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Weekend Studio Visit: Marilyn Lerner in Chelsea, New York

August 10, 2014 | By John Yau

I first went to Marilyn Lerner's studio shortly after I reviewed her show at John Good for Artforum (May 1989), and have gone periodically ever since. I have always thought of her as a painter. Perhaps that is why — in that first visit — I didn't ask how she came to be a painter, and, eventually, any questions I may have had around that subject faded into the background.

In 2010, I included Lerner's paintings in a group show, *Rhyme, Not Reason*, which I organized for the Janet Kurnatowski Gallery (September 10–October 10, 2010). When I learned that she was having a museum exhibition, *Circle in the Square*, at the Butler Gallery, The Castle, Kilkenny, Ireland (August 9–October 5, 2014), which has been organized by Anna O'Sullivan, I knew that I didn't want to miss the opportunity to see what was going to be in the show. It was during this visit — some twenty-five years after the first one — that I learned how Lerner came to be a painter.

Lerner studied printmaking as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, where she earned her BFA before going to Pratt Institute for her MFA. Like many printmakers I know, she is meticulous. However, instead of pursuing a career in printmaking, as one might expect, Lerner began making laminated wood sculptures, partly influenced by H.C. Westermann. She showed these sculptures at Zabriskie Gallery in 1969, and work from this period was also included in the 1970 *Sculpture Annual* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Although Lerner was gaining attention as a sculptor, she realized that her deepest interest was in color, and she began exploring painting. Because the apartment she lived and worked in was so small, she couldn't make laminated wood sculpture, which required a lot of sanding, and paint at the same time, and so she was compelled to completely abandon the former to start the latter. Such decisiveness typifies Lerner's entire approach to art, as she moved almost effortlessly from printmaking to sculpture to painting and, for the latter two mediums, teaching herself what she felt she needed to learn. In her sculptures, her use of laminated wood required her to build each piece from successive layers, and her paintings, with their multitude of colors, are equally demanding.



Marilyn Lerner's studio, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic, all other images courtesy the artist).