

**THE ARTIST'S I**

BY MICHAEL NEWBERRY

# Jeff Larson's Radical Perceptions

*Photos courtesy of Jeff Larson and Jeff Frey*



The easy integration of natural-looking people and outdoor scenes is one of the hardest-won achievements in the history of art. Lurking in the air are irascible art obstacles: technical demons ready to sabotage the artist at every swipe of the brush.

Jeffrey T. Larson glides past these devilish difficulties as if his only problem were selecting the next image for his creamy, rich palette. And his scope is large: Larson paints still lifes, landscapes, portraits, and figures. Here, I'll focus on two of his figure series—one whose theme I think of as “sheets” and the other as “the river.”

## Light and Color

A special attribute of Larson is his unbridled play with all kinds of reflected or refracted light, and with cast shadow. In *Color of Daylight*, the peach-colored sheet might appear simply to be a gathering of beautiful colors, but in truth it is very complex—with every color being an attribute of refracted, reflected, or filtered light. The cool violet fold, which the arrow is pointing to in the detailed view, is picking up the refracted light from the woman's white dress. The orange stripe marks the cast shadow from the sheet behind. Above that boundary is sunlight filtered through the double layers of the peach sheet. But the bright gold light under the woman's arm is a single layer of peach sheet, which is therefore twice as bright. These areas are like the light filtered through stained-glass windows.

Where does all this immediacy of light and color come from? Larson loves the early morning light, and his way is simply to take his studio outside and paint directly from observation for about ninety minutes each morning. *Light, easel, action!* And he is off breathing, feeling the moment, and sensing the energy of the light, wind, color, and mood all around him. With lightning-quick decisions, without hesitation, he attacks the canvas. His name for this is “Game day!”

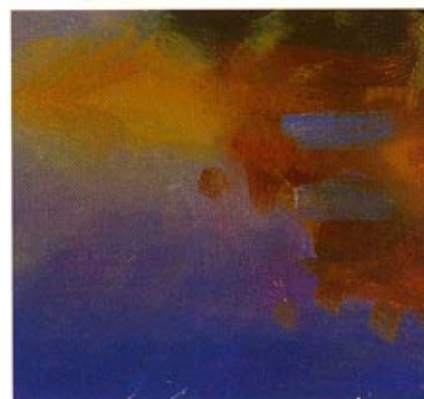
Backing up his skill are years of classical training at the Atelier Lack, an artists' workshop for drawing and painting established by Richard Lack (1928–). Lack was one of very few artists who stood proudly against the twentieth century's embrace of the nonobjective art of no light, no form, no subject matter. His method was to teach the demanding skills that are essential to representational art, and so Larson's education began with his painstakingly drawing inanimate, plaster-cast busts. Then he went on to draw still-life work, graduating through the courses until he was painting live models in oil color.

A profound view of art that Larson learned from Lack was the significance of fresh color combinations, as espoused by the American and French Impressionists—Monet being one of Larson's important early influences. My eye (with forty years of painting experience behind it) senses immediately that Larson's colors come from his direct observation of life, not from a hypothetical, in-studio construct. Let me see if I can help you discern this as we look at *River Rock*.

In the studio, without observing colors from life, it is difficult to place bold colors next to one another without the combinations' seeming artificial. However, look at the more-detailed views from the lower-right corner of the painting, and see how Larson pairs golden orange, rich browns, purples, and intense blues. Note that there is nothing jarring about the color combinations. They give off the natural, harmonious feel that is the result of direct observation. Notice the peach-pink highlight on the painting's main rock, and observe that Larson plays with orange, green, blue—but again, with no discordant note.

Another thing that plagues an artist not working from life is that it is very difficult to vary the colors of things, such as gray rocks. But every rock in this painting is made up of differing colors. It excites the eye by never letting it get bored through repetition.

Below: The cool violet fold, which the arrow is pointing to in the detailed view, is picking up the refracted light from the woman's white dress. The orange stripe marks the cast shadow from the sheet behind. Above that boundary is sunlight filtered through the double layers of the peach sheet. But the bright gold light under the woman's arm is a single layer of peach sheet, which is therefore twice as bright.



Above: See how Larson pairs golden orange, rich browns, purples, and intense blues. Note that there is nothing jarring about the color combinations. They give off the natural, harmonious feel that is the result of direct observation. Below: Notice the peach-pink highlight on the painting's main rock, and observe that Larson plays with orange, green, blue—but again, with no discordant note.





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## Abstraction, Détail, and Symbolism

Larson creates bold, abstracted compositions, yet effortlessly merges his realistic subjects and their surroundings. This marks him historically as an artist coming after the influence of the abstract modernists. Far from doing abstraction for its own sake, however, Larson believes in cutting out all nonessential elements until he arrives at the essence of the overall image. "There must be something abstract to a composition—like music, or like seeing something at the end of a corridor—that pulls you into it," he explained to me. "The fine details, like those of a beautiful woman's face, come afterwards; they are the icing on the cake."

One of the most enjoyable things to do while looking at art is to see if there are any symbolic connotations in it. For instance, *Over the Line* merges the abstract composition of the three clothes lines with a few metaphors: communicating over the line, as well as between the lines. But there is also a nice spirit to it. Instead of communicating over the telephone, a neighbor has dropped by to have a real chat.

Freud said that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but looking for symbolism can be one of many ways to develop your eye and get more out of a painting. I find *Rose Print* loaded with possible erotic symbols: the masculine, bold, blood-red sheet in the foreground, and the feminine, delicate, luminescent, rose-pattern sheet (these are bed sheets, of course). Note the two horizontal, parallel clothes lines: Horizontals tend to give a calming feeling to a visual image, and the parallels are indicative that the two lines, the two people, see eye to eye. We might even imagine that the delicate shape of the woman's cast shadow is unclothed. Yet her body is screened, as if to ask gently for privacy. And, of course, the clothes pins. I find this painting to be one of the most beautiful romantic works I have ever seen.

It doesn't really matter if the artist did all this intentionally or not, but I

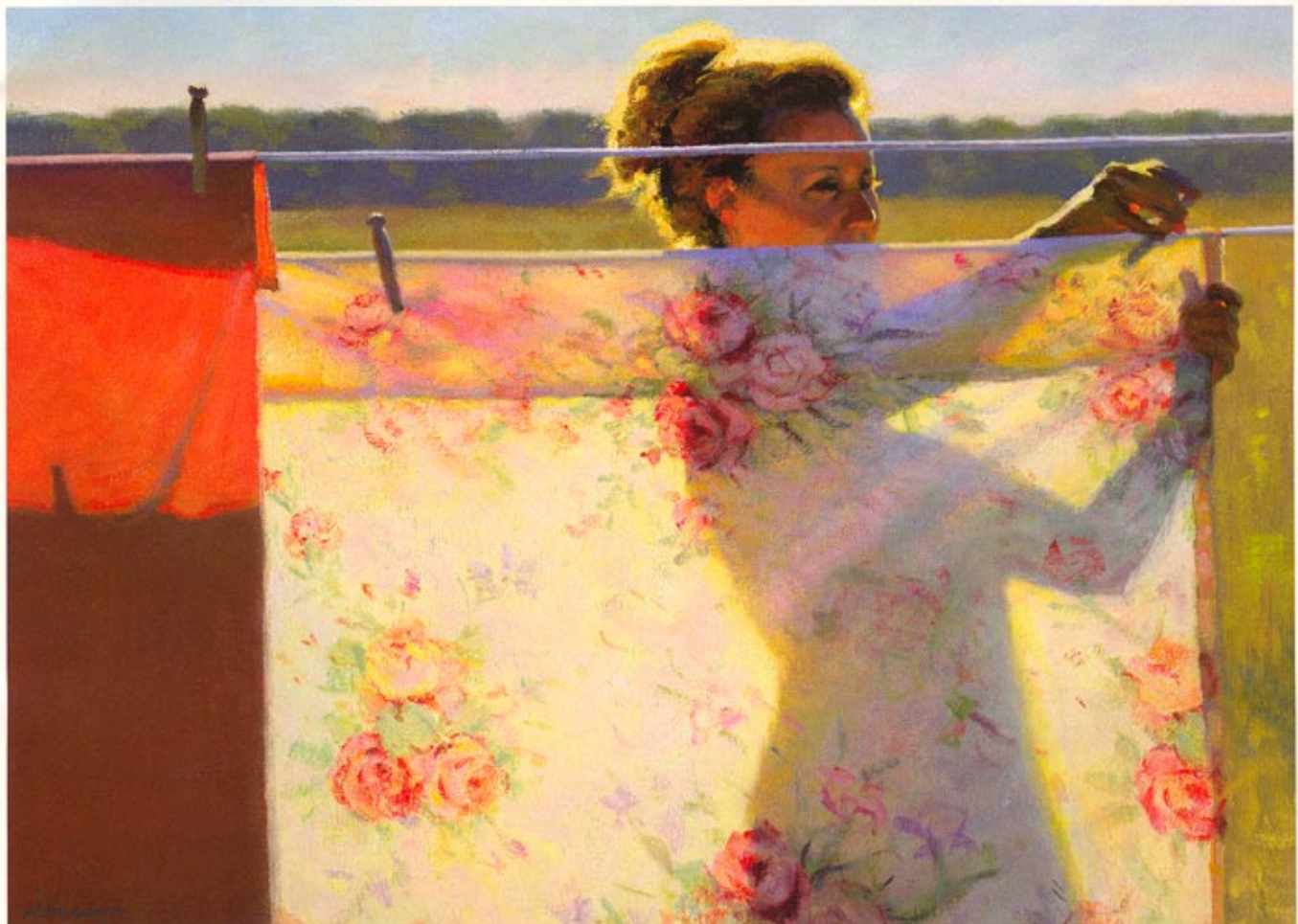
did get you to look at the painting more closely, to contemplate the colors, shapes, objects, and their possible meanings. And I am fairly certain that the artist would be delighted if someone was looking at his work with this sort of care, time, and thought.

### Life As an Artist Sees It

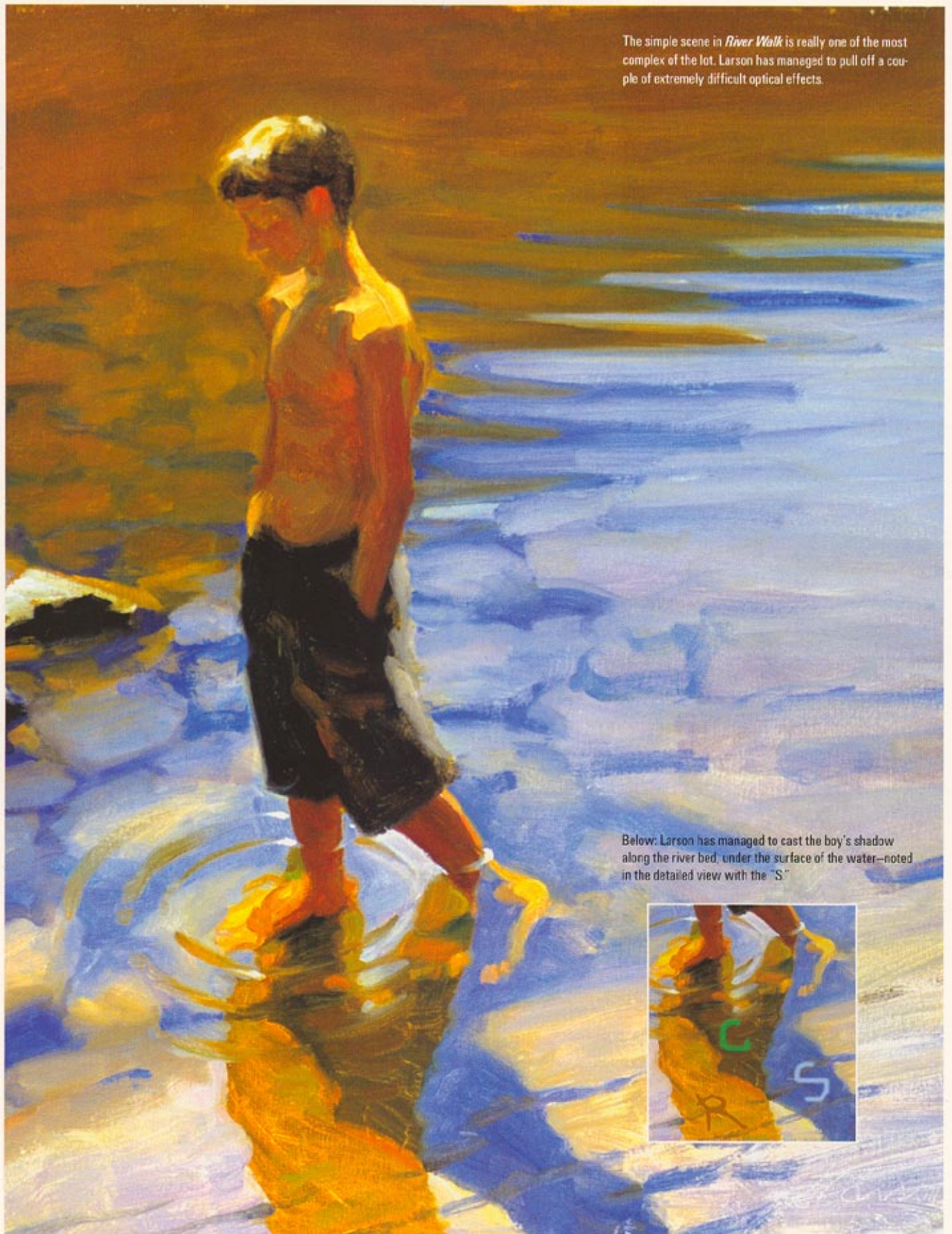
The simple scene in *River Walk* is really one of the most complex of the lot. Larson has managed to pull off a couple of extremely difficult optical effects. The boy's ankles and feet are clearly submerged in the water. We can see the rocky river bed through the surface of the water, yet we can still sense that there is a surface to the water. But the most intriguing thing I would like to share with you is that Larson has managed to cast the boy's shadow along



Above: *Over the Line* merges the abstract composition of the three clothes lines with a few metaphors: communicating over the line, as well as between the lines. But there is also a nice spirit to it. Instead of communicating over the telephone, a neighbor has dropped by to have a real chat.



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Below: Larson has managed to cast the boy's shadow along the river bed, under the surface of the water—noted in the detailed view with the "S."



the river bed, under the surface of the water—noted in the detailed view with the “S.” Then, in a warm, orange-brown color, he has painted the reflection of the boy on the surface of the water, indicated by an “R.” The “C” marks where the cast shadow and reflection overlap and merge. Amazing stuff.

**I**t would be misleading to think of Jeff Larson’s subject matter as lightweight. In our postmodern world, so many people elaborate grandiosely on what they are against, but so few inspire us with what they are *for*. Through his works, Larson shows us a world worth protecting from terrorism, cynicism, and senseless anger. “Having kids has helped me hold special moments—like playing patty-cake with my daughter,” he told me. “She may have only been four years old, but then it seems that only weeks before, she was two. We don’t need to be in church to experience God; we can experience that and wonderful moments in simple things all around us.”

Perhaps sometime this summer, on a lazy day by the seashore, you can spend a few hours looking at the differences of the reflections and the cast shadows of piers, docks, boats, or children playing. When the day is over, you will know that you did not merely look at life, but that you really *saw* it. That is what it means to have an “artist’s I.”

*You can contact Jeff Larson through his website:* [www.jeffreylarson.com](http://www.jeffreylarson.com)

*Recent Jeff Larson shows:* Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, NYC, March 6–30, 2008; [www.eegallery.com](http://www.eegallery.com)

*Upcoming:* Tree’s Place, Orleans, Massachusetts, July 26–31, 2008; [www.treesplace.com](http://www.treesplace.com)

