

sculpture

Chattopadhyay, Collette: Making Oxymorons Happen: A Conversation with Liz Lerner

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Making Oxymorons Happen: A Conversation with Liz Lerner

[June 1, 2002 by Collette Chattopadhyay](#)

Liz Lerner's mid-career survey, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles from December 2, 2001 through March 10, 2002, covered the last 15 years of the Los Angeles-based artist's work. Lerner graduated from the California Institute of Arts in 1985 and rose to international prominence during the 1990s. Among her numerous gallery and museum exhibitions, most notable to date are a 1997 solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel and a 1999 solo exhibition at MAK, the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna. The current show, which is Lerner's first solo museum exhibition in the United States, was organized for MOCA by Russell Ferguson who is now the UCLA Hammer Museum deputy director of exhibitions and chief curator. In addition to developing her own work, Lerner teaches at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where her questions, insights, and energies are impacting the next generation of emerging Southern California artists.

Collette Chattopadhyay: *I thought we might start by discussing your new magnum opus, the huge Untitled (2001) multi-cubic form in the opening room of the MOCA show. How did you come to be interested in the cube to begin with?*



Untitled, 2001. Fiberglass, steel, and urethane paint, 144 x 144 x 144 in..

Liz Larner: First of all, I don't see it as cubes—it's more spherical. I developed it using computer animation: the sphere gets animated into a cube and then spins back into a sphere again. There's only one cube in the whole thing. The rest of the forms are combinations of those two seemingly opposite forms. There's really no name for those forms, because they're hybrids of a cube and a sphere. The entire shape itself is really spherical because of the motion and rotation it suggests. But back to your question, I've always liked the mass of the cube. It's a very equal form, a super-symmetrical, ultra-geometric, incredibly stable form that is also quintessentially modern. My interest in the cube relates back to Tony Smith's *Die* (1962) and to that point when things took a turn in sculpture.

CC: *Can you elaborate? You mention that the cube is a stable, super-symmetrical type of form and yet your works are none of those things. They're all about an instability and transmutation of the cube, even your early work Used to do the job (1987).*

LL: Yeah, you're right, and that's why I was interested in it. The cube itself symbolizes these things, but I don't know if they are possible. It's meant to symbolize a stasis or even stases that I don't believe really exist. I'm interested in being able to get away from that—to allow sculpture a physical manifestation in the third dimension that speaks about things that are not necessarily concrete. Like the idea that sculpture had come to represent security for some people, almost a physical security: the idea of stasis, which is appealing but not the nature of our world. "Attack" is maybe too strong a word, but using the term the way actors do, I was interested in an "attack" on the cube, opening it up and revealing its instability.



Bird in Space, 1989. Nylon cord sewn with silk and weighted with stainless steel blocks, dimensions variable.

CC: *Your linear cubes, which appear in some ways to be drawings in space, such as Two as Three and Some Too (1997–98) and Two or Three or Something (1998–99), approach those dialogues too. Perhaps we could talk about their relation to Untitled. But first, did you build the piece specifically for that room?*

LL: I've been in Los Angeles for 20 years, and I've probably seen every show that's ever been in that room. So, when I had the opportunity to have my work here, I wanted to make a sculpture specifically for the space. I'd never seen one object in there, and it seemed to me to be one of the things that the room was calling for.

CC: *It appears huge, massive, metallic, and bold in form and feels so different from the tenuous, pastel-colored linear works of 1997 and 1998. The new work seems to borrow the textures, qualities, and colors of cars or technological culture, while the earlier linear pieces look more like they are constructed of bones or tree branches, even though they're made of steel. Where do you see your work in relation to technology and nature?*

LL: I've been involved with the question of technological culture. This new piece fulfilled itself so much that it was overwhelming. I made decisions along the way. I could have done a lot to make it self-critical, but decided not to do that. For me, the impact of the sphere on that form alone is what enlivens it, in the sense that it isn't a cube anymore. And

I don't know that the open (linear) forms are even cubes. They all measure the same, but can it be considered a cube when the lines aren't straight, perpendicular, and at right angles to each other?



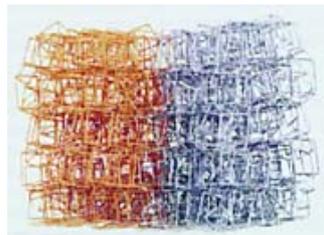
Ignis (Fake), 1998–99.
Aluminum, paper, watercolor,
and steel, 32 x 32 x 34 in.

CC: *We have no word for it if it's not.*

LL: Right. There's not a word for it. People call it "a cube," because it's the closest thing they can think of. And there's something wonderful in that, because in calling it "a cube" we redefine this thing we consider a cube. That stretching of the idea, or making it larger to define as another thing this thing which is really not what a cube was considered to be, is something that interests me. The technological look of the new piece I need to think about more. But more than the critique of nature and culture, the thing I'm most interested in (and what I think that piece is very successful at and where it's similar in nature to the open forms) is that it activates the viewer in a way that a cube never could. Because with a cube you know what's on the other side. You know how it looks. With *Untitled* there's no way you could ever anticipate it. I've been around that thing a hundred times and I still can't grasp it. I can't remember from one side to another what the thing looks like. I can't contain it. It's too visual. It's too physical.

CC: *Even you have that experience? It's interesting that in your work the physical and tactile experimentations of sculpture meet with new-media concepts and experimentations. Often, for example in art schools, these endeavors remain separate spheres of inquiry. But in your work not only do they meet, they embrace and even dance. And then, you've created and presented this work in both forms: both as a huge tactile sculpture and as an animated Web image.¹ Do you like it more in the animated form?*

LL: No. I really like the idea of trying to change dimensions, of turning this thing that exists as animation into sculpture. The animation is good-looking, but it's not surprising, and I find it totally receivable. I'm not against two-dimensional images, but for me the physical is a much more thrilling and complex experience. I think there are so many ways of receiving other than through the visual, such as moving around a form. Your body in relation to form introduces speed: slow speeds, fast speeds, stopping, moving in and out. It's not a zoom, it's you. There's a big difference between the zoom in a camera and walking up close to something.



Surprisingly Nameless, 2000.
Powder-coated and stainless steel,
mulberry paper, and watercolor,
123 x 28.25 x 52 in.

CC: *How did you arrive at the color of Untitled?*

LL: I've been working with color a lot in the last few years. Color in sculpture is an area that has been taken for granted and made to act in a particular way, usually to reinforce the form, to make you see the form more clearly. In Calder, Miró, Caro, or even in Judy Pfaff, color is used to reinforce the form. This goes back to what I was saying about the cube: I think the form doesn't need to be reinforced. The interplay between color and form that color can create with the actual three-dimensional form is much more exciting. That's an area I want to continue to explore. There are so many forms in this new piece, yet it is one form. I was going to try to compose through colors to create something that would not allow you to stay with one form for too long and yet not allow you to dissect the thing. The thing constantly wanted to put itself back together as one shape, while still having these clear forms interpenetrating each other. I had worked up a number of studies with different colors. Then, I got a book for the kind of autopaint I wanted to use, mostly for durability, and I came across a paint that had five colors in it. It's one paint but it has five colors. I realized that it could do what I was attempting to compose, and all with this one paint.

CC: *You mean, this work is painted with only one color, yet it has all these rarefied hues?*

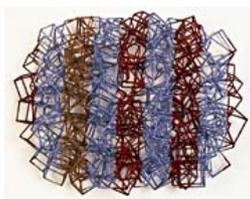
LL: Yes, it's one paint, and the color changes in relation to where you're standing in the light. It's a more sculptural solution to color, I felt. The color can change like this because every particle of the paint is laser cut so it's exact. That's why it gets that incredible refractive quality.

CC: *How many forms did you use to compose this piece when you edited the animation studies to develop the singular sculptural version?*

LL: I consider it to be six forms. It's a sphere, although the sphere itself is not in the piece, because I felt the sphere had so influenced all of the forms. There's so much softening, except in that one hard cube. Then, the rotation that I had the forms go through is so spherical that I didn't actually use the literal spherical form, didn't push it to the surface. So there are five full forms there.

CC: *In a recent interview with David Pagel of the Los Angeles Times you said, "If you asked me if my works were feminist, I'd say yes."² Your early sphere Out of Touch (1987), which looks something like a giant ball of yarn though it's made of surgical gauze, raises the idea of knitting, something still deemed by many a feminine activity. And your Corridorpieces (1991), with fabric and knit elements, could be conceived as conversing with knitting, even with Rosemarie Trockel's investigations in these areas. Obviously, the larger question here is how do you see your work fitting into feminist dialogues?*

LL: I'm not sure how it fits in or even if it does. I feel there's a basic feminist idea, in the terms of French feminist theory, that language is not ours, that it does not belong to women. We haven't had a part in it: we borrow it, but it wasn't constructed by us.



Untitled, 2000. Stainless steel, mulberry paper, and watercolor, 30 x 25 x 13 in.

CC: *Do you think that about the cube as the Minimalists constructed it?*

LL: Oh yeah, totally. I think those uses for it were completely different from my uses or what I'm trying to get it to do, which is the antithesis probably. A lot of my early work was simply trying to make that statement. I think and hope that this new untitled piece and also the open form (linear) works, actually go beyond that reactionary deconstructionist type of comment about the cube and move onto something that's more generative—something that really is a different form—a form that a woman has created. The logic behind it does not necessarily follow from forms that have already existed.

CC: *The interesting thing is that we do not have words for it on the one hand and on the other that there are a number of women doing cutting-edge abstract sculpture that redresses Minimalism and that could be said to embody these interests. And, of course, with discussions of the circle or the sphere Judy Chicago comes to mind. It's intriguing that in its hidden essence Untitled is spherical.*

LL: I don't know if I'm going to identify the sphere as female and the cube as male. In daily life these forms are all around us. Cars, for example, have had this softening thing going on for about the last five years. Everything is rounded, and there is an idea that it is all more aerodynamic. Where does that idea come from? And then there is this idea of opposites: one moment it's the "round era" and then it's the "sharp era." I'm interested in making sculpture that mixes the two. It's like mixing oil and water, two things that aren't supposed to be able to be mixed. They aren't supposed to go together, but that's because of what we don't want to accept as an outcome. Maybe there's something feminist about that too. I'm fascinated by *Untitled* because it's the combination of the sharp with the round, both present in an object together. That's something we haven't seen. It's always the body or the geometric. They're always kept separate.



Something I Got Out of the Museum Here in L.A., 1989. Glass vial on wood stand, 9 x 3 x 3 in. Materials found in the third pit during Chris Burden's *Exposing the Foundations of the Museum* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

CC: *You're suggesting that this is one of the more interesting questions in sculpture right now?*

LL: Certainly one of the more interesting questions for me. I was also trying to have something be larger but not seem heavy. The laws of physics are still working on the sculpture, but the way it appears goes against the laws of physics. I don't think it can quite be called illusionism, although I called it that before. It's not really an illusion, because you're there with it, you're moving around it, and it reveals itself as it starts to look like something else again. That's a really great thing. I am trying to make things that haven't been made before. I'm not even so much interested in debunking Minimalism. I'm just interested in going on. After having gone through this intense technological experience, the next thing would be to follow up with something non-technological, something very

handmade. Theoretically it will probably be the same thing, in as much as I'm interested in making things happen that are supposedly oxymorons and not be oxymorons anymore. If they're not named at least they're present.

Collette Chattopadhyay, who lives in the Los Angeles basin, contributes regularly to Sculpture, ART Asia Pacific, Art Nexus, and Artweek.

Notes

1 Liz Larner's Study for Untitled (2001) is on view in MOCA's Digital Gallery

<www.moca.org/museum/digital_gallery.php>.

2 David Pagel, "Out of the Unreal World," Los Angeles Times (December 16, 2001), p. 81.