

# Sense and Sensibility

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## Nancy Lasar's Marks on the World



Nancy Lasar knows about haste. She knows that chaos is the price of modernity, and that the price is high. It can seem, to her —and to anyone who values tranquility [—] that we are forever on our way or coming back, without ever realizing where we've been. As it is with the pace of life, so, too, with the pace of discovery. Scientists have mapped the human genome but haven't developed a method to decelerate life's pace. In such frenzy any *thing*—any solid, familiar, three-dimensional object — can be a harbor to which we desperately cling.

In the swirling, calligraphic abstractions of Nancy Lasar, certainties emerge. The hard edge of a table; the consoling arc of a vase; the scales of a fish [—] even the haunting, barely grasped suggestion of a face. They materialize like the shape of a familiar bureau in a darkened hallway. Lasar, whose work is on display with the work of John Davis at New Arts Gallery in Litchfield, can capture the physical world with the deftness of an engineer, and then dissolve it again with all the tensile urgency of fireflies escaping from a jar.



Nancy Lasar is a petite, fine-boned New Englander whose family can trace its lineage to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Lithe and angular with a buttery complexion and a salt-and-pepper mane cinched back in a ponytail, Lasar, at 65, is fetching and spry. She can be diffident and even uneasy about the success of her work, at the same time effusive and breathless about its concepts. At moments a flinty, plain-spoken Yankee [---] on being the eldest of eight, she says flatly, "You learn how to manage a lot of things and work hard," [---] and curious and expansive about artistic concepts of space and oblivion.



"My work is about how you want to feel and breathe. It's not about the things. It's about [JUMP]<\*L\*p(0,0,0,10,0,0,G)>the relationship between space and marks and how you want to be in the space, how you want to breath in it."

So in "Shaker Table with Red Leaf," Lasar contrasts the simplest of objects [---] a Shaker table [---] with a vase whose furious contents shimmer and vibrate with quavering glyphs of color. In "Spawning Ground," an Asian-looking work on a sienna background, copper and tangerine gestures explode, dribble and shred into slivers. A fuchsia-colored salmon dissolves into translucent gold while another, delicately articulated with deep threads of inky black, scuttles to the surface. These works, which look almost like Asian scrolls, balance tension and tranquility, the embryonic and the decaying.

"It's always been about creation of a tension between something that's stable and some thing that's a little off kilter."

Like her work, Lasar mixes hard-edged realism with frenetic abstraction. She is equally at home talking about time-management as she is about the protean nature of the universe [--] and a human cell. “Are we all just vibrations,” Lasar asks rhetorically. “Are there edges to things? There’s the molecular and the cellular image and at the same time the images of the universe [--] macro and micro,” she says. “So how do you incorporate your consciousness of what is life, our experience of being alive into one image?”

For Lasar, the answer is to show object and experience, Cezanne-like, as happening from all vantage points and at different times. The fish, for instance [--] muscular, gluttonous-looking salmon that float through Lasar’s mixed-media monotypes [--] are at once gelatinous and fully formed, hovering and drifting through the aqueous background of these photo-collages, amoeba-like and amphibious, creatures on their way to becoming what they are and what they may become. All of this [--] the incessant mutability of self and cosmos and intelligence and the alternately burdensome and comforting pleasures of the tangible world fuse in Lasar’s work.

“I do think about things as open and interactive and morphing into one thing or another,” says Lasar, of Washington, Conn. Lasar grew up in Massachusetts, the daughter of a school administrator. Her childhood, as she describes it, sounds idyllic [--] a pair of culturally sophisticated parents taking their children to museums and concerts; a mother who sang to her children before bed; a family that sang old Scottish-English folk songs and church hymns without affectation or hesitation.



“I was lost in the mayhem and the confusion and the chaos,” Lasar says, smiling. “I’m always organizing chaos.”

When Lasar, a promising student, decided she wanted to go to art school instead of Wellesley, her parents didn’t blink. Her siblings display her work in their homes and tell Lasar that they feel blessed to wake up and lose themselves in her creations. “I’m blessed,” Lasar says frequently. “Truly blessed.”

For the last 20 years – ever since the last recession [--] Lasar has run West Wind Studios, a framing shop and gallery in Washington Depot. The shop allowed her to be at home when her two children were in school, she says, and gave her the freedom to create. But in that juggling act [--] running a business, raising a family, carving out a creative space [--] Lasar’s life mirrors the themes she explores in her work [--] the dizzying but often illuminating whorl that is life in the 21st century.

“We live in a world where you have to resolve things fast and we’re under the pressure of time

constantly,” she says. “You have to know when to push it and when to stop.”



Lasar's new work is a mixture of photo collage, engraving, colored pencil, poured-ink drawing, and stencils [---]incredible panoply of media. Ultimately, Lasar insists she is simply “a drawer,” and all of her works, despite a molten quality that can make them look like microscopic images of sea or of space, have a febrile graphic element. The jittery lines enervate the dreamy abstractions beneath.

But as abstract and expressive as Lasar's work can seem, there remains an obliging recognition of art history. Her current series “Casting Off,” [---] ravenous ghostly fish at once fully realized and embryonic [---] were inspired by her memory of John Singleton Copley's masterful “Watson and the Shark,” from the National Gallery of Art. The ochre background of the fish series suggests 18th century paper, an allusion to her own indebtedness to art history, she says. “Even though I am drawing from nature, I'm working from memory,” says Lasar, who has lived in Washington with her architect husband Steven since 1985. “You have a memory of how a branch connects to a piece of a tree or how a beak curls on a bird. You have a memory of it by looking closely and by looking closely, you have memory.

“You have memory, imagination and nature. That's what you have at your disposal as an artist. That's what your mind has access to.”

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