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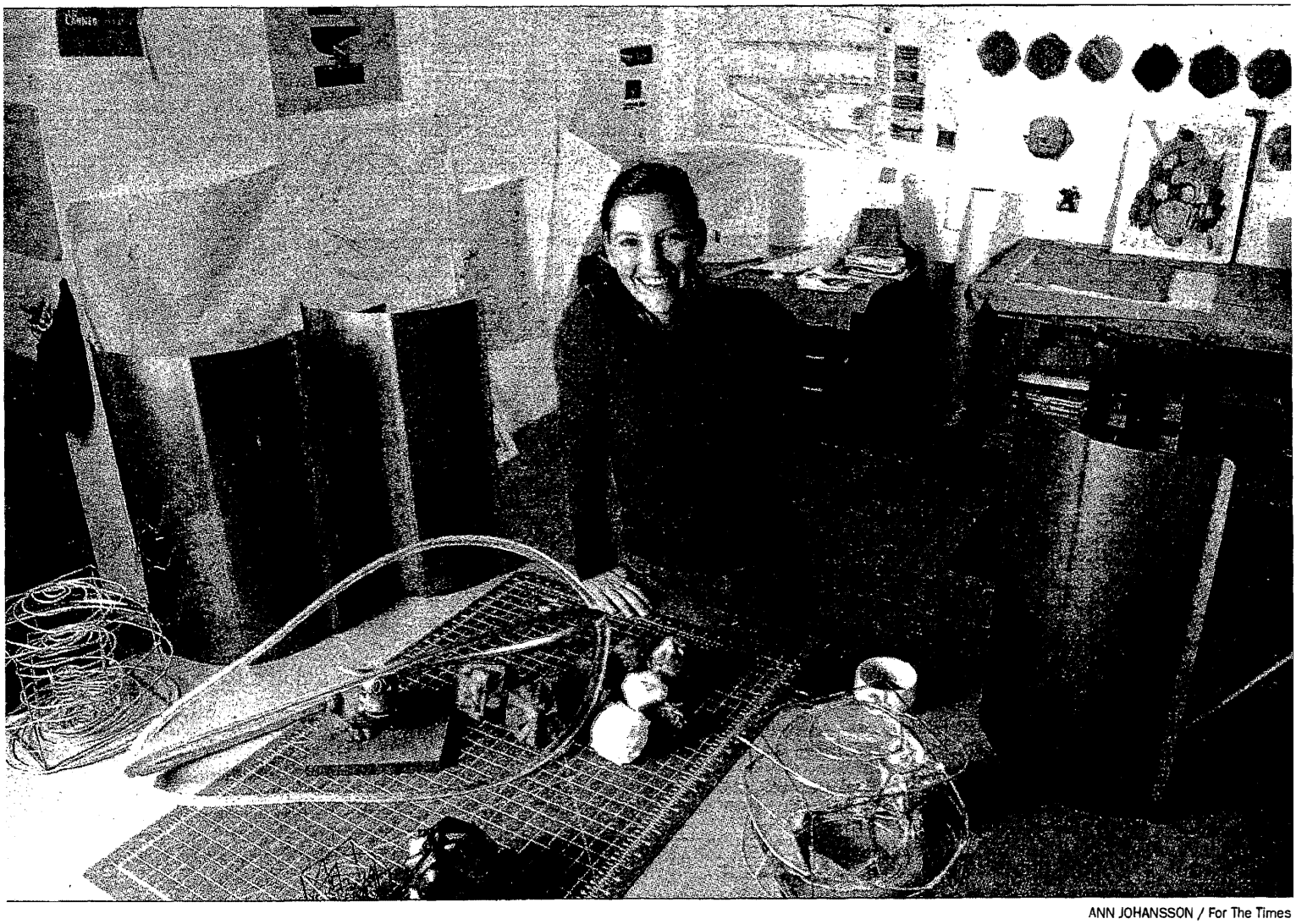
OUT OF THE UNREAL WORLD

Trying to surprise newcomers and fans alike, sculptor Liz Larner turned animation into a 3-D riddle.



ANN JOHANSSON / For The Times

'All I can do is keep paddling in the direction I'm going. It's always upstream, but sometimes the current isn't as strong as it is at others," says Liz Larner.

Larner: 'Untitled' Sculpture Started Out as Animation

By DAVID PAGEL

A short list of the materials Liz Larner has used to make her sculptures during the past 15 years is a pretty kinky inventory. It runs from false eyelashes to stainless steel chains, and includes surgical gauze, saltpeter, guitar strings, buttermilk, collagen, gold, copper carbonate, cast polyurethane, leather, mulberry paper, volcanic ash and an entire uprooted *Agave americana,* as well as such traditional standbys as wood, wax, plaster and bronze. But the most exciting surprise in the 41-year-old artist's mid-career survey at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art occupies the first gallery, where sunlight pours through skylights in the pyramid-shaped ceiling that soars to a point 59 feet overhead.

To step into this room is to come face to face with an abstract sculpture so new that Larner had not even seen it in its finished state until it was installed the week before her exhibition opened to the public Dec. 2. Four days later, in her Highland Park studio, she recalled the experience. "It was overwhelming. I had seen it assembled, but it was all white. Then painted but apart. After working on it for a year and eight months, it was like, 'Oh my God, what have I done?' "

In terms of materials, the answer is simple. She had covered a specially designed fiberglass armature with a thin skin of lightweight metal and given the whole thing a custom paint job that puts any hot rod to shame. In terms of physical effect, the answer is more complicated. The initial "wow" that "Untitled" (2001) draws from most viewers eventually gives way to a series of smaller wows that take place in your brain as you begin to unpack its mysteries.

For Larner, "it's too soon to know if it's my favorite piece. I need more time to fully understand it." A contemporary sphinx, its riddles are visual, not verbal.

For example, its slick coat of metallic paint sometimes appears to be bright green and at other times looks purple. Walking around the huge sculpture is a sensory delight, its angled planes and curved surfaces creating an ever-changing light show. At the same time, it entertains intellectually inclined viewers by answering the question "When is a color not itself?" with a deadpan: "When green is purple, and vice versa." Which leads to further questions about just where the color is located. In the work? On it? Is it a trick of your eyes? Your mind? Or something in between? Before you know it, you're caught up in a participatory drama as playful as it is profound.

Larner earned her bachelor's degree from CalArts in 1985, at a time when many American artists were

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enthralled with Continental theory. In their nerdy works, the appearance of intelligence was more important than the real thing. She says, "Because of my whole education, of growing up in the 1980s, I didn't want to be really smart and dull and dry and serious and academic. I wanted to be light and lyrical. I like the idea of turning a cartoon into a philosophical inquiry."

In fact, "Untitled" is a 3-D cartoon of monumental proportions. It is the result of an animated sequence she engineered on a computer (which can be seen on the museum's Web site, *www.moca.org/museum/digitalgallery.php*). The digitized images begin with a sphere, which gradually morphs into a cube as it spins through space on two invisible axes. The transformation continues in reverse, with the cube returning to its original state as a sphere. Then the cycle starts over, forming a seamless loop.

From this animation, Larner selected six frames, centered their odd, in-between forms, and superimposed them atop one another. Treating each as if it was a balloon, she used Maya, a common 3-D animation program, to pump up the volumes of five of the forms, leaving the sphere to be implied by the fusion of the others. "I pushed everything out to the surface except the sphere because it had so informed everything," she explains. "For me, the whole sculpture is so spherical that having a literal sphere would be repetitious."

This is not the first time Larner has turned to computers. In 1997, she used readily available software to design the teardrop-shaped components of "Alias" and the loopy forms in "I thought I saw a pussycat," a tumbleweed like tangle of blue and yellow lines.

Larner doesn't use computers for their own sake but because "they allow me to do things that can't be done by hand." She also likes their contemporary feel: "They are ubiquitous tools. All the objects around us are made this way. I don't see why sculptors can't use [this technology]. Even better, I like that it gives my works a weird familiarity, a sense that they are part of the cultural field, that they speak a common language."

Larner is a full-time member of the graduate faculty of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Using the school's studio equipment, she fed her digital picture into a 3-D "printer," which extruded a softball-sized model of her sculpture. She took this prototype to CTEK, a company in Tustin that fabricates experimental cars for the automobile industry and architectural materials for Frank Gehry. Working with a team of technicians, she enlarged the model's dimensions to 12 feet on a side and oversaw the construction of its fiberglass frame and steel skin.

Another group of CTEK technicians spray-painted its exterior. The urethane paint Larner chose is appropriately high-tech—not to mention sculptural: Every particle in it has been cut with a laser before being suspended in a toxic medium. The way these particles line up with one another to cover the sculpture's sexy contours reflects light at radically different angles. This gives the finish its iridescence and makes you see different colors.

In 1999, when MOCA invited Larner to have an exhibition at the museum, she immediately knew she wanted to use its pyramid gallery to make a big statement. Her goal was to do something that would dazzle newcomers to her work and astonish established fans. During the past five years, she has built an international reputation with abstract sculptures whose loosely geometric forms resemble lines drawn in space.

"I felt really lucky," she said, "because it was a good opportunity for me to make a piece that could not be read in the way my work was getting read, as being almost exclusively about line and openness. I didn't want to be limited to that. I wanted to do something that more physically engaged this idea I had about animation.

"Animation is a totally unreal world, an unreal space, and I wanted to bring it to bear on sculpture, which, because it exists in the third dimension, is the art form we think of as representing the real. Being able to use the enclosed volume felt good to me because it let me turn the lightness and motion and color that exist in animation into a *thing*. It brought all the points of the animation to one place, where everything happened at once. But it still takes time. You have to walk around it to see it. It slows you down. Its relationship to time is complex."

Larner has a give-and-take relationship with viewers' responses. "Generally, the written criticism is well thought through," she says. "But then you get reverberations back from that, which often turn into sound bites. Everything boils down to the obvious very fast."

This interests her because "it's a caricature of your own work coming back to you. Working off that is kind of inspiring. It pushes me to think, 'No, that's not quite it. What can I do to clarify it?' At first, it's annoying. But you either get used to it and let it spur you on or not. It's the way the world is. All I can do is keep paddling in the direction I'm going. It's always upstream, but sometimes the current isn't as strong as it is at others."

Although Larner went to art school with the intention of working in photography, she says, "I soon realized that I didn't want to make images. I wanted to work in the world." She was drawn to sculpture because it isn't something you just look at, like a picture, but something you engage physically.

In the early 1990s, after making several bodies of work in which color did not play much of a role, Larner turned her attention to this often overlooked aspect of sculpture. "Corridor Orange/Blue," "Corridor Red/Green" and "Corridor Yellow/Purple" (all 1991) paired complementary colors in sprawling structures that viewers walked through (the first two are in the MOCA exhibition).

"Those pieces are a little naïve," she says. "If I hadn't been so young I would never have done them. I had just started using color, so I naturally gravitated to the bright ones. It was kind of like, 'I want magenta!' That was the first time I thought about color in a sustained way, and it came from a 2-D idea. When opposite colors are side by side, there's this space between them where they vibrate. It's a live wire, an electrical charge. I wanted to make that into a thing, a space you could actually enter. It was kind of a surprise how it turned out at the end. I don't think I ever could have imagined it until it was installed." Such unexpected discoveries are essential to Larner's creative process. "I have this experience a lot, more often with larger works than small ones. But even with the small things, you do something and then all of a sudden it turns out it's doing something else. It's either good or not so good, and then you have to go with that or decide how to fix it, to make it more the way it need[s] to be. Being an artist is liking that process. That's a part of why I'm devoted to sculpture. It's just built in. In a way, it's kind of continually magical."

"Our bodies sense their surroundings in subtle ways," she says. "For lack of a better term, call it your inner ear spatial radar. It is similar to sound waves, in the way that it affects your body. Maybe a better analogy is heat or motion or atoms in space, but when there's an object in the room, this energy hits it and makes a pattern and you pick up on that. It's very, very subtle. It's not another sense. Maybe it's a compendium of all your senses. I don't know. But I'm interested in it. I do think it is how we maneuver in the world. It is part of our navigational system, which is the vehicle that carries us into experience."

Last year, a 300-foot-long pedestrian bridge Larner designed for Disney's Burbank studios was completed. "I enjoyed the process of working with an architecture firm and an engineering firm. And although the project seemed to take forever, it was incredible to see it realized. The scale jump was mind-boggling. And terrifying. Also cautionary. You know, I like the bridge, but I don't know if I'm ready to run out and do tons of architectural projects. I just don't know if those are the places I want to fight my political fight."

Politics do not often come up in discussions of Larner's art, which appears to put formal concerns ahead of topical ones. For her, such either/or choices are short-sighted. "If a work is abstract," she says, "it's seen as being formal—and that's the end of the story in terms of politics. But every object has a formalism, and every formalism is political in the sense that it is a vehicle for the ideas that lie behind it and the consequences that spin out of it.

"Politics makes its way into my works through the way they reconfigure space," she continues. "They change our relationship to objects in space. That may sound grandiose, but I don't think it has to be. It's important and I think that sculpture can do that, actually, better than any other art form. If you'd ask me if my works were feminist, I'd say yes."

Which brings her back to why she prefers art to architecture. "The best part of being an artist is that you get to do what you want to do. People in other walks of life, like cooks, do similar things. I just get to spend a lot of time doing them—the majority of my time. So much so that I never cook.

"When you're young and you think of being an artist, you see yourself as being free. And in some ways it is really free. But it's also not free. In the end, you just get yourself. You have to live with your ideas, and you have to make them work with how you want your life to be. Sometimes I feel laden down with all the stuff sculpture requires.

"But I do love the world. I have always found it to be really thrilling, the experience of being in it, of walking around outside, of living. Sculpture is able to engage this. There's something really great about that." □

"Liz Larner," Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., L.A. Through March. Tuesdays-Sundays, 11-5 p.m.; Thursdays, 11-8 p.m. Adults, $6; seniors and students with ID, $4. Free Thursday nights. (213) 626-6222.

David Pagel is a regular contributor to Calendar.