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Liz Larner’s “A hard line to bend”

Jonathan Griffin



Liz Larner, *A hard line to bend* (detail). Bronze and madrone branch, 220.7 x 280.4 x 116.8 cm. Image courtesy of Camden Art Centre, London. Photo by Rob Harris.

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Asteroids are a rather on-the-nose motif in Liz Larner’s otherwise unpredictable visual and conceptual lexicon. Hurled out of the cosmos, they arrive on Earth as airborne readymades, small miracles from deep space that can have cataclysmic consequences when they make impact with our world. Larner’s best work feels much like this. Not made but discovered. Excavated, maybe. Modest, but potentially Earth-shaking.

Several ceramic asteroid sculptures are arrayed across the floor of her mid-career survey at Camden Art Centre. “A hard line to bend” follows surveys by the sculptor (born in 1960 in Sacramento) at SculptureCenter, New York, and at Kunsthalle Zürich, both in 2022. It leans heavily on the abstract ceramics Larner has made since the 2000s, thus eliding some of the heterogeneity of her earlier oeuvre. (She has made public sculptures from mirror-polished steel and iridescent urethane and colorful rocks and minerals; a kinetic machine that whips the gallery wall with a ball and chain; petri dishes of decaying substances on agar and wall-mounted figurines of running women.)

Even though, taken individually, Larner’s works may express a beguiling simplicity, in total they are hard to simplify. In the 1990s she was often critically aligned with third-wave feminism and noirish LA grunge (she was included in Paul Schimmel’s epochal 1992 exhibition “Helter Skelter”). She studied photography, but eventually came to be known as an abstract formalist. Today, the terms typically summoned to contextualize her art are “posthumanism” and “ecofeminism,” fitting our general sense of nearing environmental implosion.

Despite this unavoidable background hum, I find little doomy in Larner’s work. Her asteroids— variously glazed, some gloopy and some dusty dry— rest gracefully in the gallery, evoking lightness and wonder rather than ballistic threat. None is bigger than a medium-sized dog; they are almost cute. (If that sounds like a burn, it was not meant as such, but perhaps it reveals a critical fissure in that series.) They sit in poignant juxtaposition to the wall-mounted accumulations of cable-tied plastic trash on the walls nearby; those works respond directly to the inadequacy of our current plastic recycling systems and the material’s toxic longevity when released into the (usually marine) environment.

But again, these works are not ominous (or not *only* ominous, anyway): Larner sorts her coffee cup lids and takeout containers and disposable forks into alike colors; the poetically titled *veiled pother* and *hard bubble* (both 2021) are made from clear plastic, accented here and there with pearlescent paint. Others consist of all-black or all-white plastic, with matching cable ties. They evoke frothing tides of waste, for sure, but also outcrops of coral, or barnacles, even distant gaseous nebulae. Beauty, in Larner’s work, is not a humanistic moral value, but a natural occurrence that will inevitably outlast the Anthropocene.

In another room, two pieces from her strange earlier series “smiles” (1996–2011) accompany two black examples of Larner’s plastic constructions. Those white porcelain sculptures were cast from glued foam-core models enigmatically based on literary descriptions of women’s smiles in books. (To learn that these books included John Gregory Dunne’s *The Red White and Blue*, 1987, and Mark Twain’s “The Million Pound Bank Note,” 1893, will be of little use to most viewers, though it underscores Larner’s literary methods.) The spiky, brittle crescents feel distantly estranged from heartfelt smiles, although that is surely part of Larner’s point. During the casting process, the

porcelain has sagged and folded in on itself; sentiment has ossified into pure form, and cultural standards of beauty have been translated into ciphers.

Larner's "slab" sculptures—mostly ovoid pieces of rolled and pressed clay, bracketed to the wall—are by now perhaps better-known than anything else she has made. They succeed because of their simplicity, though they remain compelling en masse because of the wide range of effects Larner draws from them. Some fold and crack; some sag and some pucker up at the edges, like fungi or lichens. I prefer those, like *Searching for a better feeling* (2024), that—per her early series of petri dish sculptures—feel like samples of random substances, left to react in the kiln; others, like *MacGuffin is not in the thesaurus* (2024), are almost pictorial with their glaze- and enamel-painted markings. The exhibition takes its title from a new work that is surprising as anything she has ever made. *A hard line to bend* (2026) peels away from the ceramics of recent years and picks up assemblage again: a slender, sinuous branch of the madrone tree, supported by a strip of polished bronze. At one end rests a stylized bird's leg (the kind used in a decorative sculpture or a very ornate piece of antique furniture) and, up at the other, the cast of a woman's hand, with talon-like nails. The exhibition literature reveals that it "reimagines the legendary female figure Lilith," referring to a medieval creation myth in which Lilith, like Adam but unlike Eve, was created from the earth.

The piece scrambles expected binaries of natural and unnatural, made and found, old and new. Every day, before the gallery closes, a recording plays of Cosmo Sheldrake's "Evening Chorus (Live in the Bluebell Woods)" (2022), in which the musician played to—and with—endangered birds such as the short-eared owl and the bittern. Sheldrake's music may be grounded in its contemporary moment, but, like Larner's sculpture, it reaches to touch something outside of itself: something ancient, something wild, something that gives not one hoot for the human.