

Artspace

Meet the Artist

A Few Questions for Architect-Photographer Erin O’Keefe, on Creating “Cubist Space” With the Camera

By Karen Rosenberg

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The artist Erin O’Keefe. Photo: Aidan McCready

NAME: Erin O’Keefe

AGE: 53

HOMETOWN: New York City

BASE OF OPERATIONS: New York City

MEDIUM OF CHOICE: Photography is my medium of choice, but I make sculptural arrangements as the subject of my photographs—so although there are some other media involved along the way, the final product is always a photograph.

WHY I MAKE ART: I make work as a way of asking questions about how we see, and particularly how we perceive space. My background in architecture is essential to this, and makes those questions feel both more urgent and more pervasive. I remember in kindergarten, being asked what I wanted to be, and answering “artist.” I recall feeling very certain about it, even then—but it hasn’t been the most linear path to get here!

CURRENT PROJECT

I'm working on a series of photos called "Book of Days," in which I am trying to get at a sense of space that flattens and expands within a single still life—a bit like the space in a cubist painting.
current project



Rudy Burckhardt, A View From Brooklyn II (1954)

WHERE I'M FINDING INSPIRATION NOW

It's always a pretty varied set of inspirations—Morandi, for his restraint, and Goethe, for aspiring to a very direct and focused observation of things. Recently I've been looking at lots of images of concrete brutalist architecture—very austere, powerful stuff.

ONE ARTWORK I CAN'T GET OUT OF MY HEAD

I first saw this photograph [Rudy Burckhardt] many years ago, and I loved the way the view of the bridge out the window is as present in the room as the postcards pinned to the wall. That spatial collapse stays in my head as both question and inspiration.

PERSONAL PANTHEON OF ARTISTS

James Turrell, Fred Sandback, Jan Groover, Robert Irwin, Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Rachel Whiteread, Robert Smithson, Anne Truitt, Josef Albers. And Giotto and Fra Angelico—I love the awkward scalar relationships and spatial flattening in early Renaissance painting, and the color is a total sensory pleasure.

INSIDE MY STUDIO



STUDIO ITEMS I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

The things I end up using the most are my radio and my foam brushes. The radio provides company on solitary days, and the foam brushes are an absolute necessity for me, because I have ruined so many “real” paintbrushes by forgetting to clean them—and the hardware store downstairs sells them, so I never really run out. radio brushes



ART-WORLD PET PEEVE

I don't know if I have one, actually. What we all collectively do is so strange and useless – but also absolutely critical. The art world seems like a place populated mostly by people with a kind of optimism and secular faith that can be pretty hard to find elsewhere.

STRANGEST REACTION TO MY WORK

People will often insist that they are not really photographs. But they are absolutely photographs—made with a camera, and lights, and a click of the shutter.

WHAT I'M STREAMING

I just finished watching season four of House of Cards. So dark, so well done—I felt simultaneously repulsed and fascinated. It made The Sopranos feel cozy.

MY PROCESS

My process is always pretty open ended—lots of tangents and accidents. As part of this, I usually come to the studio with a question. For the series “The Flatness,” I wanted to make an image where the flattest thing in the still life “read” as the most dimensional in the photograph, and the actual space of the arrangement flattened out in the final image.