



PHOTO BY CARLA HARRIS

Valeri's Reality



BY RACHEL KALINA

IF YOU'RE AN ASTORIA/LIC COMMUTER, YOU FREQUENTLY PASS THROUGH THE SUBJECT OF ONE of Valeri Larko's current oil paintings. And, once you view Larko's work, you're likely to never look at it the same way again. That is, if you've ever really noticed it at all.

The graffiti-ridden, worn pink bridges depicted in Larko's interpretation of Queensboro Plaza are vibrant and alive compared to their actuality. While Queens residents pass them mostly unnoticed on an almost daily basis, Larko's interest was immediately piqued when she saw these structures and decided to set up her mobile easel beneath their intersecting branches.

"I think people find their environment – when put on display – rather fascinating," Larko says. Sculptural qualities, color, shape and form all play a role in Larko's choice of subject and execution of her work – but there is also an evident theme of documenting what she refers to as "contemporary ruins."

"I'm interested in the environment where manmade culture and nature intersect. That fringe along the city; that forgotten place that we've created and we don't want to look at as we're driving by. That's the kind of thing that fascinates me."

Although the "pink bridges" are not yet obsolete, or in a state of ruin as some of Larko's other subjects, they already show signs of being integrated into history. Larko compares their graffiti to ancient hieroglyphs. Someday, too, these tracks will be forgotten.

"I'm documenting the ruins before they're gone forever," says the New Jersey native turned New Rochelle, New York, resident.

According to Larko, there are hidden narratives all around us, which she seeks to uncover for her viewers. For her, something doesn't have to appear traditionally beautiful to be considered captivating. And while she agrees it may be an end result, Larko says with a laugh that, "Beauty is probably the last quality that I look for." "My interest is much more in our contemporary stories, the things we're leaving behind – what that says about us," she explains. "Build as we may, things change," she notes. "I'm documenting those changes."

Larko first became interested in fluctuating urban and industrial centers when she moved to Jersey City as a younger artist and experienced a culture shock, having grown up in suburban New Jersey. After studying at The duCret School of the Arts, Inc., in New Jersey, and taking classes at the National Academy of Design (now The National Academy) in New York and The Art Students League of New York, Larko found herself in a new world of industrial parks. The sculptural tanks and forgotten, weird-looking landscapes she discovered intrigued her, and they still do.

Given Larko's penchant for painting the unassuming, it's not much of a surprise that she has even managed to create art out of humanity's discards. During a five-year period in an active New Jersey salvage yard, Larko forwent her usual panoramic landscapes and went up close with mounds of cast-off appliances, cars, furniture, computers and even school buses.

"I went from painting the factories to painting the discards from the factories," Larko says.





"It had a connection." Her paintings of these objects were almost abstract. And how did she manage to make what others would call trash into treasures on canvas? Through focusing in on subjects that are visually interesting and highlighting their contrasting shadows, or even underscoring how they beam with color.

"Regardless of what I work from, regardless of what the actual subject matter is, it has to stand on its own as a work of art," Larko adds. "Is it something that's going to challenge me and ultimately be a good painting?"

There are also undertones of environmental awareness in Larko's paintings, which she acknowledges.

"When you see all those piles of rusting refrigerators, you just realize how much stuff you throw out. Our whole economy is based on consumerism. We'd collapse if we didn't keep buying new things," Larko says, recognizing that the piles of "avocado fridges and harvest gold dishwashers" will eventually be replaced by stainless steel ones. "You can't paint what I paint and not have it influence your view of the world."

After her experience in the salvage yard, Larko relocated to New York in 2004 and began working wherever inspiration struck, whether it is in Eastchester, the Bronx or now Long Island City, home of pink bridges. Her pieces still teeter between panoramic and close-up viewpoints, leaning mostly toward the latter.

"Even though each series may be different, with different challenges, different views – they all have a thread of being interested in how we have changed the environment and what is either the product of that or the leftover product or the discarded product. It all comes together," Larko says of her work.

She also says it becomes fully recognized in the eyes of the viewer, who is able to bring the stories and places she paints into context. "I want to tell the story," Larko states, "but you have to bring yourself and your views to it, too."

Yes, Larko may choose a painting's focus, and in doing so, expose her own thoughts, but she doesn't want to interpret for the viewer what their experience with the painting should be. The viewer completes the story. Larko notes, "I'm pointing out these things that we tend to overlook and saying, "This is our environment. Take note."

Maybe, she says, her work could even make a commuter stop and realize there are pink railroad bridges in what may seem like a mundane setting. Or, perhaps it could prevent a passerby from throwing trash out of their car window towards an overlooked contemporary ruin. Or, it may startle a collector into realizing that graffiti can be admired. And if Larko's paintings don't appeal to what you recognize as beautiful or worth admiring, they still reflect your surrounding reality.

"If you don't like them," Larko says, "well, you can change them. That's your option, too. Rather than just mindlessly not thinking about it."

For more information on Valeri and her art, visit: www.valerilarko.com.