

Barbara Kasten: New Peers in Contemporary Photography

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“Barbara Kasten: Stages,” curated by Alex Klein at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, is the first major survey of Kasten’s work, from her fiber sculptures from the early 1970’s, to a newly commissioned site-specific installation involving a nearly 30-foot-high video projection interacting with the architecture of the gallery. For a practicing artist with nearly five decades of work to survey, some might duly note that this first museum retrospective is long overdue. Certainly it is, and there’s no doubt that Kasten has long been underrecognized, however, this exhibition comes at a time when Kasten’s work is perhaps at its most relevant.

Though she never trained formally as a photographer, Barbara Kasten is best known for her highly staged photographic series of studio constructions and architectural spaces, particularly for their lush, saturated colors and perspectival manipulation of light, shadow and space within the photographic frame. Influenced by the Light & Space movement in California, Constructivism and Bauhaus experimentation, in particular the work of László Moholy-Nagy, Kasten uses sculptural forms, mirrors, props and lights to investigate the interplay and tension between three-dimensional and two-dimensional forms, abstraction and material and the object and image.

These concerns have come to the forefront of consciousness due to the work of a new generation of artists and curators, particularly with respect to the medium of photography. This next generation engages with photography not as documentary medium, but as a medium with inherent formal properties -- digital and

analogue -- ripe for experimentation. Kasten’s work, with its absence of narrative and precisely staged constructs built for the camera, situates her right in the midst of these new contemporaries, artists such as Kate Steciw, Elad Lassry, Sam Falls, Eileen Quinlan, Jessica Eaton, Lucas Blalock and many others. On April 7th, the ICA hosted a panel discussion entitled “Kasten in Context: New Peers” between Kasten and Sara VanDerBeek, David Hartt and Takeshi Murata, to discuss shared processes and precedents. And in an interview with Liz Deschenes in the exhibition catalogue, Kasten comments on this exchange with a new generation of artists: “I never felt that I had a peer group before, and now I do. There are younger artists who respect what I do, and I respect what they do. So what if there is a thirty-year age difference between us? We are talking on another level.”

To explore this intergenerational conversation I invited four young artists to comment on and provide insight into Kasten’s photography vis à vis their own, to provide a lens or frame or mirror by which we can understand



Erin O’Keefe, *Much Ado*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

various aspects of Kasten's work, and her impact on contemporary photography. I asked them how and when they had become familiar with Kasten's work, and how it made an impact on their work and their view of photography.

“I don't remember exactly how I first became aware of Kasten's work, but I know when I did, it was a revelation.” Erin O'Keefe, a visual artist and architect based in New York, makes photographs that exploit the translation of three-dimensional form and space into two-dimensional images. For her, Kasten's work “presented a range of possibilities for photography that felt really important to me, and deeply relevant to my own interests as an artist. It set out an alternate method of working -- that it could happen in the studio, and investigate phenomena of light and space within a pretty tightly controlled still life. These were not things that I had encountered much in photography -- and it was both inspiring and validating to find an artist working this way.”

Hannah Whitaker...

Jessica Labatte ...

Jaclyn Wright ...

Kasten's practice provided a new paradigm to look at and respond to, drawing out new possibilities beyond portraits, landscape and street photography -- those “windows on the world” the photographic frame was meant to represent. “In my experience, being a photographer seemed to mean taking pictures, as a kind of keen observer,” O'Keefe remarks, “the decisive moment ethos kind of thing. Kasten's way of being a photographer was another model altogether. She was making photographs -- not so much finding the frame as filling it.”

“I find it interesting how much of the writing on her contextualizes the work an amalgam of sculpture, installation and photography,” notes Whitaker. The retrospective exhibition at the ICA indeed emphasizes Kasten's interdisciplinary background and practice -- but Kasten's work can provide us with a more expansive view of what potentialities the medium of photography can hold. Whitaker continues, “There is a persistent and unnecessary insistence that her work is not just photography. [Kasten] shows us our own narrow view of the medium -- that photography can involve making pictures, not only taking them.”

Kasten, when reached for comment, expressed a feeling of gratitude and perhaps some sense of vindication, at the renaissance her works are currently enjoying. “Twenty-plus years ago I set out to do a documentary video on women artists in photography who I felt were not getting the recognition they deserved,” she told me. “I never thought that I'd be the recipient of similar attention later in my career. Thanks to Alex Klein and the ICA Philadelphia, my career is being looked at by a younger generation just as I did in *High Heels* and *Ground Glass*. It's a return of all the good karma I set in motion in the 1980s.”
--Natalie Hegert