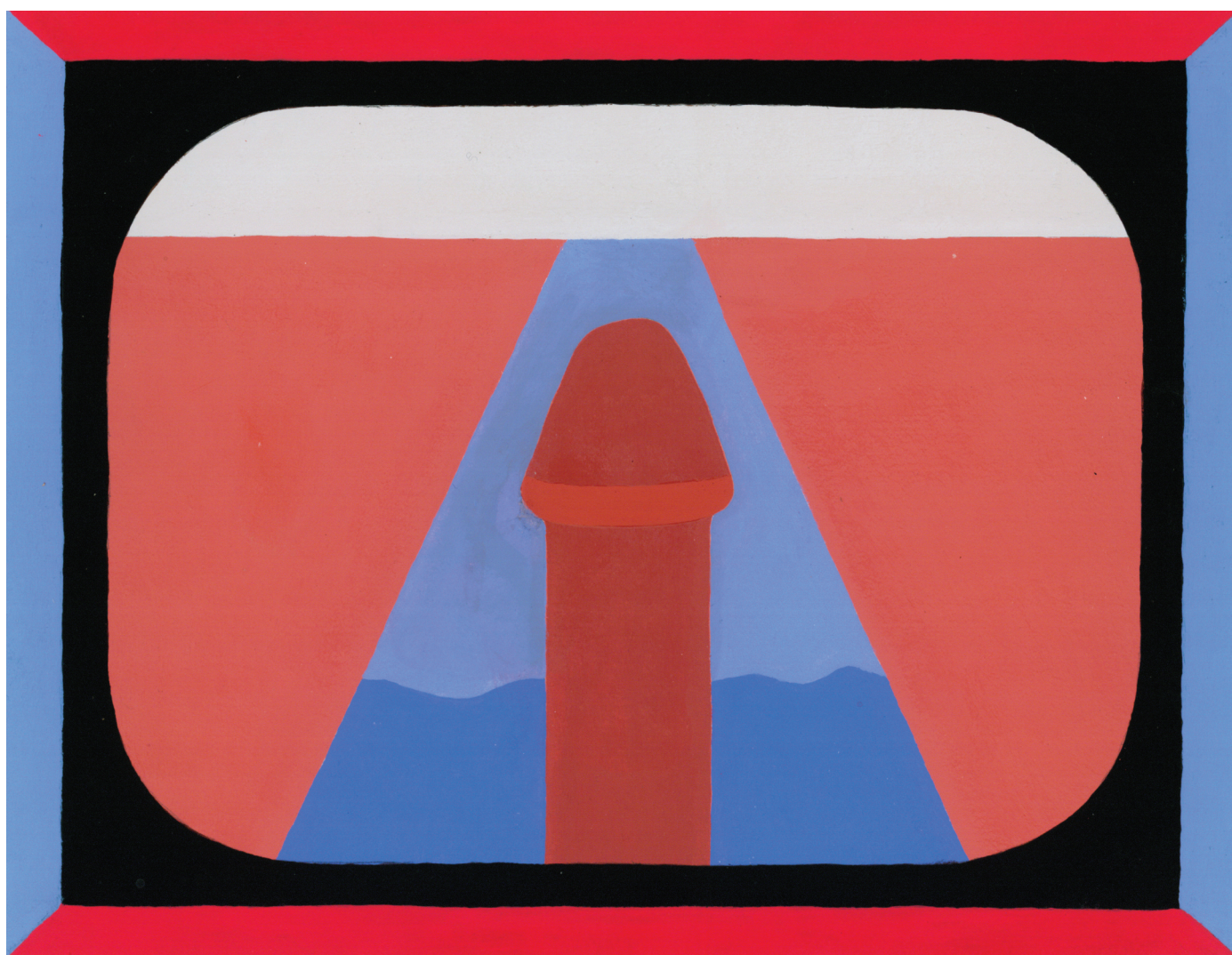


AN UNEXPECTED MODERNIST

Pensive and reclusive, the Seattle-based painter Larry John Palsson created sophisticated compositions that reflected the spirit of his times

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Untitled, n.d., acrylic on paper, 8.5 x 11 ins. / 21.6 x 27.9 cm

The world of *art brut* and outsider art tends to love its enigmas. Given the central role the presentation of artists' life stories has played both in the reception (in the media, by the art world and by the public) and the promotion of the work of many self-taught artists, what is known about a particular art-maker's background often helps establish an alluring air of myth and mystery surrounding whatever

paintings, drawings, sculptures or other creations he or she may have produced. This has been true even when some of the "facts" about an artist's biography have been sketchy at best.

Then there are the many anonymous artists whose works have appeared as compelling as anything any known art-maker with a well-documented history might have made. In some cases, like those of the American autodidact

Untitled, n.d.,
acrylic on cardboard from
Cheerios cereal box,
12.5 x 8.5 ins. /
31.7 x 21.6 cm



Judith Scott (1943–2005) or the contemporary New Zealander Susan Te Kahurangi King (born 1951), who either could not or did not talk, such artists did not offer insights into the meanings of their creations or their art-making intentions.

It is against such a backdrop of limited, ascertainable biographical data that, in recent years, the work of the American artist Larry John Palsson (1948–2010), who made boldly-coloured, abstract paintings, has come to light. Palsson spent his entire life in the city of Seattle, on the West Coast of the United States. An apparently ordinary boy in the neighbourhood in which he grew up, Palsson was, in fact, most likely autistic to some degree, and was described years later by area residents who had known his family in passing or who had observed him as an adult as a “harmless recluse” or as “mentally retarded” (an outmoded term that is now considered insensitive and is almost never heard).

An only child, Palsson was 15 years old when his father, Jon Arinbjorn Pálsson, an immigrant from Iceland who had worked as a baker, died. Larry, who became a heavy smoker, continued to reside with his mother until his own death from lung cancer; he loved cats, and his own cat also died of cancer, apparently from the second-hand smoke to which it had long been exposed. Palsson’s mother, Iowa-born Marjorie Sawyer Palsson, who was 22 years younger than her husband, outlived her son and died in 2012. (The accent mark in the Icelandic spelling of their surname had long since disappeared.)

A term paper titled “The Elements of Design”, which Palsson wrote when he was in the ninth grade, was found after his death. It was dated May 1965, which means that he was 17 when he produced it – an advanced age for that high school grade level, suggesting that he could have suffered from a learning disability that had held him back and forced him to repeat certain grade years. Also discovered among Palsson’s belongings after he died was a sole, undated notebook filled with doodles and assorted jottings, whose routine misspellings suggest that he was probably dyslexic as well. Reflecting behavioural or personality traits that are commonly associated with autism, in that plain, spiral-bound, grade-school notebook, Palsson wrote, “I don’t talk very much when I don’t have to.” He noted, “The pulls of the world sometimes isn’t very pleasing to the mind.”

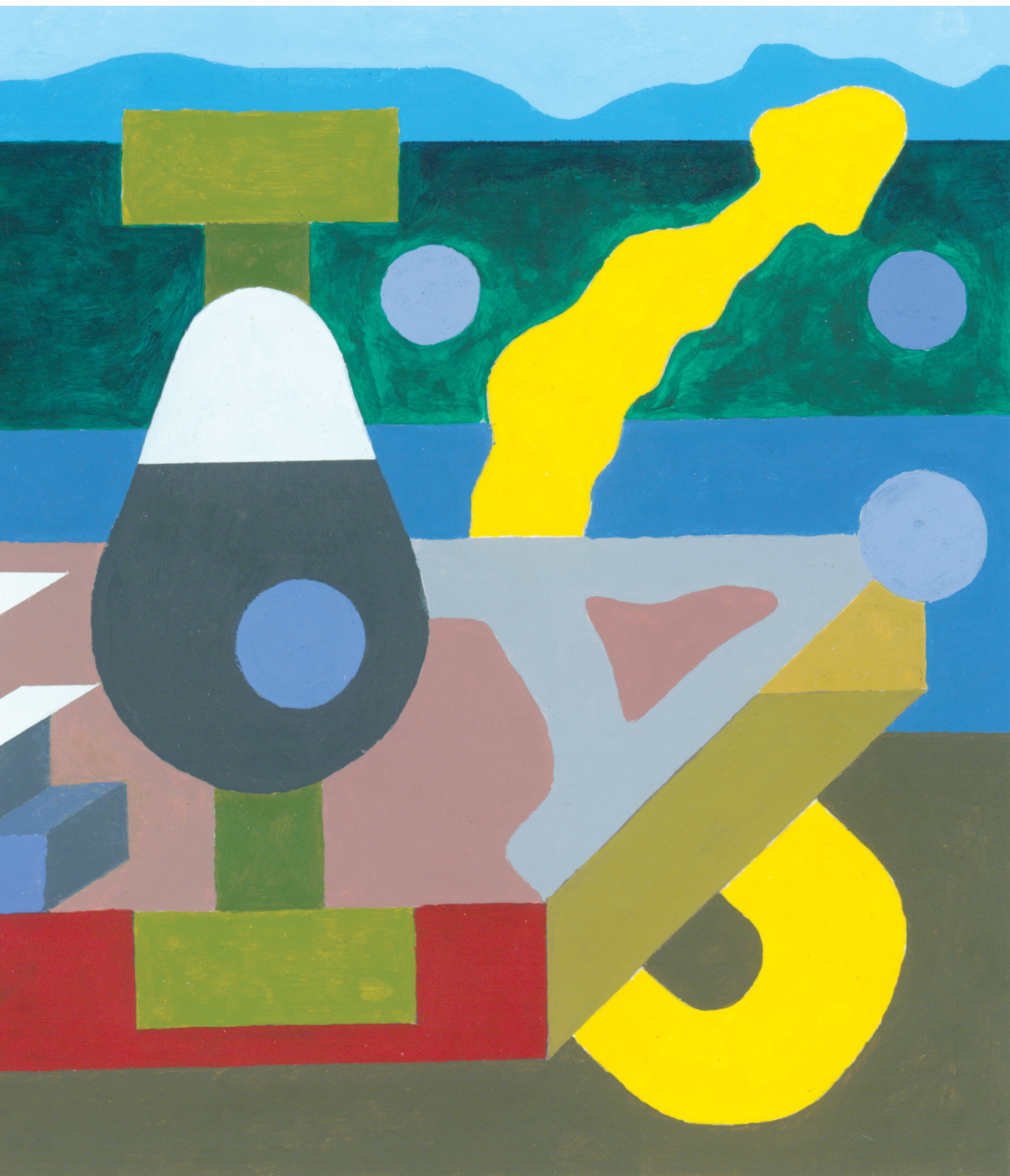
The notebook is filled with repeated lines of words, numbers and letters. Some of the letters are annotated with sharp or flat symbols for musical keys, suggesting that some of his lines of



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upper-case letters might be chord sequences. Palsson also wrote such quizzical statements as “No new music to really care about. Sounds as if the instruments need the presence of pink liquid” and “Your feet belong where you can see them.”

Because of his condition, which was never formally diagnosed, Palsson was never able to hold a job. He received government-issued

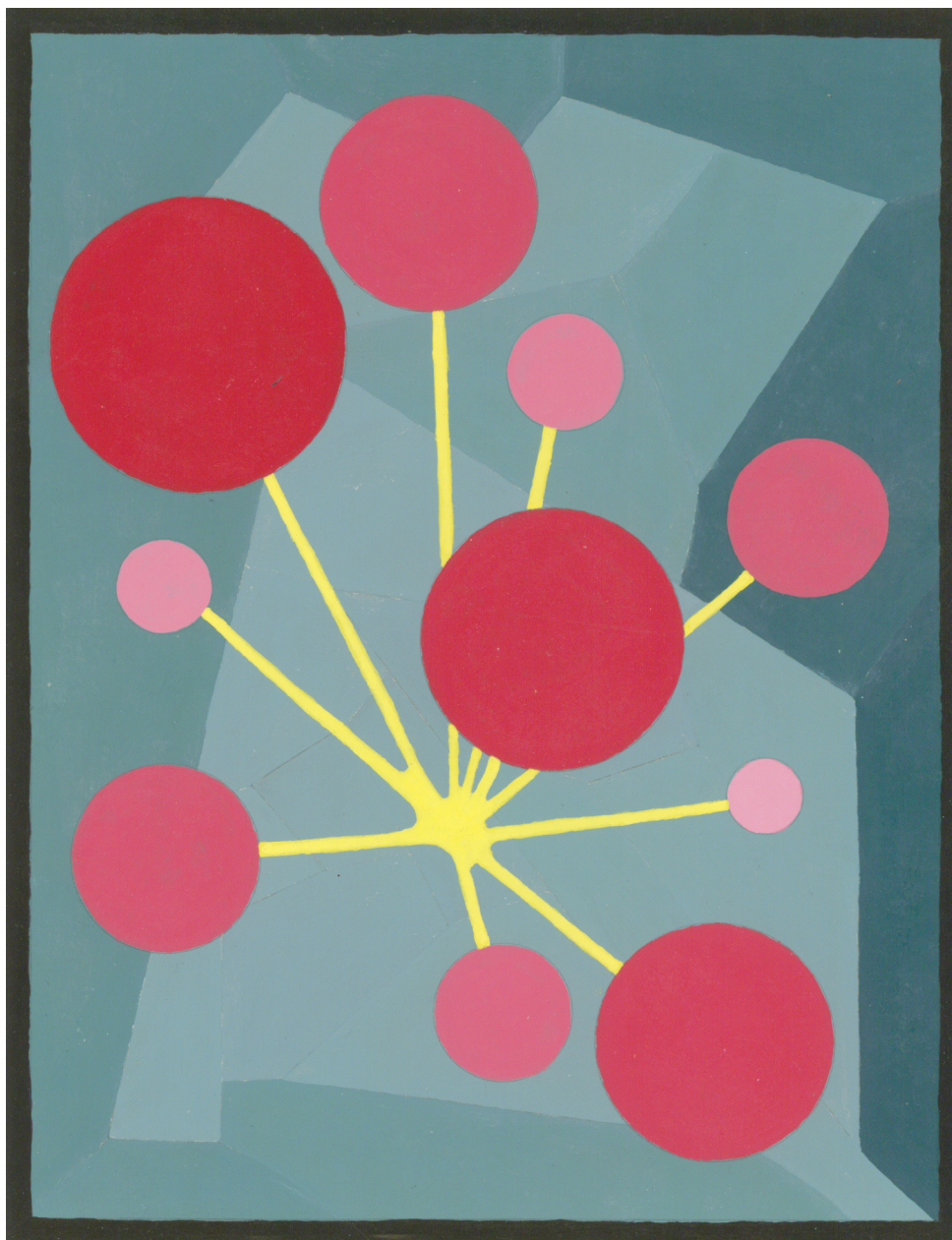


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disability payments, which allowed him to survive. After he died, when his rooms were being cleaned out, they were found to be filled with stacks of science-fiction paperbacks, engineering trade journals and electronic paraphernalia. (As a young man, Palsson had wanted to pursue a career in engineering, but his condition prevented him from doing so. Nevertheless, his

notebook's doodles and scribbles indicate that he retained an interest in science and outer space. A child of the 1960s/1970s "space age", he would have followed the news of the United States' space-exploration program, which was at its peak during those decades.)

Sometimes in the outsider art field, an art dealer has played a valuable role – in some cases



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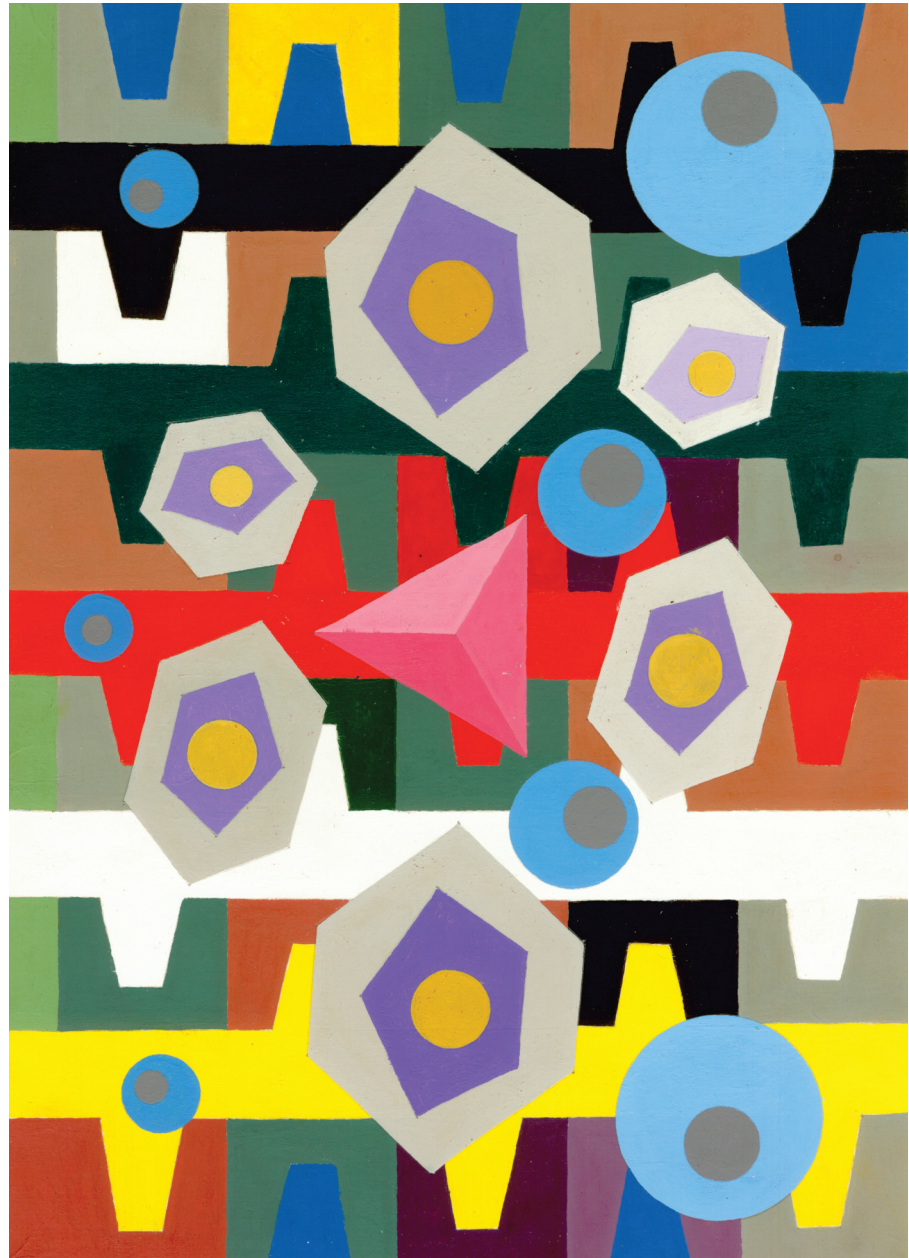
out of sheer necessity – as a researcher who has been compelled to dig up whatever reliable information might have been available about the life and career history of a particular artist. Such information can help dealers and art historians date individual works in or make sense of an artist's broader body of work. For example, the now-retired dealer Bonnie Ames of the Ames Gallery in California, which is now closing down, spent years piecing together the biography of the San Francisco artist A. G. Rizzoli, whose work she discovered and patiently brought to market over a period of time, each new exhibition supported by her emerging research findings. In Palsson's case, the Texas-based dealer Jean Compton handles the artist's work, of which some 600 paintings on cardboard, watercolour

paper and other surfaces are known to exist. Armed with Palsson's notebook but with little or no information about his working methods, motivations, life story or outlook on his art-making, she has managed to locate a few of the artist's surviving family members. From them, she has gathered a handful of mostly distant, superficial observations.

Compton told *Raw Vision*, "I don't have enough information to create an [accurate] chronology of Larry's paintings, but from the limited material I have, I surmise that he began teaching himself to draw and paint in the 1970s. Some of his most intricate paintings were made on simple, 8.5-by-11-inch printer paper or on cardboard from breakfast-cereal or frozen-food boxes. What I assume is earlier work was



Larry John Palsson (above, n.d.) as a young boy, in Seattle with his pet cat, and (below, n.d.) in a photo taken during the final years of his life



Untitled, n.d., acrylic on cardboard from Macy's department-store box, 16 x 14 ins. / 40.6 x 35.6 cm

painted on art board or canvas, materials he would have purchased at art-supply stores." Compton added, "With only one or two exceptions, none of Larry's works were titled, signed or dated."

Palsson's abstract compositions are made up of geometric forms whose hard-edged outlines and modeling-free flatness share affinities with the various kinds of geometric abstraction that flourished both before and after the eruption of gestural Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s. They also bring to mind the reductivist forms and bold palettes of 1960s-era Pop Art. Sometimes his neatly painted shapes depict or seem to allude to familiar subjects – stars, eggs, phalluses, stairsteps, needles or human faces.

In his notebook, Palsson wrote, "Art is

not enough to think about. Visions many ugly vs beauty [sic] Most hum[ans] do not like grave yards As the stream of traffic goes on[.]" However cryptic such ruminations appear, their disjointed pronouncements may offer the only keys we ever will have to some kind of understanding of Palsson's art and his motivation for creating it. Then again, maybe they just reinforce the sense of mystery that already surrounds his life and accomplishments. At the very least, despite the modest circumstances in which he lived and worked, Palsson left behind one clue hinting that he was someone who dared to think big. In his notebook, he also wrote, "Emagination is always a seperate country within one's owns mind."

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