

On Location at the

Urban Fringe



VALERI LARKO TAKES HER LARGE CANVASES TO THE OUTSKIRTS OF MAJOR CITIES, WHERE SHE PAINTS AREAS OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE THAT ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

by Austin R. Williams

Valeri Larko spends months observing and painting rusty factories, bridges, and yards of scrap metal—places many of us only see briefly through the window of a moving car or train. But by working at these locations, Larko is able to pursue her passions for painting from life and for discovering the hidden stories that can be found in out-of-the-way places.

Larko looks for her subjects on what she refers to as “the urban fringe of the New York metropolitan area.” She avoids the city’s well-known icons and crowded streets, instead focusing on industrial locations and crumbling structures in areas such as Jersey City and the Bronx. These spots may not be as glamorous as the buildings of Fifth Avenue, but they are an equally important part of the infrastructure that makes up the modern metropolis. Furthermore, spending time in these locations—where one is more likely to find someone spraying paint onto the side of a building than putting oil to canvas—provides Larko with endless opportunities to meet others and learn more about the places that she paints.

The artist is frequently on the prowl for subjects. She spends days driving and wandering through neglected industrial and commercial areas, looking for unique locations that have a touch of personality. “It can be something humorous, quirky, or colorful,” she says. “Maybe I like the way two things are juxtaposed, or maybe I’m attracted to a sculptural form. The spot has to grab me for some reason.”

After she has found an area that interests her, Larko will sketch it and consider possible paintings. But unlike many painters who work outdoors, Larko paints on large canvases that will take several months to complete on-location, so choosing to paint a certain scene is a significant commitment. The artist scopes out and sketches many possibilities before making a decision, and in some cases she may return to a spot that intrigues her

Gaseteria, Bronx
2009, oil on linen, 28 x 56.
All artwork this article
collection the artist.

for months or years before settling on a precise view to paint.

Larko begins by drawing quick pen-and-ink sketches in her notebook. "These sketches are very rough and help focus my attention on what is most essential," she says. She notes that although her work represents real places, it has a strong formal component, and she will alter a view to make a better composition. "The painting has to stand on its own, regardless of what the real thing was," she says. "There has to be something formal that makes it work. The sketches help me zero in on that abstract quality of big shapes and big forms that makes any painting good."

If Larko is happy with the result of these initial sketches, she paints a small color study of the scene in oil, which she completes in just a few days. She makes further compositional choices during this stage, such as positioning the large shapes and extending the view in a particular direction if necessary.

Then, if she is committed to making a full-scale painting of the scene, she orders custom-made stretcher bars for her canvases, which she stretches herself. Once the surface is ready, she begins painting at the site as often as possible. To have consistent light, Larko works on one painting in the morning and another in the afternoon, working at each location for three- or four-hour stretches over several months.

Spending so much time painting on-site is, for this artist, the whole point of the process. "Every painting has numerous stories behind it, and that's what keeps me engaged," she says. "Working outdoors is just really fascinating." It does, though, present plenty of challenges, especially to Larko's large canvases, which can be as wide as five feet. "Wind is frustrating, but I've learned how to deal with it," she says. "I'll weigh the easel down with a rock or screw eyehooks into the back of the stretcher bars and stake it down." In the winter, Larko paints in her car, using her steering wheel as an easel. When weather permits, she rolls her window down so that she can observe the scene directly. And no matter how cold it gets, she keeps the windows cracked if she's working with oils.

Larko first blocks in the big shapes, which takes only a few hours, then spends months adding detail. She generally works from back to front, moving all over the canvas to bring the different areas up at about the same pace. If she decides to change a part of the composition, she makes sure not to lose the essence of the place. She works with a full palette of mostly Rembrandt oils, with at least one warm and one cool of all the primaries represented.

When a painting is nearly complete, Larko will take it into the studio and see how it looks indoors, paying careful attention to the values. "There is so much illumination outdoors that you tend to paint things darker than they are," she says. "I'll bring a painting into the studio, soften some

BELOW

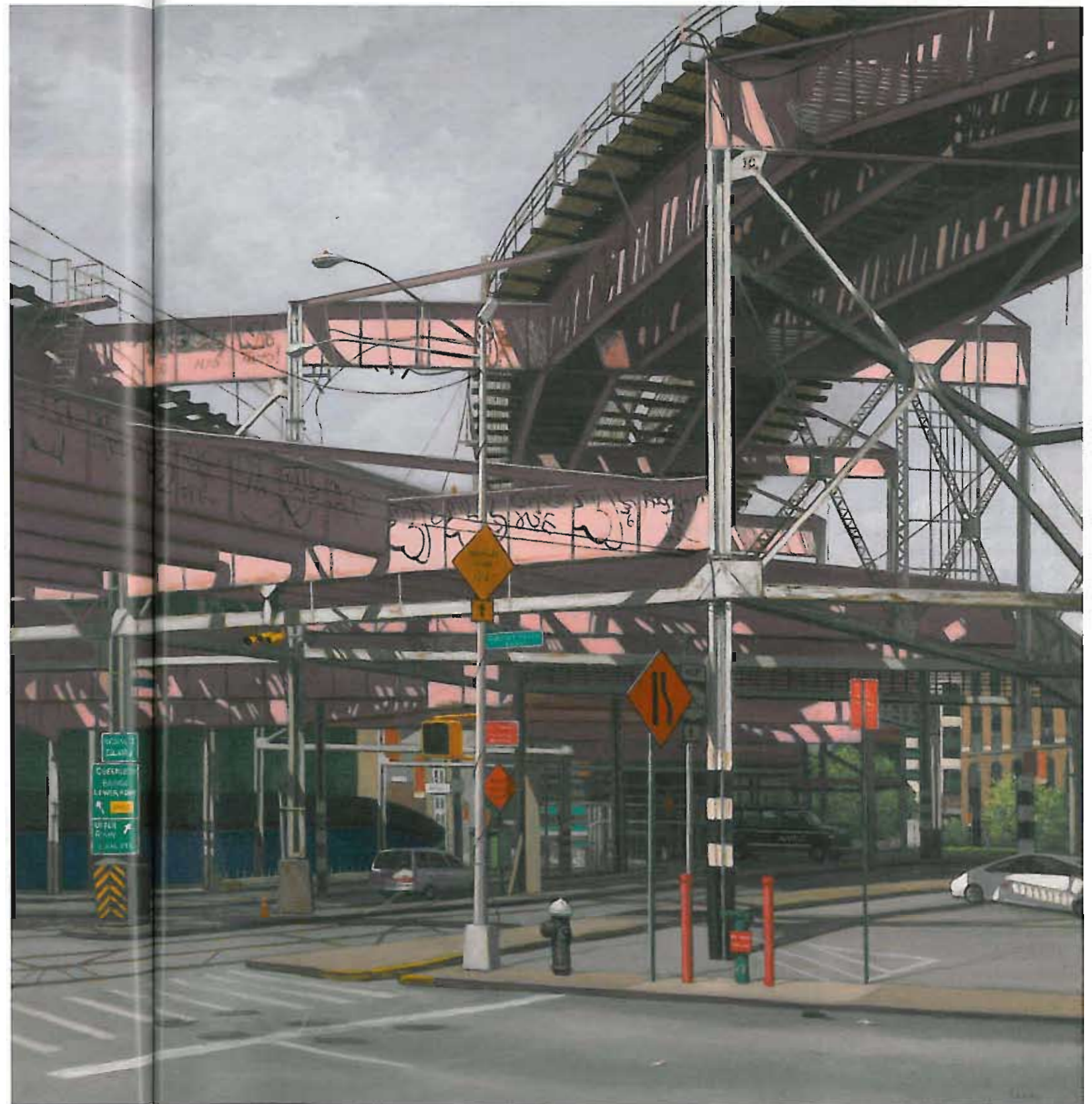
Larko on location in Queens working on the painting *Elevated Subway, Long Island City*.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Elevated Subway, Long Island City
2008, oil on linen,
32 x 32.



Photo: David Cajigas





edges, put little bits of color in the transitions between light and dark, and just live with it for a while.”

Although Larko has concentrated on urban and industrial imagery for most of her career, she has also focused on more specific subjects within this broader genre. In the 1990s, for instance, many of her paintings were of a single structure—such as a smokestack or water tower—in isolation from the area surrounding it. In the early 2000s, she started painting heaps of discarded scrap metal, refrigerators, computers, and car parts. In many recent paintings, she presents wider views of her locations, incorporating multiple structures, streets, plants, and other elements.

One subject that has recently become prominent in Larko’s work is graffiti, which offers the artist opportunities to communicate with another form of art through her own painting. Several years ago she moved to a new home only a few minutes from the Bronx, an area with more graffiti than anywhere she painted previously. “The area is a mecca

of graffiti,” she says, noting that at her current work site there is a wall that was painted by the well-known graffiti artists FX Crew. “The mural is amazing,” she says. “Vans bring tours in to see it.”

Larko is more interested in simpler, less-celebrated graffiti tags than in the elaborate, mural-like graffiti that draws attention from the fine-art world. This focus provides her with another opportunity to connect to part of the community she paints and help tell the story of these locations. “When I’m working on-site, I get to meet some of the kids who make the graffiti,” the artist says, “and they’re always so proud to have their graffiti in my painting. Even if they are anonymous, everyone wants their art to be seen.” Through her paintings, Larko is able to further project the voices of these artists and help tell the stories of the forgotten places where both she and they create art. ■

Austin R. Williams is an associate editor of American Artist.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Valeri Larko studied at the duCret School of Art, in Plainfield, New Jersey, and at the Art Students League of New York, in New York City. She has had numerous solo exhibitions in New York and New Jersey, most recently a mid-career retrospective held at the Morris Museum, in Morristown, New Jersey, in 2010. She has taught for 18 years at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, in Summit, and she leads painting workshops to locations such as France, Italy, and Mexico. For more information, visit www.valerilarko.com.

LEFT
Graffiti, Zerega Ave., Bronx
2008, oil on linen, 42 x 35.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Oak Tower, Bronx
2009, oil on linen, 30 x 36.