

José Lerma



Painting from Site

Kristin Korolowicz

Born in Spain in 1971 and raised in Puerto Rico, artist José Lerma is best known for producing humorous and intricately rendered paintings that often depict history's forgotten bureaucrats and aristocrats. In recent years, Lerma has expanded his practice to include the repurposing of nontraditional materials such as reflective fabric and industrial carpet, and the incorporation of found objects. Earlier in his career, the artist felt torn between his desire to make "painterly" paintings and his attraction to conceptually driven, site-responsive projects that incorporate objects and materials from their surroundings.¹ His *BMO Harris Bank: Chicago Works* exhibition showcases the maturation of his various artistic concerns in a theatrical, even epic, exploration of painting's relationship to history.

Lerma recognizes painting as a medium that, historically, has often been a vehicle for commemorating status and power, second only perhaps to civic sculpture and coins. But Lerma doesn't polemicize against symbols of power and status. Rather, he finds insights in their idealized forms. His ongoing series of works that incorporate coins and his interest in monetary instruments as "civic portraits" has expanded to encompass those who work in finance: for instance, seventeenth-century French paintings of bankers were among the sources for *The Credentialist*, his 2012 exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Lerma has engaged portraiture directly. Upon noticing that the museum's third-floor Chicago Works galleries have a high concentration of donor plaques, the artist took the named patrons as inspirations for his show's portraits. Each of the three discrete areas in his exhibition thus showcases works loosely depicting or inspired by the corresponding patron or sponsor of the gallery, including two busts made out of crushed sheets of monochromatic photography backdrop paper, which playfully refer to the medium of photography and his other paintings. Based on loyal art patrons Marjorie Susman and Marianne Deson Herstein, the busts are installed in the lounges named after them that overlook the museum's main entrance on the second floor. The two works, entitled *Marjorie Looks at Marianne* and *Marianne Looks at Marjorie*, face each other across MCA Chicago's dramatic foyer. Lerma is interested, figuratively, in ideas of "real estate" in this context and the spatial relationships among the array of people involved with any institution (whether it be art or banking). He has explained:

Portraiture has traditionally been a way of depicting status. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, for instance, it was meant to be seen only by a few people in someone's home or manor, obviously way before the mass dissemination

¹ Lerma attributes much of his early artistic development to studying with Michelle Grabner and T. L. Sollen at UW-Madison. According to him, their different approaches to painting made them the perfect "art parents." José Lerma, personal communication with author, February 2, 2013. All subsequent statements by the artist are from this conversation.



of images we know today. The pictures weren't about faithful likeness either. The portraits were idealized, even theatrical. When you looked at one you couldn't penetrate the picture plane. They were sort of intended to be seen from a certain distance, a certain reverence. They were instruments. Images serve that function.

Comparing the social history of portraiture with the economy of images we are all too familiar with today illuminates certain paradoxes that play out in this show. His thinking about the role of the artist, patron, public, and site, along with his use of likeness to evoke a certain distance between the viewer and work—developed from his earlier interests in painting and site-specificity, which were evident in the work he was making at UW-Madison and in Puerto Rico after his graduation.

When Lerma moved back to Puerto Rico in 2001 after completing his MFA at UW-Madison, he found painting to be a stigmatized medium. He joined forces with a few artist friends who were organizing DIY-style public interventions all over the island.² Their projects tended to be situationist in spirit, ranging from the formal beauty of using cigarette butts to outline the cracks of an alley in Old San Juan, to painting an entire town green. Many were launched under the auspices of Michelle Marxuach, a local curator who oversaw the organization of M&M Proyectos, Fortaleza 302 (an artist studio and residency program), and a series of biennials (PR'00, PR'02, PR'04). Puerto Rico's small but internationally recognized (albeit briefly) art boom coincided with

² Among these artists were Chemi Rosado Seijo (b. 1973), Jesús "Bubu" Negrón (b. 1975) and Allora & Calzadilla (b. 1974, b. 1971).

José Lerma and Hector Madera
The Countess, 2012
Photo backdrop paper and glue
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy of the artist



the rise of global biennial culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s as well as Nicolas Bourriaud's then-popular notion of relational aesthetics.

In this context and in response to the long tradition of landscape painting in Puerto Rico, Lerma constructed one of his first major works commemorating a type of failure or tragedy. As part of PR'02, the artist constructed *Untitled (the gallery)* a 16-by-32-by-8 foot, portable white cube gallery out of foam blocks, and installed it at sites that were of personal significance to him. Creating a pun on landscape painting and "post-studio" practice, he literally placed an interpretive frame around part of the landscape. On the first day of the work's presentation at the biennial, Lerma wore a T-shirt with the address and telephone number of Francisco Oller (1833–1917), the most important Puerto Rican painter of the nineteenth century.³ One of the sites where Lerma chose to insert his gallery was a monument commemorating the island's first hot-air balloon, which crashed and burned on its first flight, killing its pilot. He also chose the site because it was behind his father's former office building. His father was a successful doctor who left medicine to pursue a string of businesses and died a couple of years prior to this piece. In reference to the memorial, Lerma explains: "It was a perfect metaphor for my dad's story. In my work, all of my characters have essentially been versions of my father in one way or another."

Unfortunate mistakes, especially ones committed by those who are or were successful, are recurring themes for the artist. For example, in his exhibition at the MCA, he presents a new parachute painting (of a spliced portrait of a middle-aged man in a suit) and

³ The number belonged to Francisco Oller's distant relative, who was listed in the 2002 San Juan metro area telephone directory.

José Lerma *Parallellogram (after Tintoretto's Paradiso)*, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, keyboard with speakers and book
90 1/2 × 137 1/2 in. (229.9 × 349.3 cm)
Image courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

his gallery-size carpet "painting" of the founders and first presidents of the merged banks (Bank of Montréal and N. W. Harris & Co., the predecessor of Harris Bank) that now comprise BMO Harris Bank. Lerma's parachute painting refers to the 1981 *New Art Examiner* article "Harris Bank Facelift Raises Legal Questions." In 1977, Harris Bank commissioned a portrait of a former bank president from Chicago artist Martyl Langsdorf (American, 1917–2013). Initially well-received, Langsdorf's painting only became controversial when the bankers noticed that its colorful appearance made the other presidents' portraits look drab in comparison. According to the article, the artist's Harris Bank patrons asked her to "make the background more mellow," but she refused.⁴ Someone else made the requested changes, so that, as the author of the article, writes "not only had the background been sanded down and repainted a 'patent leather' black, but all marks of maturity and character in the face and hands had been crudely overpainted." The most poignant quote in the article comes from a banker who said, "What we wanted was a portrait, not a work of art." Lerma explores precisely such slippery distinctions in his work, and they inform his project at the MCA.

After spending more than a year in Puerto Rico, Lerma wanted to return to painting, but a painterly approach to the medium diverged from the direction of Fortaleza 302, and he was asked to leave the residency after the paintings he hid behind a curtain in his studio were discovered. He began dividing his time between New York and Chicago, where he admired the semi-grotesque, carefully crafted figurative paintings of the Hairy Who, as well as Tony Tasset's (American, b. 1960) puns on minimalist sculpture.

In 2003, his first Chicago exhibition—a two-person show with Scott Roberts at the apartment gallery Seven Three Split—exemplified a similar sense of humor and marked a turning point in his practice. Lerma produced all of his works on site, using whatever he could find in the Pilsen gallery. In one work for example, the artist duct-taped a pathetic-looking sock soiled by his own semen to the gallery wall, anointing the tape with a single white paint stroke. The work refers to "Actionist art from Vienna and plenty of '60s body-fluid art, but it is really about being 14," Lerma wrote at the time. In a more understated and traditionally beautiful piece, *Paint Removed From Cabinet and Transferred to Wall*, Lerma took a found metal cabinet, removed the pale blue paint from a section of its surface, and applied the repurposed pigment in short, horizontal brush strokes over the entire gallery wall. He also chose to install the cabinet from which he had removed paint directly over the wall painting. It is important to note the artist's labored efforts to apply the paint from a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface. His impulse to strip away rather than add began with his MFA exhibition in 2002, in which he excavated layers of paint from the gallery walls, revealing paint colors from past MFA shows. As these works suggest, Lerma's work usually offers a mix of highbrow and lowbrow, at times with a dash of self-flagellation.

⁴ Donna and Stephen Toulmin, "Harris Bank Facelift Raises Legal Questions," *New Art Examiner*, October 1981, 12.

Shortly after his Seven Three Split show, a Brooklyn exhibition included Lerma's small, richly textured abstract portraits. These paintings explored a technique of dyeing industrial caulk with acrylic paint, creating an elegant matte surface, which the artist first experimented with as an MFA student. The figures in the paintings that Lerma was producing at the time pivot between figuration and abstraction and recall the cartoonlike elements of paintings by Philip Guston (American, b. Canada, 1913–1980) with a touch of the abject as found in the work of Sean Landers (American, b. 1962).

In 2005, after Lerma attended the CORE Residency Program at Houston's Glassell School of Art and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, he moved to New York. The recession of 2007–09 left him less tethered to market pressures and more inclined to experiment. Lerma's interests in long-forgotten historical figures, industrial materials, and quotidian objects influenced his painting, as one sees in his 2009 exhibition *El Pendejo* at Galerie Looock in Berlin, a presentation of carpet paintings inspired by King Charles II of Spain. The following year at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, he exhibited works that incorporated musical keyboards and retro-reflective fabrics, which anticipated his BMO Harris Bank: Chicago Works exhibition.

For the MCA, Lerma created new examples of his so-called keyboard paintings, which layer various types of marks over large-scale canvases, that often lean against the wall, propped up by electric keyboards. The characters in these epic works recall the cartoons of Agostino Carracci (Italian, 1557–1602), William Hogarth (English, 1697–1764), and Thomas Rowlandson (English, 1756–1827). Though the keyboard paintings come off as frenzied doodles—in part because Lerma's fine-point airbrush technique results in marks similar to those of a ballpoint pen—the artist's process is methodical and purposeful. The pressure of the canvas against the keyboard produces the note D minor, adding a soundtrack to the painting, and the depressed keyboard lets Lerma refer, tongue in cheek, to the metaphoric weight of painting's history on contemporary artists.

His historical research for this show began with an investigation of how the advent of the Salon in eighteenth-century Paris reshuffled the relationships among the public, artists, and patrons. The Salon was the first attempt at a populist exhibition, which brought a broad mix of classes together for the same leisure activity, and the public took the primary role in validating artists, superseding the once-direct relationship between artist and patron. The Salon's revival in 1737 was the responsibility of the French finance minister, who thought, according to art historian Thomas E. Crow, "the Salon, in his conception, would be like an annual public audit of artistic productivity."⁴ Through research at the Art Institute of Chicago, Lerma found an incomplete print of Pietro Antonio Martini's (1737–1797) iconic engraving *The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre in 1787* (1787). It depicts public onlookers without any background or context. As a study for one of the keyboard paintings anchoring his MCA show, Lerma digitally compressed most of the figures in the Martini engraving, overlapping them into a physically impossible

⁴ Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 5–6.



arrangement to refer to the *parterre*—the open space where half the audience stood near the front of the stage. As Crow observed, spectators in the *parterre* could interrupt and intervene in the performances, creating chaos, and their opinions could make or break a production's success. Lerma's keyboard painting humorously depicts the audience and simultaneously creates its own droning claque. A claque is a group of people hired to applaud (or heckle) a performer or public speaker. Lerma's works thus present an unruly mass of fantastical characters (i.e. the public and patrons) that reflect the complex relationship between artist, patron, public, and site.

Combining cheeky self-reflexiveness and rigorous research, Lerma's work not only considers painting's contemporary art history, but also mulls over the medium's relationship to history with a capital "H." Neither critical nor celebratory, Lerma's matter-of-fact approach to his subject matter exposes paradoxes ranging from the site and context of his projects to the medium of painting itself.

Kristin Korolowicz is the Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Pietro Antoni Martini
The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre in 1787, 1787
 Etching and engraving on ivory laid paper
 Image: 6 1/16 × 19 1/16 in. (15.4 × 48.5 cm); Plate: 15 1/16 × 20 9/16 in. (38.2 × 52.2 cm); Sheet: 15 3/4 × 22 in. (40 × 55.8 cm)
 The Art Institute of Chicago, the Amanda S. Johnson and Marion J. Livingston Endowment Fund, 2007.505

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Untitled, 2007
oil on linen
20 × 16 inches (40.64 × 50.80 cm)
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Photo: Jessica Eckert,
courtesy of the artist and
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

José Lerma received his MFA in Painting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has held residencies at the CORE Residency Program; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine. He has exhibited his work widely both nationally and internationally at Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, North Carolina; Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; Milwaukee Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece, among others. Lerma lives and works in Chicago and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Drawing and Painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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