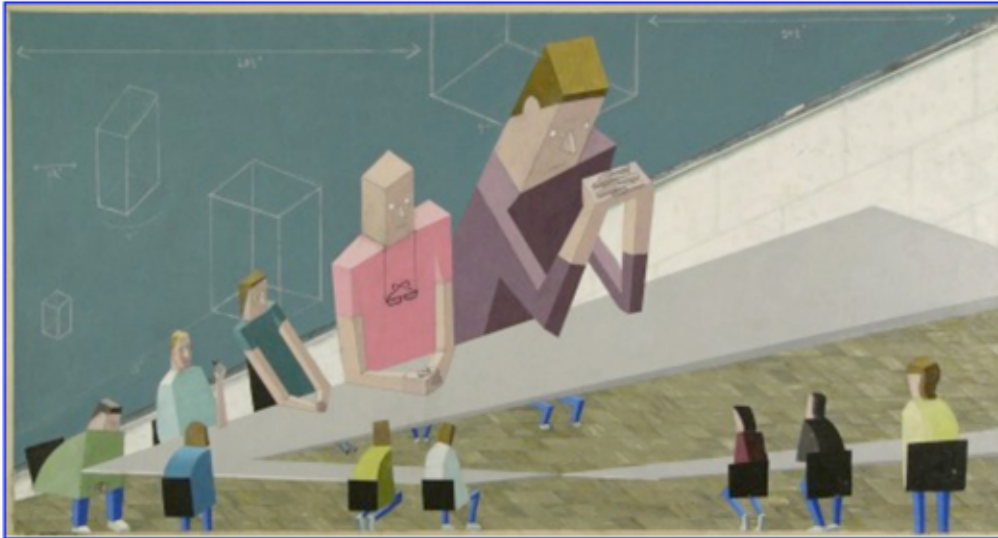


Art review: Frances Barth, Mernet Larsen play spatial tricks, at Marcia Wood Gallery

by JERRY CULLUM | Mar 18, 2011

The paintings of Frances Barth and Mernet Larsen have one major thing in common: both operate in a paradoxical space defined by maps and higher mathematics instead of in the realist space of Renaissance perspective. Nevertheless, as the two-person exhibition at Marcia Wood Gallery demonstrates, they do dramatically different things with it.



Be that as it may, both show that the map not only isn't the territory, sometimes it isn't even the map. Barth's surfaces have an emphatic flatness that denies the depth implied by everything from shapes that occasionally suggest dimensionality to combinations of colors that contest and compete wonderfully. Larsen regularly flips the laws of Renaissance perspective, making foregrounds tiny and backgrounds enormous.

Larsen also combines axonometric projections and top-down views, a strategy often found in Japanese art, to create a sense of disorientation that, coupled with her cartoony figural representation, creates a sense of discomfiting comedy. "Flat Tire," for example, features a tiny disabled tour bus as its central image, overshadowed by picture-taking tourists and the feet and legs of a local in the painting's upper register. The bus motif recurs in "Yellow Bus," where the minimal bus in question is the only thing a viewer is likely to overlook amid all the recognizable but off-kilter segments of the scenery.

The comedy becomes openly art-historical in the perspective-reversed "Landscape with a Dirt Road (From Poussin)" and in "Resurrection," in which a geometricized Jesus ascends from an even more geometricized tomb, conflating and subverting the basics of any number of Renaissance-era Resurrections and Ascensions.

Some of Larsen's works are more emphatically geometric than others, and it's these more abstract and less comic paintings that mesh most readily with Barth's more elusive style. Each, however, illuminates aspects of the other by virtue of their singularly instructive parallels and divergences.



Barth's style is consistently harder to summarize or even describe adequately; her paintings are also full of horizon lines and stacked rectangles that look like architectural sketches, but in each case the superficial resemblances are defeated by other elements of the overall composition. Barth thus appears deadly serious where Larsen is whimsical, but both are intensively intellectual painters whose work nonetheless has an emotional effect on viewers.