rita kernn-larsen





RITA KERNN-LARSEN











INTRODUCTION



Merilly we live, 1995, Oil on painters board, 20×14 cm.

Rita Kernn-Larsen (1904-1998)

Rita Kernn-Larsen was born in 1904 in Hillerød, Denmark, and grew up in a culturally engaged environment that encouraged intellectual curiosity and artistic independence. From an early age she showed a strong commitment to painting, and she chose to pursue formal training at a time when professional artistic careers for women were still far from common. She studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where she received a solid academic foundation, yet she soon felt the need to move beyond its conventions.

In the late 1920s, Kernn-Larsen travelled to Paris, where exposure to modern French painting profoundly altered her direction. Encounters with Cubism, Surrealism, and the wider avant-garde expanded her sense of what painting could express. Rather than remaining within Danish naturalism, she developed a visual language marked by clarity of form, psychological tension, and a dreamlike atmosphere.



It is rather love than war, 1939, Oil on board, 26 x 20 cm.

During the 1930s she became closely associated with the Danish surrealist milieu around the journal Linien, alongside artists such as Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen and Wilhelm Freddie. Her work from this period reveals carefully staged interiors, symbolic objects, and enigmatic female figures rendered with cool precision and subtle unease.

Kernn-Larsen's paintings distinguish themselves through their balance of structure and mystery. While clearly informed by international surrealism, they avoid theatrical excess, favouring instead controlled compositions and quiet psychological intensity. Throughout her career she continued to refine this approach, moving between Denmark and France and maintaining connections with European surrealist circles. Rita Kernn-Larsen remained dedicated to painting until her death in 1998, leaving behind a body of work that stands as one of the most sustained and distinctive contributions to Scandinavian surrealism.

BIOGRAPHY



Rita Kernn-Larsen - Photo: Arkivet Randers Kunstmuseum

1904

1 Born in Hillerød, Denmark. Grew up in a culturally aware environment that encouraged intellectual independence and artistic ambition.

1920s

2 Studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, receiving academic training before seeking a more experimental direction.

Late 1920s – Early 1930s

3 Traveled to Paris, where encounters with Cubism and Surrealism shifted her work from naturalism toward psychologically charged, dreamlike compositions.

Mid-1930s

4 Became associated with the Danish surrealist circle around the journal Linien, alongside Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen and Wilhelm Freddie, establishing herself as a key figure in Danish Surrealism.

1930s–1940s

5 Developed a distinctive surrealist style marked by carefully staged interiors, symbolic objects, enigmatic female figures, and a restrained, cool precision.

1998

6 Passed away, leaving behind one of the most sustained and significant contributions to Scandinavian Surrealism, with works represented in major Danish and international collections.

RITA KERNN-LARSEN'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE FIELD OF WOMEN'S SURREALISM



The Halmstad Group painted by group member Stellan Mörner

Within the history of Surrealism, women were often positioned as symbols rather than authors—muses, dream figures, or projections of male desire. Rita Kernn-Larsen is a key figure in women's surrealism because she quietly reverses this structure. Her paintings do not present the female body as spectacle; instead, they construct spaces of psychological autonomy. The female presence in her work is self-contained, enigmatic, and inwardly charged, shifting the focus from objectification to subjectivity.

What distinguishes Rita Kernn-Larsen is her ability to adopt the visual language of Surrealism while transforming its tone. Rather than relying on shock or fragmentation, she works with clarity, restraint, and compositional control. Bodies merge with plants, interiors dissolve into organic forms, and identity appears fluid yet grounded in atmosphere. These transformations feel introspective rather than theatrical. By redirecting surrealist motifs—metamorphosis, erotic symbolism, dream imagery—toward lived interior experience, she reclaims them as expressions of agency rather than fantasy.

Rita Kernn-Larsen's importance lies in this subtle re-authoring of surrealism from within. She demonstrates that the movement could articulate female autonomy, psychological depth, and existential reflection without abandoning its imaginative force. In doing so, she stands not at the margins of Surrealism, but at the center of its redefinition through a distinctly female consciousness.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Early Period — Clarity, Form, and Emerging Surrealist Imagery (late 1920s–early 1930s)

In her early development, Rita Kernn-Larsen worked within a disciplined modernist framework shaped by academic training and exposure to European avant-garde movements. Her compositions reveal careful structure, controlled space, and an interest in clarity rather than expressive excess such as the work *Nature Morte, ca. 1929.* As she encountered Surrealism more directly in the early 1930s, her work moved decisively toward dream imagery and psychological tension. Work such as *Nature morte II* showing figures and organic elements began to merge, and surfaces became smoother, more refined, suggesting not chaos but controlled transformation. This period marks her transition from structural modernism toward a distinctly personal surrealist language.



Nature Morte, ca. 1929, Oil on canvas, 58 x 68 cm.

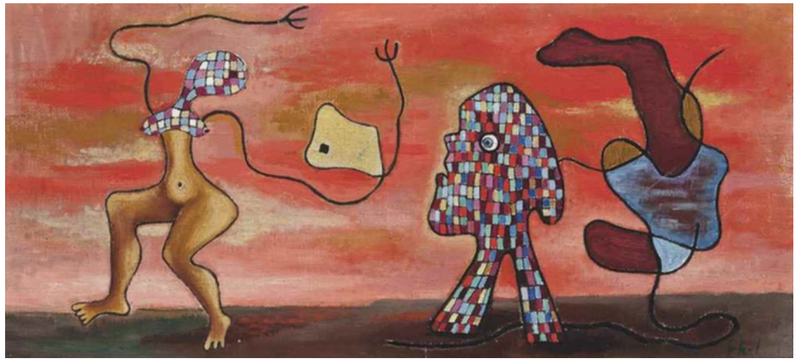


Nature morte II, 1933–1934, Oil on Canvas, 74 x 97 cm.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Middle Period — Metamorphosis, Female Presence, and Psychological Space (mid-1930s–1940s)

During the mid-1930s and 1940s, Kernn-Larsen's surrealist vocabulary became fully articulated. The female figure emerged as a central motif—not as spectacle, but as a site of interiority and metamorphosis. Bodies dissolve into plant forms, drapery becomes organic, and enclosed spaces suggest psychological rather than physical interiors with works like *La promenade dangereuse*, *An attendant,* and *It is rather love than war*. In this phase, transformation is subtle and continuous; identity appears fluid yet self-contained. Rita Kernn-Larsen cultivates ambiguity, tension, and restraint. The dream is present, but it unfolds quietly, as an inward condition.



La promenade dangereuse, 1936, oil on canvas, 25 x 53 cm.



An attendant, 1939, oil on canvas, 63 x 46 cm.



It is rather love than war, 1939, oil on board, 26 x 20 cm.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Late Period — Simplification, Symbolic Density, and Atmospheric Reflection (1950s–)

In her later work, Rita Kernn-Larsen gradually simplified her visual language. Compositions became more distilled, with fewer elements occupying carefully balanced spaces. Symbolism remained, but it grew more condensed and contemplative. The dramatic aspects of earlier surrealist imagery receded, replaced by an emphasis on mood, silence, and symbolic clarity. The female presence remains central but increasingly abstracted, integrated into atmosphere. Her late style reflects a sustained commitment to psychological depth and compositional control—transforming Surrealism from an avant-garde experiment into a mature, introspective visual philosophy.



The dance in the desert, ca. 1937–1985, oil on canvas, 84 x 61 cm.



Untitled, 1996, Oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm.



Untitled, 1982, Oil on canvas, 110 x 81 cm.

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS & VISIBILITY

After Rita Kernn-Larsen's first solo exhibition in Chr. Larsen's Art Gallery, Copenhagen in 1934, she began exhibiting with the Surrealists in Copenhagen, Oslo, Lund, and London, and participated in the International Surrealist Exhibition such as Cubism–Surrealism in the Free Exhibition Building (1935). In 1938, following her meeting with Peggy Guggenheim, she was given a solo exhibition, Exhibition of Surrealist Paintings by Rita Kernn-Larsen, at Guggenheim Jeune in London (May–June 1938). Her work was also included in two additional group exhibitions at the gallery that year, placing her firmly within the international surrealist network.

During the war years she remained active in London, participating in meetings and exhibitions of the Surrealist group. After 1945, she continued to exhibit and later took part in the Venice Biennale in 1986. In 1995 she was the subject of a major retrospective at Randers Kunstmuseum.

In recent years, her work has regained significant international attention. In 2017 she was exhibited at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. In 2018 she was presented in Women of Surrealism at Kunstforeningen Gl. Strand, and in 2020 her work appeared at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition Fantastic Women, shown alongside artists such as Frida Kahlo and Meret Oppenheim. These exhibitions have firmly re-established her presence within the international history of Surrealism.



The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2017



Randers Kunstmuseum exhibited work, Wooden Pantomime, 1934
Oil on canvas, 72 x 104 cm

NOTABLE AUCTION RESULTS

Rita Kernn-Larsen — Opvågning" (Awakening)

Art Historical Context

This work reflects Kernn-Larsen's recurring exploration of the "new woman" — a modern, self-aware female presence connected to sensuality, intuition, and transformation.

Auction Result

Offered in the auction Pioneering Women Artists (4 March 2024), the work carried an estimate of 100,000–150,000 DKK and achieved 450,000 DKK (approximately $70,000), significantly surpassing expectations. Its strong result reflects the growing recognition of Kernn-Larsen's role within international Surrealism and the renewed institutional and market interest in pioneering women artists of the twentieth century.

Exhibition History

The work was exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Guggenheim Jeune in London in 1938 (inscribed on the stretcher), situating it directly within the international Surrealist network of the period. It later appeared in Rita Kernn-Larsen. Malerier og tegninger fra 1930'erne at Sønderjyllands Kunstmuseum, Tønder (1985, cat. no. 18), and in SOLO: Rita Kernn-Larsen at Kunsten Aalborg and Gl. Holtegaard (2018–19), where it was reproduced in the catalogue (cat. no. 1.35, p. 67). The painting comes from a private Danish collection.

Rita Kernn-Larsen — Nature Morte

Art Historical Context

The work reflects a moment of rapid artistic formation. Structured yet harmonious, the composition is built from detached, carefully balanced fragments placed centrally on the canvas.

Auction Result

Offered at the auction Women in Art: Denmark 1850–1950 and Modern Art (26 March 2025), the painting carried an estimate of 200,000–300,000 DKK and realised 500,000 DKK (approximately $78,000), significantly exceeding expectations. The strong result confirms growing international recognition of Kernn-Larsen's early Paris works and her increasingly secure position within the narrative of modernism and women's contribution to Surrealism.

Exhibition History

The painting was exhibited in SOLO – Rita Kernn-Larsen at Gl. Holtegaard, Holte, and Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (2018–19), where it was reproduced full-page in the catalogue (fig. 14). It comes from a private Danish collection, having been acquired directly from the artist and passed down by descent within the family—an exceptional provenance linking the work closely to Kernn-Larsen's own circle.

MARKET & COLLECTING



Opvågning" (Awakening), 1930s. Signed on the reverse. Oil on canvas. 40×25 cm

HOW COLLECTORS VIEW RITA KERNN-LARSEN'S WORKS

Characteristics Valued by Collectors

Collectors are particularly drawn to Rita Kernn-Larsen's refined surrealist language—her smooth surfaces, controlled compositions, and psychologically charged imagery. Unlike the more theatrical strain of Surrealism, her works feel deliberate and self-contained.

Market Position and Auction Performance

Rita Kernn-Larsen's market has strengthened alongside the broader reassessment of female Surrealists. A notable auction result is Nature Morte (1929), which sold for $72,200 —achieving 125% above its estimate and marking one of her strongest public sales to date. Similarly, Awakening (1930), oil on canvas (40.0 x 25.0 cm), sold for $65,500 at Bonhams and Bruun Rasmussen—more than four and a half times its low estimate. . While major works remain relatively rare on the market, smaller paintings and works on paper generally provide more accessible entry points for collectors, with prices varying depending on period and condition.

Appeal for Contemporary Collectors

Today, Rita Kernn-Larsen appeals strongly to collectors focused on women's contributions to modernism and the international Surrealist movement. Her work carries both historical significance and contemporary relevance, addressing themes of identity, interiority, and transformation. As institutional visibility continues to grow, her market position appears increasingly stable, with demand driven by both Nordic collectors and an expanding international audience interested in rediscovering overlooked avant-garde women artists.