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Chris Larson: *The Residue of Labor*, ENGAGE Projects, Chicago, April 8–June 25, 2022

Upon entering Chris Larson's impressive exhibition, *The Residue of Labor*, one was immediately enveloped in the percussive din of sewing machines, their irregular rhythms projected from a grid of vintage speakers suspended within a standing wood frame. The speakers originally broadcast country music to some 500 employees who once worked in a now-defunct garment factory in Smithville, Tennessee, that produced clothing for such brands as Burberry and Ralph Lauren until production moved offshore during the 1990s. Today, they are among the many artifacts recovered from the abandoned factory then recast by Larson in this expansive show of 55 works, including photographs, videos, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and installations, that address the politics (and sometimes poetics) of labor through measurements of time.

Larson began his ongoing project of the same title in 2018 as part of a Guggenheim Fellowship through which he researched the history of the factory, once a central source of employment and driving economic engine for this small rural community. Over the course of a two-year period, the artist archived then dissembled the contents of the factory and rebuilt

parts of it in his studio in St. Paul, Minnesota. In her essay "The Geography of Labor," Laura Y. Liu reveals how globalization and "industrial restructuring [change] the form and function of cities and towns once organized around labor. ... The production economy continues to move offshore and what remains of it withers or hangs on as a last bit of industrial residue" (Liu 2011). Shunning mere esthetic representations of industrial ruin, the strength of Larson's project is the artist's deep engagement with the material conditions of the factory itself—from its textile remnants to its architecture to its deserted machinery—and with the residual traces of human labor that such objects bear.

The presentation of the central exhibition within a 10,000 square-foot empty warehouse on Chicago's near west side added another layer to this history of de-industrialization and its impact on local economies, rural and urban. (A smaller show of the artist's more two-dimensional works was on view at ENGAGE Project's storefront gallery.) At the same time and as the title suggests, *The Residue of Labor* made visible the intimate connections between workers, their labor, and industrial sites of production through

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Figure 1

Chris Larson, *Thread Room*, 2022. Mixed-media installation with found Ralph Lauren industrial garment thread, 96 × 120 × 288 in. Photo courtesy ENGAGE Projects, Chicago.

multiple series of found objects and fabricated works that together speak to community and place.

Several works belong to the project's *Recovered Object Series* (2019–22) and take the form of archeological assemblages in which the artist reconfigures the factory's repository of forgotten materials into large-scale sculptural installations. These include original bathroom doors and unaltered sewing machine tabletops arranged within freestanding wooden structures that wear the patina of use while emphasizing absence and voids. Hundreds of left-over spools of garment thread neatly line the walls of the exhibition's central installation *Thread Room* (2022)

(*Figure 1*), a large, enclosed chamber designed by the artist to emulate the basement setting of the original factory. The installation's low ceilings and dark interior give clues to the restrictive working conditions endured, while the regimented spools, grouped by color and displayed on long horizontal shelves, become stand-ins for the many workers whose livelihoods were lost when the factory closed and production moved to Honduras.

With these works, Larson positions himself as curator, gathering and assembling his artifactual materials into compelling spatial environments. Elsewhere, he assumes a kind of documentary role, as in the video

work 30 Sewing Machine Portraits (2019), a running sequence of close-up views of sewing machines that reveal the vestiges of human touch and toil. The artist adopts a more interventionist strategy in several works that address time and the physicality of garment production through walking, repetition and erasure, artistic devices Larson employs throughout his diverse practice. A suite of color photographs from the artist's *Factory Performance Series* (2018–19) (*Figure 2*) document several fiber installations the artist “performed” by walking with up to 12 miles of thread, connecting sewing machines to the interior architecture of the emptied factory. Devoid of the



Figure 2

Chris Larson, *12 Miles of Neon Yellow Factory Line Re-imagined*, 2018-2019, from the *Factory Performance* Series. Set of 3 photographs, 10.5 × 15.75 in. and 14 × 21 in. Edition of 5 plus 2 artist's proofs. Photo courtesy ENGAGE Projects, Chicago.

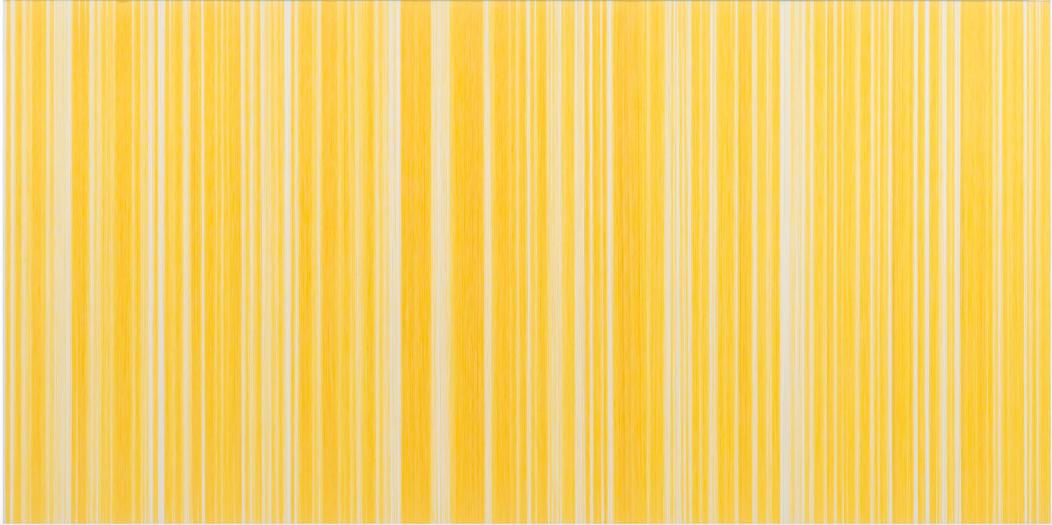


Figure 3

Chris Larson, *Sunlight*, 2021, from the *Thread Works* Series. Found Ralph Lauren industrial garment thread on canvas, 48 × 96 × 3 1/2 in. Photo courtesy ENGAGE Projects, Chicago.

artist yet suggestive of human presence, these tensile structures map the relationship between workers and the spaces of textile manufacturing as an interdependent network of social and economic relations. Rendered individually in red, pink, blue, white, and fluorescent yellow, Larson's linear webs recall Fred Sandback's minimalist, string-based sculptures, as well as Anne Wilson's site-specific thread installations, walking performances in which the artist, in collaboration with others, transforms her chosen sites into a sculptural loom by wrapping physical elements of each space with thread.

Two of the artist's wall-based series similarly explore the body at work, conflating skilled labor and artistic labor as related acts of endurance. For the 22 works that comprise the *Thread Works* Series (2020–22), Larson created a foot treadle-operated

machine to wrap miles of garment thread onto either white canvases or Ralph Lauren polo shirts used here as two-dimensional supports. The result is a succession of thin, vertical zips that transform his salvaged materials into vibrant, abstract paintings that reference Op Art and the Color Field School (Figure 3). Each work is titled by the color code identified on each thread spool—ranging from Sunlight to Deep Lilac to Bamboo Green, Mint, and Bermuda Sea—referencing the designer brand (again Ralph Lauren) for whom the Tennessee factory produced its garments.

The complex relationship of textiles to labor history is well known, as are the abuses of the apparel industry that creates a “sharp division between the ‘designer’ and the maker” (Sherlock 2002), the latter who remains invisible and whose labor is measured by pieces produced.

Piecework rewards outcome over quality and worker welfare stretching the limits of the body and time, a subject intimated in Larson's *Timecards* Series (2020–22) (Figure 4). As in the *Thread Works* Series, the artist renders these 12 works as nearly monochromatic “paintings,” stitching then layering the factory's discarded manila timecards onto flat wood backgrounds of varying scale. Using a rotary tool, the artist sands their surfaces erasing identity and detail, a physical and symbolic gesture that points to the alienating effects of mass production yet acknowledges the intervention of the artist's hand.

Explorations of the factory and the studio as related sites of production culminate in the video *Stillness of Labor* (2022), a meandering journey through Larson's Minnesota workspace, where he recreated 12 of the factory's rooms

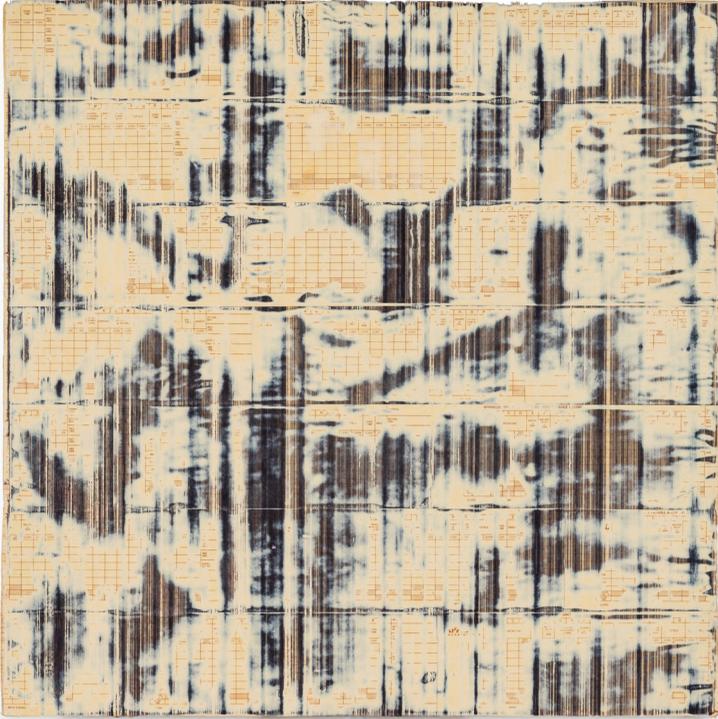


Figure 4

Chris Larson, *Timecards and Mulberry Wine #6*, 2021. Found factory timecards, Ralph Lauren industrial garment thread, 24 × 24 × 3 1/4 in. Photo courtesy ENGAGE Projects, Chicago.



Figure 5

Chris Larson, Still from *Stillness of Labor*, 2022. Video, run time: 9 minutes. Edition of 5 plus 2 artist's proofs (#3/5). Photo courtesy ENGAGE Projects, Chicago.

to scale. With a roaming lens that rotates and disorients the viewer (isolated figures and rooms sometimes appear upside down), the camera captures the original factory's intimate, confined spaces. Throughout, the artist's studio assistants are seen working—seated at sewing machines, organizing stacks of clothing, counting recovered inventory—doubling as garment workers themselves (Figure 5). In the final scene, the camera slowly leads to a room beyond the factory-studio setting completely blanketed in thick layers of milky white ice. At once a nod to Larson's previous work

Deep North (2008), whereby the artist recreated a Louisiana-style shotgun shack and similarly encased it in ice, *Stillness of Labor* presents a portrait of a once-thriving factory reimagined yet frozen in time.

Never nostalgic, Larson successfully merges art and archeology in a practice that is as performative as it is archival. When viewed within the context of today's global economy, with its rampant recession, broken supply chains and unparalleled corporate profit, *The Residue of Labor* offers a timely commentary that honors skilled labor and local production.

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