

## ED LARSON

**Entering** Ed Larson's rustic studio-warehouse-gallery is a pre-modern experience, reminiscent of a time when contraptions clanked in tune to an American tradition that barely existed. Stripped of media glut, Larson's paintings, sculptures, quilts, and toys conjure up lost panoramas culled from the vicissitudes of a

certain kind of American dream. Cowboys and Indians, snake-oil salesmen, as well as sumptuous presentations of now dormant or dying fetishes of American culture—stockyards, watering holes, happy couples—surface throughout his oeuvre. Politicians with fat and glistening faces, like rashers of bacon, sum up a style that combines Expressionist deformation and Surrealist composition

in a satirical reconfiguration of an America blinded by the surface glare of its own meaty reflection. This is not the work of a great sublimator. This is no-nonsense, muscular American speech that springs whole hog out of a tradition of self-made culture, flinging pots of enamel paint in the eyes of fate. In this regard, Larson's work reminds us that the modern visual artist is simultaneously a writer, arguing his or her epistemological, theoretical proposals via invocations and material configurations that echo, whether they like it or not, Stefan George's famous verse, "Nothing can be where the word fails." In other words, Ed Larson's work has something to say.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Larson backed into being a painter through a stint in the navy, hauling aviation gasoline for pilots in the Korean War. His tour ended in Long Beach, California, where he signed up at the old Art Center School, which moved to Pasadena in 1976. Ansel Adams taught photography there and a majority of alumni from the Art Center went on to become filmmakers, car designers, concept illustrators, and admen. Larson went on to Philadelphia and Chicago to work as a corporate art director, followed by a stint in a toy design house and then as a professor at the Chicago Art Institute. So far, so good. But as Donald Rumsfeld demonstrated in a brief act of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and unknown: "There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know." What he forgot to add is the crucial fourth term: the unknown knowns, things we don't know that we know. In Larson's case, what he didn't know that he knew was that all this time spent in the established order was in fact producing a conscious, methodical alienation from the entire sphere of business and industry. Turning the music of the soul into the music of salesmanship has, in the end, the upchucking flavor of mendacity.

Perhaps that is the pre-modern feeling I mentioned at the top of this review. The acceleration of the sciences and technology has beggared both the reach and veracity not only of language, but of much contemporary visual art. There is, moreover, a dilemma probably unique in the history of art. To many, the installations of global celebrity artists are monstrous assemblages of pretentious, maddeningly repetitive obscurantism, confidence tricks perpetrated by tainted mountebanks, voluminous with footnotes. On the other hand, in statistical surveys of telephone conversations and electronic messages recorded and dispatched across America on an average day, modern word usage has been shown to have diminished to some sixty-five words. On both ends of the spectrum the retreat from the word, from its traditional promise of meaning, has become almost pathological. If Ed Larson has anything to say, it is somewhere in between the fantastically intricate and demanding speech of the plutocratic art market on the one hand, and the Neanderthal babble of Facebook on the other. The viewer's eye must listen.

—ANTHONY HASSETT



Ed Larson, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36", 2012