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Laura Larson

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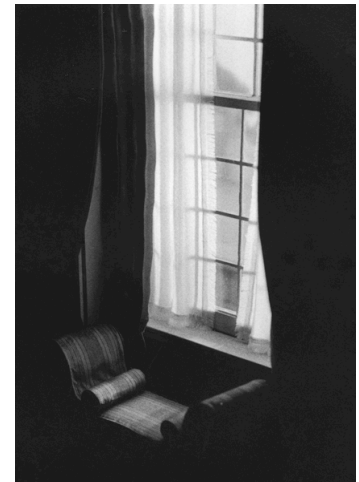
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents
GALLERIES

Artifice, Authorship, and the History of Photography

by Susan Silas on September 5, 2014

Laura Larson's current show of photographs at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. feels like a small museum retrospective. The elegantly installed exhibition explores the artist's career over a roughly 20-year period, from 1996 to 2012. Her early works, small black-and-white photographs dating from the mid-'90s, show interiors; yet they are, we discover, images taken of exquisitely detailed doll houses. These works, titled *Domestic Interiors*, are completely plausible as "real" spaces and as such begin a critical commentary that evolves over the course of the artist's career, on what photography is and what it does and how it does it.

The old cliché "seeing is believing" seemed ready-made for photography's early days. The camera was pointed at something, and it documented that reality; the image was the result of light playing on whatever the camera lens saw, recording it on film. But artifice was present in photography from its inception. How do we know that the images Larson presents are of "real" spaces? We don't; we just accept them as such. We accept them as representations of spaces we can walk through and inhabit. At 5 x 3.5 inches, the images are in fact a closer approximation to the scale of the doll houses they depict.



"Chaise by Window" (1996)



"Open Door, Metropolitan Museum of Art" (1999)

Larson started out as a film student. Conventional film presumes a narrative; the medium is about time. When Larson switched to still photography, she brought her narrative interests with her. In her next series of photographs, titled *My Dark Places*, she elaborated on *Domestic Interiors*, photographing scale models of crime scenes. We peak through a doorway and see an upturned chair, uncollected mail accumulating on the floor inside an apartment, the hint of stilled flesh in a bathroom mirror, blood spattered on the wall. We act as voyeurs, seeing through curtains, windows, and doorways. These physical passages frame events the way the photographer frames the moment that will be preserved in perpetuity. From here, we are not surprised to find out that the next logical step for the artist was to look at historic sites and period rooms in her series *Well Appointed*, where we find what amounts to the doll house writ large. And so we travel from the

miniature interior to the scale interior, both of which function as representations of “reality” and are, in turn, represented to us in an image that purports to be a representation of the real.

A narrative creates a world. Larson seems deeply interested in how such worlds are made through images. She seems just as interested in the places in which worlds are created. Larson explores the other important form of narrative, literary writing, by inference, documenting the rooms in which writers wrote and the desks at which they sat, including those of William Faulkner and Emily Dickinson. In the image of Dickinson’s workspace, Larson conjures the writer’s absence through the empty room and vacant desk but also by means of the mirror that once beheld Dickinson’s image. With the period rooms and the writer’s rooms Larson’s images increase in scale, almost as if larger photographs were required to accommodate “real” spaces.

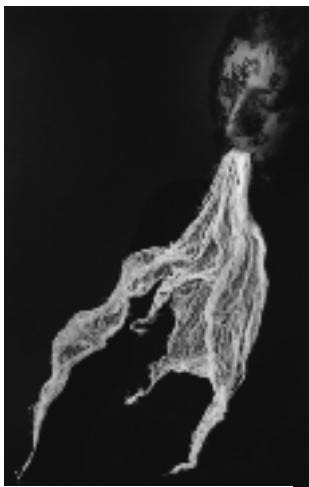


“Dickinson Desk 1” (1999)

Photographs document a moment in time. They give us an image of something that had been present and is now absent but remains present in representation. Roland Barthes’s analysis of this phenomenon and its connection to death in *Camera Lucida* is perhaps the most well known and the most compelling: “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die: I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”

With every new technological advance the hope arises that this will be the one, finally, to make humankind immortal, or at the very least, to put us in touch with the netherworld. Photography was no exception to this rule. Soon after its discovery, practitioners were claiming to be able to provide contact with deceased loved ones. The photographer William H. Mumler first “discovered” what became known as spirit photography through an accidental double exposure in the early 1860s. His most famous photograph

is of the seated Mary Todd Lincoln with the dead former president standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders. Larson’s investigation of this period depicts primarily but not exclusively women with strange and suggestive “fluids” seeping from their bodies, a cross between those spirit photographs and what might have been documented by J. M. Charcot at his clinic filled with female hysterics in Paris’s Salpêtrière. One of the most convincing and beautiful of Larson’s photographs from this series, titled “Stanislava P.” (2003), is of a woman, her face veiled by a black mantilla, vomiting out a white stream of fluid that, on close inspection, turns out to be swath of cheesecloth.



“Stanislava P.” (2003)

In another, a white substance leaks from a woman’s breast, but a closer look reveals a white cloth hanging from her nipple and draped across her chest. The images are in black and white and make no attempt to hide their trickery; the body fluids quickly reveal themselves as fabric, as when the white substance gushing from between a seated woman’s legs resolves as a clump of white string. This recalls a nearby image of a seance, a bell hanging mysteriously above a young girl’s head with the faint line of the string holding it in mid-air visible in the photograph.

It’s as if Larson is telling us: this is how obvious the deception was all along, and yet we see what we want to see. Even after the deceitful aspects of spirit photography were uncovered and the curtain was pulled back, men of stature, Arthur Conan Doyle among them, refused to

believe that it was all a fraud. Larson seems to be saying that photography was always just another tool for the artist to craft as he or she chose; that from the very start, the greatest illusion of all was believing that there was none.



“White on Black” (2004)

In an elaboration on this theme, abandoned interiors from the series *Asylum* and secluded wooded



"Hole (Yellow Room)" (2005)

making. The work is an ambrotype, a positive image made on a glass plate. In it we see an outstretched arm resting on a metal object. This object is actually one of the neck braces used by early studio photographers to help their subjects keep their heads still during the long exposures required to shoot a portrait.

The image, titled "Prop" (2012), feels like an appropriate end point in an exhibition of works by an artist who's always reminding us that photography is a malleable art form, that the artist's hand is always in it, and that there was no point in the trajectory of the medium when that was not the case.



"Prop" (2012)

[Laura Larson: Photographs 1996–2012](#) continues at *Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. (TK, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through September 13.