

Queen of the Heap

Artist's paintings inspired by N.J. landfill.

01 you can liken my work to Monet painting haystacks, but I never see

any haystacks. What I see are tank farms and salvage yards," says artist Valeri Larko, who devoted five years to depicting piles of refuse at Kucharski Salvage Yard in Hackettstown, N.J. Works from her resulting "Salvage Yard Series," 60 representational oil-on-linen paintings, were featured in "Trash: What We Value and What We Throw Away," a summer exhibition at Atlantic Gallery in New York.

Rusting propane tanks, shredded lawn chairs and punched-out monitors guarded by crippled school buses might seem like a peculiar career twist for Larko, a classically trained figurative painter who graduated from the prestigious Art Students League of New York. But call it more of an evolution for this artist, who has made a name for herself painting urban and industrial scapes.

During a 1996 exhibition of her paintings, Larko received a fan letter from an artist who occasionally welded at Kucharski, inviting her to visit. "It was such a cool place," she says, recalling that she found something unique in the color composition and narrative - "often with a humorous bent"- that she saw in the piles.

Inspired, she returned in 1998, and for the next five years for eight hours a day, weather permitting, Larko and her tripod easel became fixtures at Kucharski.

"They were lovely to me," she says of Joe Kucharski Sr., his wife, Joyce, and son, Joe Jr. "I'd let them know where I was painting, and they were good about not dumping more stuff." And the Kucharskis enjoyed the novelty. "It was no bother," Joe Sr. says. "My yard is spread out, and we just worked around her."

But the art world, Larko soon discovered, wasn't as accommodating. After wrapping up "Salvage" in 2004, she was discouraged by the initial lack of enthusiasm it generated. "I

thought, 'Wow, this is the best body of work I've ever done,' but nobody wanted to show it," she says. Undaunted, she continued to approach dealers and attracted the attention of the Arts Guild of Rahway, N.J., and Safe-T-Gallery in Brooklyn, which mounted solo shows in 2005 and 2006, respectively. More group exhibitions are scheduled through 2008.

Larko hopes that these images will resonate with viewers - and maybe even prompt them to think about the environmental impact of our consumer culture. "The salvage yard represents the cultural ruins of our disposable society," she explains. "In addition to the rusting heaps of metal appliances, it is the plastics that grab my eye. And as you are well aware, those plastics that we discard will certainly outlive us all." For more information, visit www.valerilarko.com.

- Patti Verbanas, executive editor, *Art & Antiques* magazine



SALVAGED ART: Larko developed a series of oil paintings depicting cultural cast-offs.