

FINANCIAL TIMES

Liz Larner at SculptureCenter — smashing, wrapping and embracing walls

By Ariella Budick, March 14, 2022

The LA-based sculptor offers macho acts of destruction and subtle psychological commentary



SculptureCenter

Liz Larner has a thing for corners. Though she's comfortable throwing a gossamer arc across a vast gallery or planting a writhing mass of leather in the middle of the floor, angles call to her with a special allure. "Where two walls meet is a really beautiful, poetic space," she once said. And yet, in the most epic segment of her SculptureCenter retrospective in Long Island City, New York, the LA-based artist responds to the sublimity of that not-quite-enclosure by destroying it, slowly, methodically, ruthlessly.

Stashed in the sort of spot where cobwebs thrive, "Corner Basher" (1988) consists of a steel ball hung by a chain from a 10-foot pole, ready to enact a rite of joyful vandalism. Push a button and the pole spins, the chain twirls and the ball bangs around, punching a hole in one wall and gouging another. A little white cloud puffs out, then settles prettily on the floor. If you're in the right mood — and who isn't, these days? — it's enjoyable to set this mayhem in motion. The

impact of steel on plaster makes such a satisfying thwack. Larner invites us to feel the exhilaration of breaking things.

Larner, 62, works in a range of styles so expansive that even if you could maneuver her into an appropriate niche, she'd just bust out of it anyway. This elegantly installed and excitingly varied survey, called *Don't put it back like it was*, suggests that sculpture and setting alter each other even when there's no mechanised demolition involved. Her attitude towards interior space is to confront it: to threaten, challenge, play with it, cajole it into doing her bidding.



Artist Liz Larner in her studio in Los Angeles © Laure Joliet

Just beyond “Basher”, a few steps further along the gallery’s labyrinthine pathway, is “Wrapped Corner” (1991), in which the creative spirit imprisons a wall, rather than the other way around. A set of 30 taut chains runs horizontally along one smooth white surface, turns through a doorway and doubles back on the other side. The chains bind the wall, reinforce it, and dig into its skin, all at the same time. In a catalogue essay, the art historian Connie Butler notes that the relationship between art and architecture here is symbiotic. It’s also neurotic: the fetters and the fettered depend on each other for meaning.



Liz Larner's 'Wrapped Corner' (1991) © Cathy Carver



'Out of Touch' (1987), left, and 'Bird in Space' (1989) at SculptureCenter

These two muscular, even macho pieces pound out big-boned themes

of destruction, liberation, incarceration and violence. “Too the Wall” [sic] is more allusive, though the artist has said it addresses the female perspective in a world shaped by men. Half a dozen steel-and-silver double-string necklaces hang between two converging walls, forming a slender ladder. Each double curve supports a leather rectangle that, at least under pandemic conditions, resembles a surgical mask. (It’s not a timely reference, though; the piece is from 1990.) The contrast between insubstantial lattice and tough leather patch suggests a string of oppositions: openness and inhibition, freedom and constraint, power and vulnerability, ornament and muscle. The enclosing walls belong to the sculpture, too, and their role is equally equivocal. The title “Too the Wall” could refer to extreme psychological pressure (as in “having one’s back to the wall”), extreme commitment (“going to the wall”), imprisonment (“chained to the wall”) or death by firing squad (“to the wall!”). More indirectly, it echoes the poet Amiri Baraka’s revolutionary battle cry, “Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stickup.” There’s no need to choose one meaning; they all swirl around the deceptively simple installation.



Foreground: ‘smile (after dark)’ (1996-2009). Background: ‘You might have to live like a refugee’ (2019) © Cathy Carver

Larner’s fusion of fragility and brawn reaches its apogee with “Bird in Space” (1989), a soaring arch of taut nylon cords and silk threads anchored by steel blocks. Larner designed the work to be simultaneously invisible and conspicuous, decorative yet able to disappear. She borrowed the title from the phallic sculpture by Brancusi and feminised it, delighting in the fact that “bird” was a slang term for “woman”. Brancusi’s piece is tapered, solid and upright, a self-contained thing on a pedestal. Hers bends, stretches and vibrates in the breeze. It is, she has said, a metaphor for “the freedom of a woman being in space, still dependent, still attached to her surroundings”.

It's fun, and sometimes a little creepy, to follow these looping trains of thought, with their puns and allusions, their unexpected twists. In the show's most uncanny corner, 10 single hands, cast in pewter, hang from the ceiling on thin chains, like a page from a Dürer sketchbook that's burst into three dimensions. For "Hands" (1993), Lerner used friends' hands for some of the moulds, sculpted a few herself, and scavenged others in junk shops. Pointing, beckoning, leaning on an invisible table, palm out, curled into a fist, wrinkled, beefy, tiny, soft — each different, disembodied limb seems to be expressing some urgent yet unreadable message. In trying to fill in the tableau, I thought of Leonardo's "Virgin of the Rocks", in which a heavenly light picks out each figure's cryptic gesture.



'Hands' (1993) © Cathy Carver



'vi (calefaction)' (2015)

Lerner relies on evasion and on the viewer's urge to interpolate meanings that don't quite fit. The labels inform us that she works in steel, thread and an assortment of other materials, including (for "Out of Touch") 16 miles of surgical gauze. But her most eloquent substance is air — the emptiness that her pieces tear through, slice up, emerge from and disappear back into, leaving us wanting another bit of solid matter — just one more clue. She's an inspired trickster, holding out the possibility of closure, and denying it every time.

'Liz Lerner: Don't put it back like it was' runs at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York until March 28, sculpture-center.org