

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

514 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 929 3265
info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

Laura Larson

Sundell, Margaret. "Laura Larson, Lennon, Weinberg, Inc." Artforum, December 2005.

LAURA LARSON

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

"Who am I?" André Breton demanded in the opening lines of his novel *Nadja* (1928). "Perhaps," he suggested by way of an answer, "everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt.'" The same could be said of the notoriously elusive medium of photography, which, like Breton, stubbornly resists all attempts at categorization. "I am whom I haunt": This is clearly the definition of photography at which Roland Barthes arrived in *Camera Lucida* (1980), his quest to discover the medium's *noeme* or essence through its ability to summon the spirit of his dead mother by offering an indexical trace of her once living presence.

Although they are never mentioned in Barthes's account, one imagines he would be sympathetic, even susceptible, to the nineteenth-century spirit photographs that are currently exerting a strong fascination on a broad spectrum of the photographic community—from seasoned curators like Pierre Apraxine, whose display of vintage prints, "The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult," is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to younger artists like Laura Larson, whose latest exhibition explored the genre through its contemporary restaging. If Larson's approach to spirit photography evinces an overtly Barthesian concern for the medium's indexical basis, it equally reflects an awareness of the challenges posed to photography's evidentiary status in the twenty-five years since *Camera Lucida*'s publication, by both postmodern critiques of representation and the rise of digital imaging. By marrying the cheap effects and materials of their predecessors to state-of-the-art technology, Larson's latter-day spirit images generate an intentionally unresolved friction between the now widely acknowledged spuriousness of photographic objectivity and the medium's still compelling "reality effect."



Laura Larson, *Rising*, 2003, color photograph, 30 x 40".
From the series "Apparition," 2003.

This tension is perhaps most apparent in the five color photos from the series "Asylum," 2005, all of which depict the abandoned rooms of a nineteenth-century mental hospital. Shot large-format, with a view camera, these stunningly detailed images capture every speck of dust and bit of chipped paint. The place cries out for ghosts, and Larson obliges by dangling bits of white netting in front of her lens. In their obvious artificiality, these blurry forms both accentuate and undermine the intense verisimilitude of what surrounds them, particularly in those works where they less resemble supernatural beings than marks scoured on the image's surface. Looking at these pictures, it's easy to conclude that a belief in photography is not so different from a belief in spirits.

A second body of photographs, from the series "Apparition," 2003, presents a lush forest that, in each shot, is cleaved into a flattened foreground containing a vaporous haze—an emissary from the beyond, or perhaps just a wisp of smoke—and a vertiginous background composed of multiple, conflicting orthogonals. What results is not so much the dispelling of illusion through an assertion of the image's flatness as the creation of a space that might be called hysterically impenetrable—one that simultaneously invites and rejects our ability to experience it as "real." In Larson's hands, photography emerges not just as a medium that haunts but one that is itself haunted by its own ghost.

—Margaret Sundell