

Larry Rivers inspires Elizabeth Langer's new exhibit

By Brooks Robards, MARTHA'S VINEYARD TIMES (July 10, 2019)



"End Of" Collage, 8 x 12 in. — Elizabeth Langer

“Larry Rivers: I Love You” is Elizabeth Langer’s new exhibit at the West Tisbury library. Her collages, paintings, and prints will be on display through July 31.

Langer, who divides her time between New York and West Tisbury, is showing a compelling new group of 27 works. “This is my 51st year on-Island,” the artist said in an interview last week. Her mother, the late Nikki Langer, was a full-time resident and a founder of the M.V. Chamber Music Society. “I have a deep connection to the Vineyard,” the artist says. Langer was in a summer commune organized by Peter

Simon in 1971, and also in part of the original Tom Maley drawing group in the mid-'70s.

“I love Larry Rivers paintings,” she says. After visiting an exhibit of the artist’s work in New York, she took home the postcard advertising the show. She cut it into different shapes and started moving them around on a vertical black mat board. After a year, she liked the arrangement she had, and glued it down to create “Larry Rivers Deja Vu.” Next came “Larry Rivers Anthology,” and “Larry Rivers: Game.”

“There was something about incorporating his paintings into my collages that inspired me to take risks,” she says. “And I have continued, from time to time, returning to my old friend Larry Rivers.”

Her abstract collages include “Tribeca Trilogy” and “Lost and Found Quartet.” In them, she combines colorful pieces of paper and grids. “I’m moving toward working on canvas for the collages, as opposed to paper, seeing how that works,” she says.

“I still love to do figures, and I move from one to the other,” she says. “It keeps me loose, it makes me free. It keeps me from getting too emotional.” When she feels she’s getting too involved or too tight, she steps back and turns to her collage table, taking out pieces of colorful paper. “I’m transitioning from two-dimensional to three-dimensional collage, which is called assemblage,” she adds. She’s used drywall joint tape, corrugated cardboard painted white, and debris from the construction of her studio, among other things. “Basically, I’m a bag lady,” she says. “It’s so hard to face a blank canvas.” She also likes to incorporate words or music in her abstract pieces.

In one case, she ripped up an oil painting on paper to create a collage. She saw one piece in it that reminded her of a heart. The question was, how to create a heart that looked fresh and new and interesting, but not sentimental. “I tore off a white packing paper strip for the right side. The left side didn’t look complete, so I painted another packing strip orange to complete the shape of the heart.” The result is “Ahava,” which is the Hebrew word for heart or love.

Elements of the abstraction Langer uses in her collages often show up in her representational work. One example appears in “Pleasures of Her Place,” which was inspired by a work Langer had done long ago, a frequent pattern for the artist. “I was thinking of ‘Lida I’ [another figurative work in mixed media],” she says. Using acrylic, she incorporated paper toweling for texture. Langer started “Striped Robe” 20 years ago. She brought this oil painting with her when she moved from Washington, D.C., to New York, working on different iterations of the stripes.

“Russell the Emperor,” an acrylic and pastel of an 86-year-old acrobat, offers an example of another piece the artist began years ago. “I wasn’t happy with it,” she says. “I unframed it and worked on it, and got it where I liked it.”

The vibrantly colored ink and pastel “And She Persisted” began as a brush and ink work at Featherstone Center for the Arts several years ago. “It was on my pad,” she says. “You can’t erase India Ink, but you can draw over it with a soft pastel stick, which is highly saturated.” A throwaway piece often gives her freedom because, she says, “I couldn’t mess it up more than already.” If not, she can toss it in the trash across the room. “I have a pretty good aim,” she says.