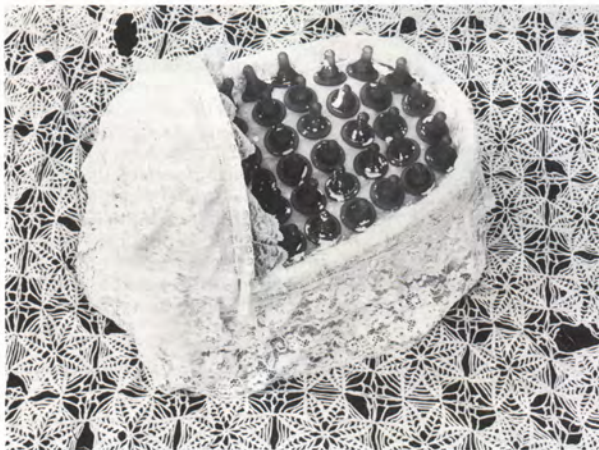


Elaine Langerman, *2 Acrobatic Houses*, 8" x 25" x 9 1/2" acrylic and wood, 11/24/80.

ELAINE LANGERMAN HOUSES

SUZANNE M. SINGLETARY



Elaine Langerman, *The Great Mother*, 12 1/2" x 18" x 12 1/2" mixed mediums, 2/6/78.

Elaine Langerman is represented by the Sebastian-Moore Gallery in Denver where she will be exhibiting in December, 1982.

Elaine Langerman's art has a look of playful innocence that is both appealing and deceptive. The simple style and bright color of these tiny "houses" recall the toys of childhood, just as the fantastic nature of their little dramas suggests favorite bedtime tales. Yet, alongside the amicable, often humorous impact made by these pieces are other, decidedly less comfortable, aspects. Like childhood itself, Langerman's works are double-edged. In them, fairy tales mix easily with nightmares, while their truth is a rich blend of both.

Langerman's career can be divided into neat and seemingly dissonant phases. During 1977-79, the artist explored the myths and realities of motherhood in sculpture that aimed to shock. *Box Lunch*, for example, is a child's lunchbox replete with eating utensils. "Lunch" in this case consists of the dismembered body parts of a doll whose pallid whiteness emerges from its styrofoam-filled cradle. The image is a grotesque reversal of the nurturing role of motherhood, with the mother a carnivorous menace, capable of administering both life and death. Feeding is the subject of another work, aptly entitled *The Great Mother*, in which numerous baby-bottle nipples protrude from the interior of a lace-covered bassinet. In this work, mother and baby seem to fuse and it is unclear exactly who is feeding whom. The first use of a fairy tale is *Rapunzel*. Hanging from the wall are bags of sewn, stuffed fabric that are weighted to resemble heavy, pendulous breasts. Rapunzel's famous locks are transformed into a cumbersome burden. Woman as beautiful, bountiful mother is trapped in her "house" tower, at once available and beyond reach.

Blatantly surrealist in origin, these works have clearly fem-



Elaine Langerman, *Sleeping Beauty*, $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times $10\frac{3}{8}$ " \times $10\frac{3}{8}$ " (each board) acrylic, celastic, wood, 2/2/82.

Color photos: Javan Bayer.

Elaine Langerman, *House on a Pole*, $37\frac{1}{4}$ " \times $11\frac{3}{8}$ " \times $11\frac{1}{4}$ "
acrylic, modeling paste, wood, 7/30/80.

inist overtones, conceptually related to much work done by women in the '70s. For Langerman, these self-conscious experiments introduced what was to become a persistent theme—the contradictory, often ambivalent, nature of relationships.

Then, reacting against the raw emotionalism of these pieces, Langerman retreated in favor of an abstract style almost Minimalist in its severity. Largely monochromatic, these works emphasized flatness and exploited the possibilities of their handmade paper support. The works are called "envelopes" or "packets," which suggests a link to the visible world of objects. Some of these "packets" are shown partly open, revealing hidden layers, while others are tightly closed and secured with string. A tantalizing play is provoked between what is seen and what is not seen, but merely implied. The resultant tension contributes to an irresistible urge to open the "envelope" and find the elusive message lodged within.

Later series explored the processes of folding and unfolding by presenting "envelopes" at various stages. These series signalled the beginning of a narrative interest, and a concern with transformations which will reappear later.

At this time, color became a key element. Muted whites, greys, and blacks gave way to highly-saturated hues and vibrant, multicolored stripes. Langerman carefully selected the exact chroma and value of each color and the same red, blue, yellow or green could be seen repeatedly in her *oeuvre*. Unmixed and intense, these hues seem to convey the essence of each color and to read as a kind of archetype. By their repetitive usage, they suggest crayons used by a child who chooses the same color from the same box of the brand used by all children.

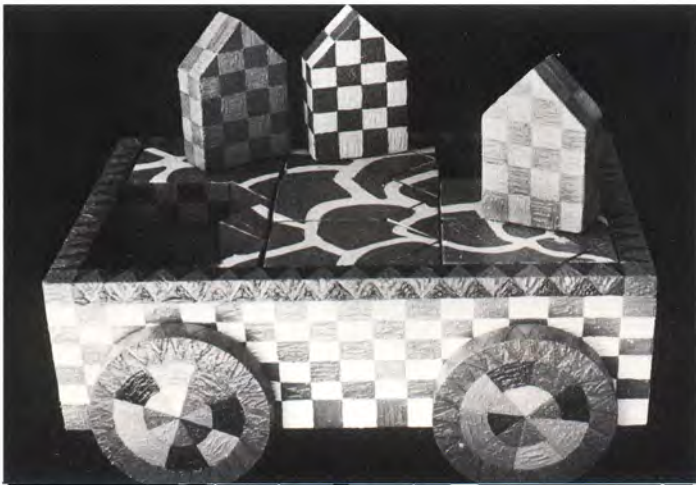




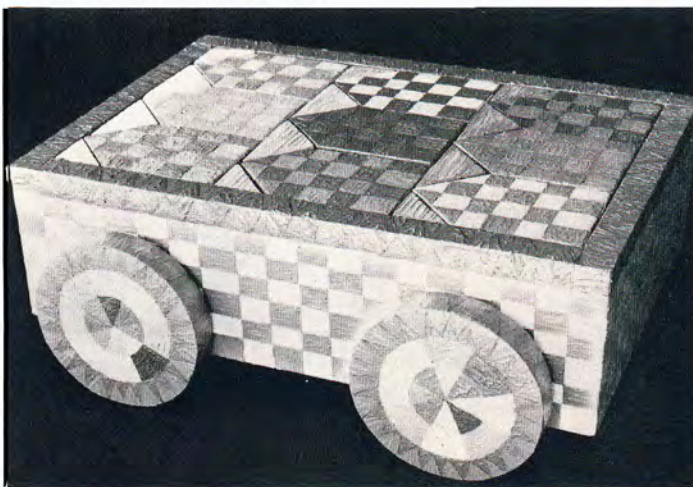
Elaine Langerman, *Ilandiskippy*, 3¼" x 24" x 24" mixed mediums, 10/30/81.

The "house" motif appears in early 1980, marking the beginning of Langerman's mature style. The image becomes a convenient divining rod with which to search the past and discover long-concealed emotions. Each little house is alive. It is tempting to view the house as expressing various aspects of the self, as a metaphor for the child contained inside each adult.

The piece entitled *Fragmented House* is dated February 6,



Elaine Langerman, *Houses, Sky and Road on Wheels* (two views), 5½" x 14¾" x 11¾" acrylic, rhoplex, wood, 3/31/81.



1980, to be followed by *Red House* of February 12th and *Blue House* of February 13th. (Langerman dates each piece to the day giving the progression a diaristic quality.) All are painted on handmade paper in a style that is simple, seemingly naive. As its title suggests, *Fragmented House* presents Cubist-derived facets suggesting a state of disintegration or a loss of self. *Red House* finds a fire-engine colored house tentatively emerging from its red ground. It is very much alone in its efforts to separate from the larger, engulfing red. Similarly, *Blue House* attempts to leave its surrounding blue field, but its mood is somber and pessimistic.

Houses Book (February 19, 1980) contains thick sheets of pearl-white paper. On each can be perceived a faintly-painted, pastel house. These "pages" have been safely tucked within an envelope-like "book" which, Langerman explains, holds "all the houses I have lived in." Like memory, the book is at times closed and unreadable, and at other times, open to retrieve lost glimpses of some distant past. This "book," a compendium of the former selves and different ages that one carries within, is another play on seeing and not seeing, remembering and forgetting.

House Series (April, 1980) consists of 21 paintings on 12" x 12" plywood panels from which 3-D "house" cubes project. The reliefs are smothered with heavy paint whose texture provides a further dimension. The houses are shown alone or in groups, and are typically very small, as if viewed from afar. There are no doors or windows, no means of entry, and no interaction among them. Each house is shut off and alienated.

Langerman's first full-fledged narrative, *The Story of the Little Red House* (July 20, 1980) has a whimsical quality that in no way undermines its powerful impact. Akin to Aesop's fables or children's literature, this charming fiction uses fantasy to unveil the complexities of human relationships. The plot unfolds in seven 5"-square paintings that read from left to right, like a medieval manuscript or a comic strip. The saga begins with the protagonist self-contained and detached from the world of other houses. Next, the house ventures out to take a walk and, though still solitary, begins to think about houses that he sees. In the next panel, the hero is seen lonely and dejected against a brooding night sky with yellow stars. Clearly, his outer shell is cracking. Finally the red house meets his dream house and bursts into a rainbow of curving vertical stripes, expressing feelings of vulnerability and confusion. The last panel finds the two houses together in what looks to be a happy ending. But is it? The two are depicted overlapping, seeming to merge into each other. Does this indicate mutual interdependence or a lifetime glued to excess baggage, or both? Something has been lost, but what exactly has been gained?

Langerman began the freestanding pieces—she calls them "3-D paintings"—in late July, 1980. In many ways, *The Story of the Little Red House* looks forward to themes that will be repeatedly explored: houses alone, houses together, and houses on the move.

The most poignant works depict solitary houses. An example is *Red House Alone* (October 23, 1980) in which a single house sits forlornly atop a bright blue box. In *House with Removable Head* (June 18, 1981), a flamboyantly-striped house occupies the center of a vast and empty striped base which guards the house's solitude. No doors or windows break its facade, though the roof can be lifted to reveal the interior, suggesting that to open oneself, one must literally have a "hole in the head" or have "lost one's head."

Often houses are placed in precarious positions that, while humorous, intensify their isolation. *House Above the Clouds* (July 26, 1980), consists of a rectangular panel attached vertically to a horizontal platform. Painted on the front and back is a sea-green lawn, perfect blue sky, and fluffy white clouds. A winding pathway curves upwards, directing attention to the suspended house. This charming piece is a play on the expression, "head in the clouds," denoting the happy, contented

dreamer. But the phrase also suggests an escapist, one who is unable to make contact or become actively involved. Separate and alone, the house defies gravity. Likewise, *House on a Pole* (July 30, 1980) recalls the perverse flagpole sitting stunt once popular in this country. A tiny house balances precariously on a tall, barbershop striped pole. A crisis must have prompted such a bizarre retreat to a position of obvious danger.

When houses are depicted together, the situation is hardly improved. *Large and Small House* (December 4, 1980) contrasts two houses whose dimensions might signify different ages and, in a subtle way, continue the earlier investigation of the mother/child diad. The large blue house is planted firmly on the ground behind a picket fence, the stereotype of home and hearth. At a respectable distance is the small house, teetering on top of a pole. Risky though it is, this position seems preferable to being fenced in too close to the large house. An elastic withdrawal into isolation seems an attempt to separate from suffocating relationships.

The problem of excessive closeness is clearly stated in *Four House Cluster* (October 15, 1980). Four differently-colored houses interlock on a horizontal plank like sets of Siamese twins. Their proximity is smothering. There is no air to breathe and no room to move. Relationships, it seems, are engulfing and require relinquishing any prospect of change or growth.

The circus provides the imagery for *Two Aerobic Houses* (November 24, 1980) who balance themselves upon a blue high-wire while a fallen ladder lies frustratingly out of reach. The ensemble presents a surreal world that is close in feeling to Sartre's *No Exit*, a frozen hell from which escape is prohibited.

Fictive or actual movement is incorporated into several works, presenting a striking alternative to the enforced immobility of others. In *Rocking Houses* (September 8, 1980) two houses share the flat top of a half-circle or "rocker" which, though moving, keeps them snugly in the same place. *House on Wheels* (September 17, 1980) can propel itself in any direction, but, rather than looking jubilant, the house is a melancholy blue. *House Journey* (May 4, 1981) enacts an imaginary rite-of-passage in which the house seeks its fortune in the big world. By chronicling these travels, the piece records the process of transformation.

This becomes the subject of a pivotal piece entitled *Landiskippy* (October 31, 1981), a Joycean term from *Finnegans Wake* that means "on land, on sea." The artist beautifully represents this limbo state by an "island" of red brick, adrift on a wavy sea, and populated by minute houses on poles. The houses are alone on the poles, together on the island, and perpetually on the move in bumpy water. Everything seems in a state of flux and turmoil.

Landiskippy summarizes Langerman's earlier concerns and marks a shift of emphasis. Newer pieces allow the viewer to peek inside houses through the addition of symbolic windows. *Sleeping Beauty* (February 2, 1982) presents four houses, each positioned on a separate base and expressive of a particular mood. One house is overwhelmed by a multitude of variegated ribbons adorning its surface. Fish swim on the exterior of another house, implying that it has submerged itself into a private world of dreams. A third house is blanketed with thick green foliage and succulent flowers that frame a sightless window. Finally, an exuberant house wears a golden, star-studded crown and pink wings. Windows abound on both the house and its base. Might Sleeping Beauty awaken at last?

From the late 19th century on, artists have sought a style that evokes the past: Gauguin's revitalization of the medieval woodcut, the stick figures of Paul Klee, Picasso's borrowings from Africa, Matisse's use of archaic Greek form—all speak to the modern need to return to origins. The past, of course, is contained primarily within ourselves. Elaine Langerman's art reaches out to that interiorized past with a child's spirit of serious play. In the process, it rehearses a key task of childhood—separating from the past and moving into the future. □