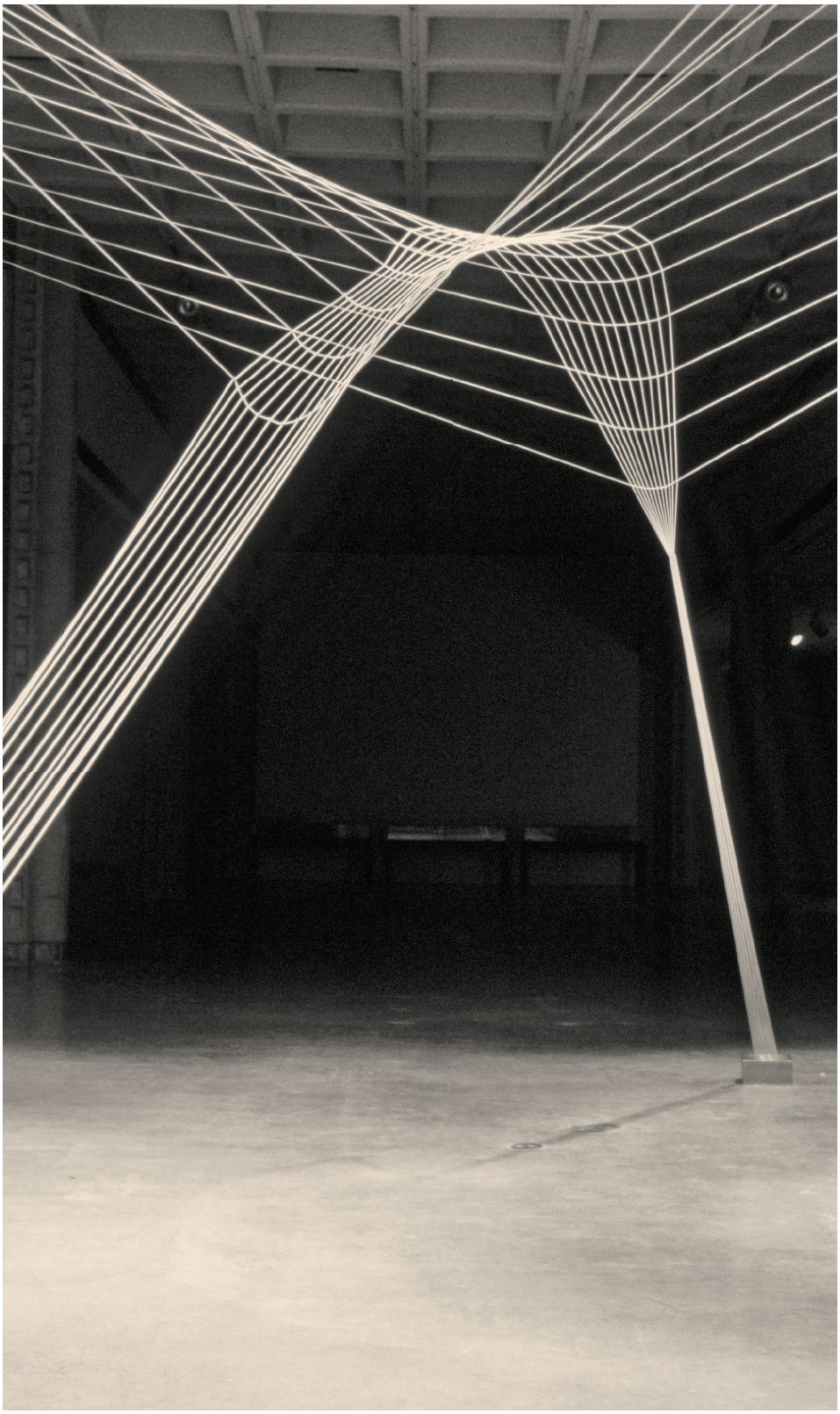
Kastner, Jeffrey and Liz Larner. “Liz Larner Talks About ‘Don’t Put it Back Like it Was.’” Artforum (February 2022) pp. 132–135 [ill.]

ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

LIZ LARNER

TALKS ABOUT “DON’T PUT IT BACK LIKE IT WAS”

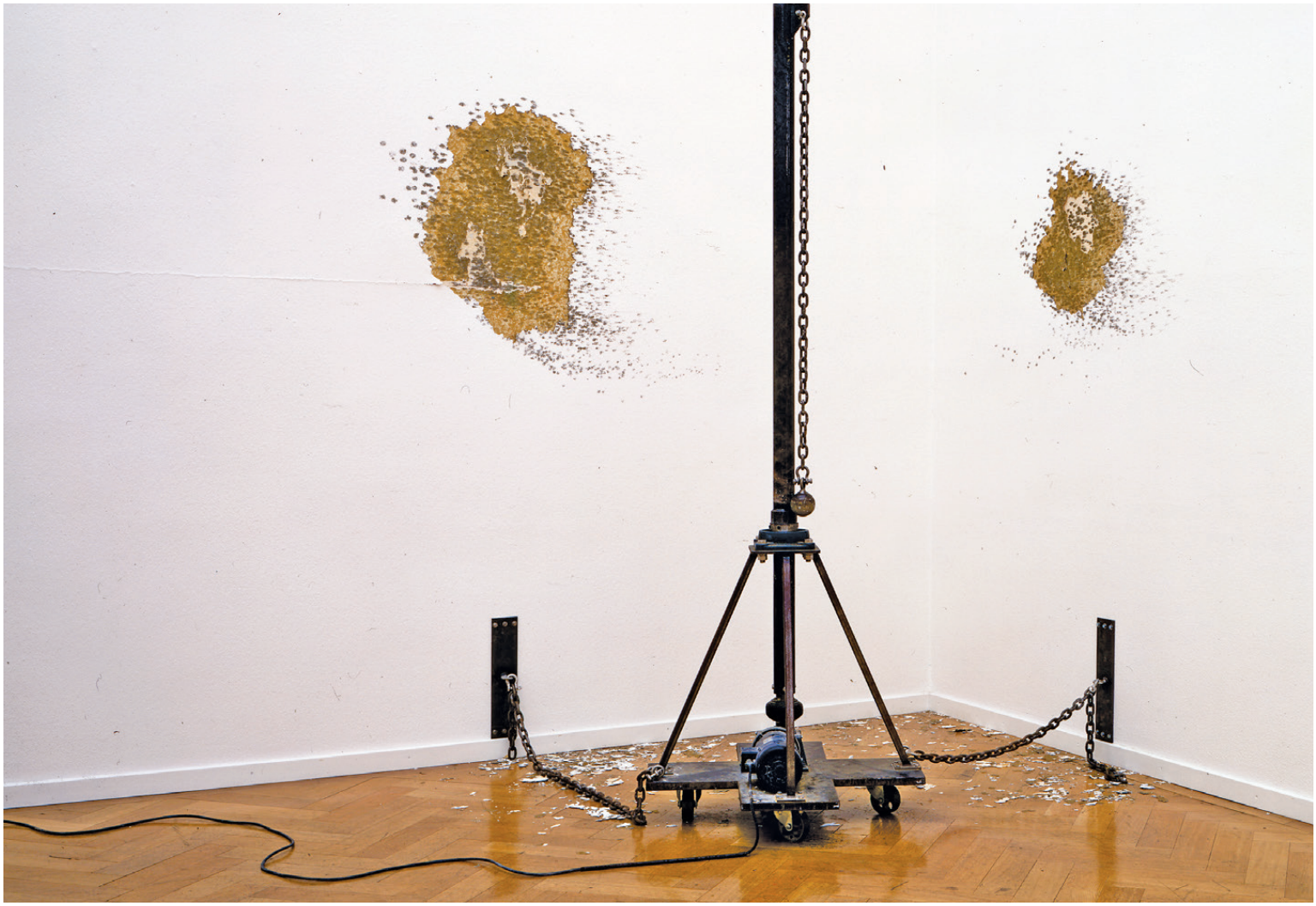


ORCHIDS, PENNIES, BUTTERMILK. A sphere made from sixteen miles of surgical gauze and a cube woven out of thin strips of copper. Sly arranged marriages between rubber and wood; leather and false eyelashes; sand, stone, and bark. Gossamer lattices and sheets of chain. Forms rendered in polyurethane, steel, and bronze; in found objects; in porcelain and ceramic. Viewers who have only encountered Los Angeles–based sculptor Liz Larner’s work piecemeal across her more than three-decade career might be forgiven for feeling a certain bewilderment in the face of the stylistic and material diversity that has characterized her admirably restless practice from its very beginnings. Now the subject of a welcome survey—the most expansive overview of the artist’s oeuvre in some twenty years, curated by Mary Ceruti, director of Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center, and currently on view in New York at SculptureCenter, where it was organized by interim director Kyle Dancewicz—Larner’s exhilaratingly heterogeneous works can finally be considered in relation to one another, and in ways that demonstrate the conceptual threads that have always united them.

Two early pieces in particular articulate the kinds of formal alterities that Larner has frequently sought out and conspired to hold in productive tension. Made within a year of each other, in the first phase of her career, *Corner Basher*, 1988, and *Bird in Space*, 1989, could hardly be more dissimilar. The former is an instrument of destruction—a small wrecking ball flung back and forth against intersecting walls by a motorized stanchion that owes a bit to both Jean Tinguely and Survival Research Laboratories—while the latter is an ethereal space-filling filigree of silk and nylon inspired by Brancusi. Both, however, diverge from their inspirations in crucial ways. While *Corner Basher* exerts the same sort of brute force that Mark Pauline’s chaotic mechanisms do, the critical difference is that its destructive energies are activated not by the artist but by the viewer—jettisoning hierarchical command and control in favor of a modality that privileges spectatorial agency. And if Larner’s *Bird in Space* echoes the elegance of the Romanian master’s signature work, it also strategically expands its field of engagement toward her preferred schema, from unidirectional regard to attentively multivalent, embodied encounter.

—Jeffrey Kastner

REGEN PROJECTS



Above: **Liz Larner, *Corner Basher*, 1988**, steel, stainless steel, electric motor, speed controller. Installation view, Kunsthalle Basel, 1997.

Opposite page: **Liz Larner, *Bird in Space*, 1989**, nylon cord, silk, stainless-steel blocks. Installation view, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1991.

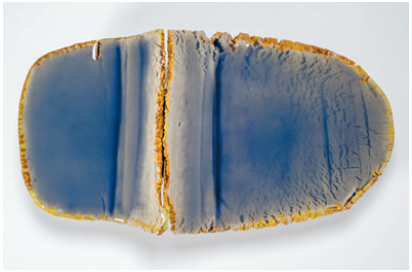
Left: **Liz Larner, *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, 1987**, orchids, buttermilk, pennies, glass, base: plywood, wood filler, latex paint, overall: 43½ × 17½ × 10⅛".

I THINK I FIRST MET with Mary [Ceruti] around five years ago. Our conversation about the show started in a place where things often start with my work, which is what I would call confused interest. I don't totally understand why people have this response, but certainly I think the material and conceptual variety are all in play. And my approach, which I guess is a bit hermetic.

I came to being an artist after studying photography in the 1980s at CalArts. I had studied philosophy and transferred there in my third year, and what a lucky break that was. It was a very interesting time, that particular era, and what we were reading and discussing made me decide that what I wanted to do was *make things*. In some sense, I never had an education in being a sculptor. My work started with incredibly basic questions like *What are materials? What does it mean to make something?* I remember being at that stage in my life and thinking, *Well, you know, I could be a photographer, but I think that would be bad for me*, almost spiritually, for lack of a better word. I felt like I needed to engage with the physical world and not be behind the camera making images of things—not having that additional distance, but being in my body and making work about being embodied.

I didn't have a "unified vision"—and I've stuck with this and have never considered it a detriment—because I felt that materials and forms have so many different potentials. That could be why I've never had an identifiable style. I think this is part of what has been confusing for people. In the beginning, I would do a show that was about something, and then I would do another show, and for me it was clearly the next thing to do, but it wasn't really in relation to the last show for anyone but me. I wouldn't say that there's no throughline. I would say that there's a throughline that isn't recognizable because it's not the kind of throughline that people have come to expect. Part of it is trying to come up with different ways of getting people to engage with sculpture—and sculpture *is* the best way for this to happen—with all their senses and movement. I've come to call it *encountering*, though I wish there were a better word. But it's amazing how it happens. That means of reception is a lot of what I'm working with.

Obviously materials and color are important, as are concepts of reality and illusion. And I think pathos is something that runs through my work, and this goes back to some of the very first things I made, the culture works. This thing is alive, and it's digging through layers of colored food. And then it makes its own bloom. And is resplendent. And then it starts to die in front of you! I had started making sculptures essentially as receptacles for the cultures; the way they were suspended in space was a big thing for me. Coming from photography, you take a photograph, you figure out how to frame it. But to put a petri dish in front of people, that's a problem. And that rapidly spilled over into making these sculptures that were informed



Opposite page: **Liz Larner, *smile (after dark)*, 2009**, porcelain, epoxy, Formica-and-plywood base, artwork: 16⅛ × 37⅛ × 7⅛"; base: 30 × 38 × 38".

Above, left: **Liz Larner, *xiii (caesura)*, 2014–15**, ceramic, epoxy, pigment, 19½ × 39½ × 11".

Above, right: **Liz Larner, *Marthe*, 2019**, ceramic, epoxy, 22 × 35 × 11".

Right: **Liz Larner, *2001*, 2001**, fiberglass, stainless steel, automotive paint, Installation view, Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York, 2006. Photo: Seong Kwon.

Below: **View of "Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was," 2022**, SculptureCenter, New York. Foreground: *2 as 3 and Some, Too*, 1997–98. Background: *Out of Touch*, 1987. Photo: Cathy Carver.

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by what I thought the cultures were about. The sculptures have come in all manner of materials—rubber, chain, silk, wood, metal, leather, fabric, found objects, ceramics. The past decade or so with the ceramics is one of the most sustained engagements I've had with one medium. And one reason for that is that ceramics let me do things that I always wanted to do but that took too long, specifically to get to the color part. It seems to bug people that I won't say if the ceramic pieces, because they're on the wall, are paintings, sculpture, or ceramics. I don't know what they are. I don't think it really matters, and they probably have a little bit of all of those forms in them. I wanted to work on the wall and still consider it to be part of my sculptural practice because I've doggedly persisted with the idea that I'm a sculptor. Hey, walls are spaces too.

I like working with these forms that are not ever exactly the same, but very close to the same, which to be honest has a lot to do with the size of my kiln. And I like their immediacy, and the way chance is involved. I had a realization when I made this very large piece called *2001*. I had done some other work early on with computers, and this was a sculpture generated from an animation. It's like this impossible object because it's so perfect—it looks like a hologram. The problem with it is that it's so perfect that one tiny scratch on it is like a devastation. I call it my perfect mistake, and I don't mean that as a negative. I decided that I had to turn from that—I was heading in that direction, and I was like, *No, that's enough*. And that came before the ceramics, as did the smile pieces—works in cast porcelain that I began making around the time of the Iraq War, with Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, which I think was the beginning of the whole Trump dissembling, the way those people were lying to us. I realized the thing about the word *smile* is that it has to have a modifier in front of it to make clear what kind of smile it is—a smile can be the facade of a lie. That was just one part of that show at Regen Projects in 2005, which was about manifest destiny and Joan Didion and the gold rush and the US government's lie about the aluminum tubes that was used to justify the invasion.

A few years later, I did a show in New York at Tanya Bonakdar, and it was about environmentalism, but through the lens of Antonioni's *Red Desert*, which is a great film but also an amazing environmental film. Monica Vitti's character is so perplexed by her industrial environment and the fact of being a woman, a mother, a wife. There's purple and gold everywhere—whenever she has a hallucination or a mental breakdown, you see a purple color. And her little boy is always wearing a burnt-gold jacket. For me, this show followed from the show about California and manifest destiny at Regen Projects. That's what I do, and I hope others can think about the flow of my work like this, but that might be asking too much. I think this exhibition at SculptureCenter and the Walker Art Center is going to show how these connections happen in the work, because I think there are moments where the pieces accomplish that, simply seen in relation to one another. □

"Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was" is on view at SculptureCenter, New York, through March 28; travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, April 30–September 4.