, 11 x 5 x 8 in.

While the forms are finely built with a sculptor's intent, the surfaces reveal the eye of a painter. In an intriguing twist, the outer layer is not painted; instead, it is formed of salvaged steel scrap. Larsen's sculptures give the impression that they have been effortlessly created, but in fact, the opposite is the case. Describing the initial stages of his fabrication and how he finds his "palette," he explains, "I go to salvage yards (salvage steel is sold as a commodity, just like new steel) to look for material. Sometimes I score, and I find really good stuff and a lot of it. Most of the time, I might find one or two pieces that work. I bring a painter's eye to the whole process. I am indeed looking for a palette—different types of greens, blues, yellows. They have to have a certain quality, not too raw, not too clean. There is a lot of processing involved to get the materials at the yards. I only purchase what I can use; the rest of the parts (and there are a lot), I leave behind. At the studio, the processing continues. I use different tools depending on the processing steps and different tools depending on the place: rough cutting at the yard and fine cutting at the studio. I clean everything up, and I have several hundred pounds of steel at any one time. The front side of the work—gathering and processing—takes a very long time. It is very hard and dangerous work."

In viewing the sculptures, there is no hint of the danger involved in their making. The means to the end are hidden from view. The essence of the work—the focused consideration seen in every detail—denies the aggressive energy needed at the beginning. There is a great deal of illusion in Larsen's works, which never disclose all of their secrets.

Beyond skill and ingenuity, a refined sensibility—a balance between form and surface—quickens these sculptures. With this most restrained approach, Larsen builds seductively beautiful objects, transforming discarded material into considered works of art. Few artists do so much with so little.



Step A Little Closer, 2010. Salvage steel and rivets, 22 x 7 x 4.5 in.

In *Endless Form*, an accordion construction surfaced with just two colors, the geometry is basic and repetitive. One half of the work is orange, the other yellow. Every aspect of the piece is perfectly calibrated. The fine-tuning of shape and skin demonstrates the artist's dexterity. The work has a natural patina, suggesting age. For Larsen, three-dimensional forms are what stretched canvas is to a painter—a foundation on which he builds his vision. He has created several variations of this sculpture.

While *Endless Form* is about surface, shape, line, and volume, *Return Policy* evidences a different type of effort. A simple white shape, slightly off square, floats in front of a cluster of odd metal strips. This is an unusual object, a construction that might have a function. *Endless Form* pulls you in, inviting speculation, yet it is simply a work of art secured to a wall, nothing more.

Step A Little Closer could easily be mistaken for something found. The structure appears to be a machine part. The edges are raw and worn, seemingly affected by time or use. Every element suggests an application. But, of course, this is not something found, nor did it ever function. Larsen fabricated *Step A Little Closer*, an artwork birthed from his imagination and intuition.

In recent years, Larsen's sculptures have become more complex. While earlier pieces were mostly self-contained volumes, defined and enhanced by surface, several newer works seem to expand outward beyond a single primary element. In *Close Distance*, Larsen composes a mini-exhibition of six forms on a wall, connected by multicolored linear parts. Though each piece differs from the others, the grouping seems appropriate, the subtle tension asking the viewer to consider similarities and differences. *Here and There* also transcends the under-pinnings of Larsen's previous works. In the past, his forms could be defined as either floor-mounted or wall-mounted.

Here and There is curiously both. Its two halves are variations of each other, related in overall shape, but slightly altered in terms of size and color treatment. Still, the parts read differently—the wall-backed form creating a two-dimensional image and the other projecting into space as a three-dimensional object. This juxtaposition of placement sets up an unexpected visual dynamic.

Larsen rejects conventions often embraced by sculptors today. He has no interest in esoteric costly materials and does not aspire to create monumental works that dwarf human scale or dominate a landscape. Instead, he finds motivation in the humble and the overlooked, using discarded scraps to build exquisite sculptures that invite inquiry and thoughtful reflection.