

Frances Lerner paints puppets that puzzle

[Jesse Hamlin, Special to The Chronicle](#)

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There's something tender and disturbing about Frances Lerner's mysterious new paintings. Puzzled, sealed-mouth puppet figures appear in old industrial settings and strange rural landscapes. An East Bay artist who's been working under the critical radar for years, Lerner is getting rave notices for these small works on wood, collectively titled "There Was Once a World."

They're at Berkeley's Alphonse Berber Gallery in the exhibition "New Images of Man and Woman." The Chronicle's Kenneth Baker, identifying the 61-year-old Lerner as an "emerging" artist, called her "the great discovery here."

A Cleveland native with a master of fine arts from the University of Iowa, Lerner has been steadily making prints, drawings and paintings in her San Pablo studio - intermittently exhibiting her art here and around the country - while working part time as a psychiatric social worker.

Twenty years ago, she bought an odd-looking Japanese female puppet at the Berkeley Flea Market. Its mouth was upturned like a spout, the big head draped in a babushka. The puppet, which Lerner named Lorelei - a play on the words "lore" and "lie" - eventually made her way into the artist's work. She's the main metaphoric figure Lerner uses to "stage elusive human stories," as she puts it.

The artist, who cites Goya, Vermeer and Morandi among her influences, creates these glowing contemporary works with old master techniques, painting layer upon thin layer of transparent color glazes and translucent body paint over a black-and-white underpainting, or grisaille. She talked about her work the other day at the gallery.

Q: What drew you to that puppet initially, and how does she function in these paintings?

A: It was the angularity of the body in relation to the sort of perplexed facial expression. And the babushka, which stirred up a lot of shtetl and immigrant images. I'm sure my grandmother wore one. Part puppet, part human, Lorelei could be every peasant, immigrant, orphan or artist in every sweatshop, factory, studio or day job in Poland or Russia or an industrial city like Cleveland. ...

My work is a lot about vulnerability. My friend Brenda Hillman wrote in the catalog essay that the figures are moving and stuck at the same time. They're trapped on a lot of levels. There's a conflict between reverie or creativity and the work of the world to be done.

Q: What's going on with those odd machines, old pipes and industrial forms that appear in many of the paintings?

A: They don't really function, or they function in some ways we don't know about. I've always been fascinated by those things. This wheelbarrow (in "Eulogy") is almost like it's praying.

Q: What does the old master technique give you?

A: It's a slow process, with a lot of steps. That's good for me, because I have a very fast temperament. The light shines through the thin layers and adds richness, that inner glow. I like the old master technique because the light shining through the gray, black and white foundation shines through these vulnerable but proud characters, as if their human spirit shines through their poor circumstance.

Old masters, academic artists working at ateliers and "folk" artists working at home painted or are trying to paint beautiful subjects in a beautiful way. I thought it would be relevant to paint complex, offbeat subjects in that way - strange bedfellows.

Q: How do the paintings develop?

A: A lot of times I start with the figure, then I struggle with the background, and redo it and redo it. I'll spend 10 hours on something then sand it off. I use triggers to get going, maybe something I notice in the studio. I'm in an industrial setting in San Pablo, where there are a lot of shops with guys working on car parts and things. I look at all kinds of things. I look at the Internet. I look at YouTube videos of explosions and industrial images. I went to this great junkyard in Petaluma and bought something that I thought would fit with Lorelei. ...

You develop a different relationship with each painting. And the ones that are hardest to work out are the ones you often feel closest to.

Q: So are you emerging?

A: If that funny word means one is now getting recognition, then, yes. These are the first reviews I have received, and the first showing of this new body of work. I have spent many years on and off in self-imposed exile from the art world, hanging out with literary friends, working privately in the studio, and only found my real voice and footing with these paintings.

New Images of Man and Woman: Frances Lerner paintings. Noon-7 p.m. daily except Wed. Through Jan. 30. Alphonse Berber Gallery, 2546 Bancroft Ave., Berkeley. (510) 649-9492. alphonseberber.com.

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