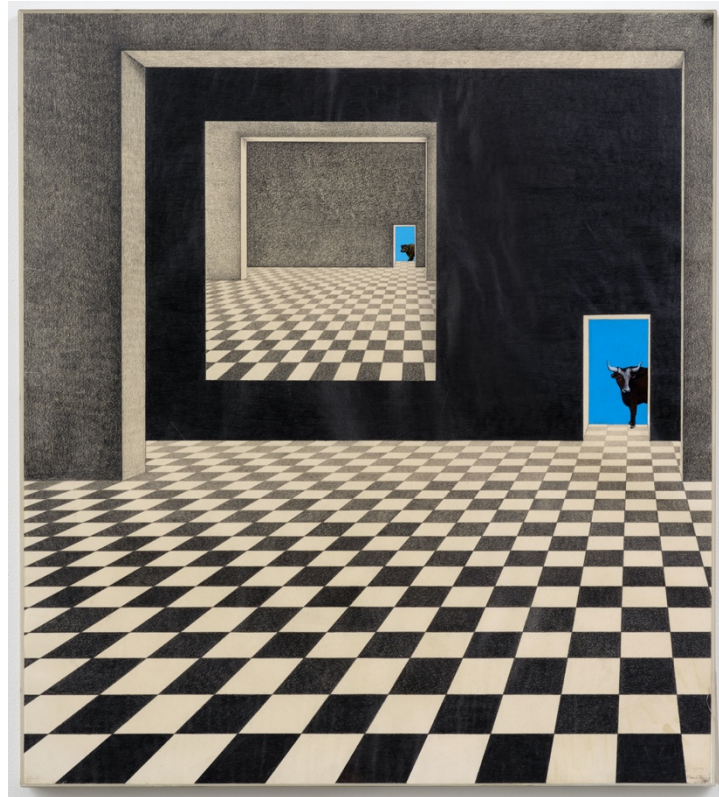


ARTFORUM



Marina Stern, *Bull and Bear*, 1967, pencil and acrylic on paper, 25 × 22 1/4"

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Marina Stern

Bel Ami/CW American Modernism

By Claudia Ross ☒

Heterodox painters such as Marina Stern (1928–2017) often leave long trails of ill-fitting labels in their wake. In a *New York Herald Tribune* review of Stern's 1965 exhibition at Manhattan's Amel Gallery, her work was dubbed "Op-surrealism." *Artnews*, also in 1965, called Stern's paintings "paraphysical" and "quirky works indeed." Another critic headlined his 1964 *Time* magazine review with the elusive pairing "Talkie Pop." More recently, in the printed ephemera that accompanies Bel Ami and CW American Modernism's joint exhibition "Luminary," the first retrospective of Stern's work since her death, the Italian-born artist is called "hyperreal," "Neo Immaculate," and simply "dynamic." This excessive taxonomy figures: Stern's paintings range from depictions of hypnotic, M. C. Escher-like interiors to banal tablescapes and sublime industrial vistas. At her most compelling, though, she reveals her delicate, wry magic precisely through the diversity of her subject matter.

Stern's eye-catching early work riffs on techniques popularized by Renaissance painters to create the appearance of depth on their flat canvases—though these naturalistic approaches often have the opposite effect in her paintings. *Bull and Bear*,

1967, displays conjoined rooms with vast checkerboard floors, their squares arranged to create the improbable illusion of multiple, diverging vanishing points, two of which end in open doorways that reveal the titular animals. In *Renaissance*, 1969, the female subject of Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1485, is depicted as though trapped inside an infinity mirror, her impeccably copied image repeated across a series of receding, identical alcoves. Stern's vein of appropriation feels both playful and reverential. Her rendition of this quintessentially postmodern style honors her predecessors while using their skillful approaches and images to uniquely dreamlike effects.

Citations of other styles and artists abound across Stern's oeuvre, but the later paintings sometimes strain to conjure the dreamlike quality and technical prowess of her earlier experimentations. *Jan and Josef*, 1997, a grid of six oil paintings, referenced Johannes Vermeer and Josef Albers by way of a depiction of a quiet domestic interior in one canvas and a facsimile of Albers's signature concentric squares in another. However, the work stumbles in its assertion of Stern's own skill, which is so prominent elsewhere. Two industrial landscapes (a building encased in scaffolding, a silver grain mill) appear uncomfortably cropped, a still life with a lemon and tube of paint is amateurishly rendered, and her cubic yellow abstraction appears thin compared to Albers's stark, confident canvases. Such artsy in-jokes aren't the stuff of true comedy, and Stern's are especially—frustratingly—subtle. In *Lotto #1*, 1991, a crumpled paper bag and spool of twine sits below a postcard of Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of a Gentleman in His Study*, ca. 1530, which displays a well-dressed man posing in front of an open book in a seaside office. Pasted just above a desk—presumably Stern's—the postcard stages a slyly humorous, gendered juxtaposition between Lotto's dramatic portrait of a stoic, scholarly aristocrat and Stern's humble portrayals of her own artistic practice.

In several of Stern's later still lifes, though, everyday objects regain a hallucinatory charge, infused with the Surrealist sensibility that defined her emerging career. A vase of vibrant bulbs in *Red Tulips*, 1987, appears as if suspended in midair, an illusion created by the dark, reflective surface the flowers rest upon. *Water Jar 1* and *Water Jar 2*, both 2003, display a gingham napkin, an orange, and a jar of water. The cloth snakes behind each of the jars as the clear liquid in the foreground dissolves the checkered pattern into a psychedelic swirl of abstract lines. These forays into an otherwise staid genre feel unstable in Stern's hands, each scene arrested at its hypnagogic peak.

“Pop accepts everything,” Stern said in the earlier-cited *Time* review. “I’m more of a satirist. I like to get a little dig in.” Her understated art-historical commentary can easily go unnoticed; allusions to Renaissance painting in Op art, for example, read more as odes than parodies. But Stern's surreal spaces and scenes still manage to cull uncanny sights from the most rigid of genres, employing a clever yet sincere approach to citation that eluded many of her postmodernist contemporaries. The artist's diverse practice received minimal support during her lifetime; she was represented by New York's Forum Gallery and was included in a few smaller museum shows, remaining on the fringes of the Manhattan art crowd. But her wide-ranging explorations may yet bear surprising fruit. Why be an artist, after all, unless a critic has to invent new labels for your work?