

“Trouble with the Curve”  
By Craig Smith / Fall 2014



The artist takes a break in his studio, where he's currently preparing for upcoming solo exhibitions at several prominent Texas galleries. Right: Larsen enjoys working with non-art and salvage materials, repurposing them and reidentifying their meanings in an ongoing experiment with contexts, hybrids, and scale.

Ted Larsen has the eyes of an artist, the hands of a man used to working with materials and machinery, and the mind of a philosopher-visionary. For him, making art is as much about the contemplation and planning that goes into a piece as it is about the actual construction of the work—or even the finished piece itself. He cares deeply about art and its interface with both the theoretical world and the practical; and when the tall, lean Larsen comes into his intimate studio, he fits it to himself as if it were a shimmering carapace he drapes over his being.

Considering the range of works produced in it—from constructed pieces and paintings to objects meant to be attached to a wall or placed on the floor or a plinth—the studio is surprisingly modest.

Not for Larsen a giant loft with a north-facing skylight, or a salonlike reception room where importunate fans can crowd about and watch him work. His light-saturated single room, located in a mixed industrial-residential area of Santa Fe, has white walls on which hang various pieces and a cubic space just adequate to contain the tools and machines Larsen uses both skillfully and carefully.

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Tables and shelves stand against some of the walls; the artist moves them around fairly frequently to create work surfaces that fit the needs of the moment. Pieces of scrap metal and wood are carefully placed here and there, but always ready to use. Works in progress line the room. His pieces range from not-quite paintings to not-quite sculptures, and are fluidly geometric, Matisse-like, mini Serras and/or Eschers in 3-D. And textured, all of them; not for Larsen the sheen-y shiny surface.

“The pictorial plane is quite interesting to me,” he says. “The image that occurs in that plane is an absolute. It is exactly what it is. It might take on metaphor or additional meaning depending on who looks at it, but it is always concrete.” Similarly, while his paintings and constructed pieces provide “a portal to the mind,” each work “is also an object. It sits in real space, it occupies an environment, even if it’s painted on a wall.” Reality is all, though it’s up to individuals to define that reality according to their reaction to the work.

Larsen moved from Michigan to Santa Fe with his family as a child and grew up here. After graduating from Santa Fe Preparatory School, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. He was then considering moving to California or New York when family matters called him back to the City Different.

“I really didn’t intend on staying,” he confesses, but things changed when he met his future wife. “She had businesses here, and so here we are 25 years later,” he says. Besides his family and art, Larsen is devoted to outdoor living: he competes in mountain bike races and is an avid skier all winter long. Such activities are an important counterbalance to the many hours he spends in the studio, whether that time is spent in contemplation or action.

Passionate about making art for what he calls the right reasons, he admits that it’s not always easy to define them— “though you can always tell when work is done for the wrong reasons.” Along that line, he feels that Santa Fe artists do not always live up to their potential—which means that the art scene itself is held back from realizing its full impact.

“There’s a lot of pleasant stuff to look at,” he muses. “There’s reams of it in this world. There are so many people who make pleasant things to look at. There are not a lot of people who make worthy things to look at. Though worthy things might be pleasant to look at. They might be appealing. They might even have qualities to them that could be called decorative.

“But the worthy, that’s a hard place to stand, especially in a town like Santa Fe,” he continues. “I would love to see people with ability challenge themselves more. I think the level of discourse that we have available to us here could be significantly increased. We have a lot of amazing people around here who could push themselves more.”

Larsen has certainly pushed himself. His work has been widely exhibited throughout the United States, with shows in more than 80 galleries, and exhibitions at museums including the New Mexico Museum of Art, the Albuquerque Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He has also done residencies from New York to Morocco and lectured throughout the country.

Eventually, as Larsen expounds on art and the art world, it becomes apparent that his attitude and philosophy are as rigorous and deliberate as his finely crafted geometric sculptures. Sculptures that play— whimsically and intellectually— with Constructivism and ready-mades, assemblage and the pictorial plane.

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“There are some amazing people in this community who raise the bar and hold the bar to a high standard,” he says, winding down. “I think it’s our obligation, our responsibility, to meet that standard.”

Happy as he is with his studio, Larsen is as practical about its limitations as about its benefits. “It’s hard to be in here sometimes,” he acknowledges. “Sometimes it’s hot, sometimes it’s really cold. It also can be dangerous working with tools—table saws are not safe machines! The fabrication techniques have some parts I have to be careful around. So I have to be very mindful and attentive.”

That attentiveness is also what Larsen’s works demand of the viewer—intentionally and unintentionally but never dogmatically. Simple as they may appear, their simplicity is not so elementary.

“Some of my work has to be made very exactly and very precisely,” he says. “There’s a part of my personality that enjoys that, and a part of my personality that wants to be real slapdash and haphazard— anything but precise. I have to make myself contained environments or ways of working so I can explore those different aspects of myself in a way that illuminates them.”

Each work of art, then, contains all those different elements of his working environment—studio, tools, materials—and that sense of containment gives each piece an intensity, a tension.

“At the same time, I tend to develop a way of working or a strategy for a group of work that both deals with the perceptual issues I’m dealing with, as well as what the significance may be for me in making that work,” he says. “It’s a personal sort of confrontation. It’s a way of discovering who I am.”