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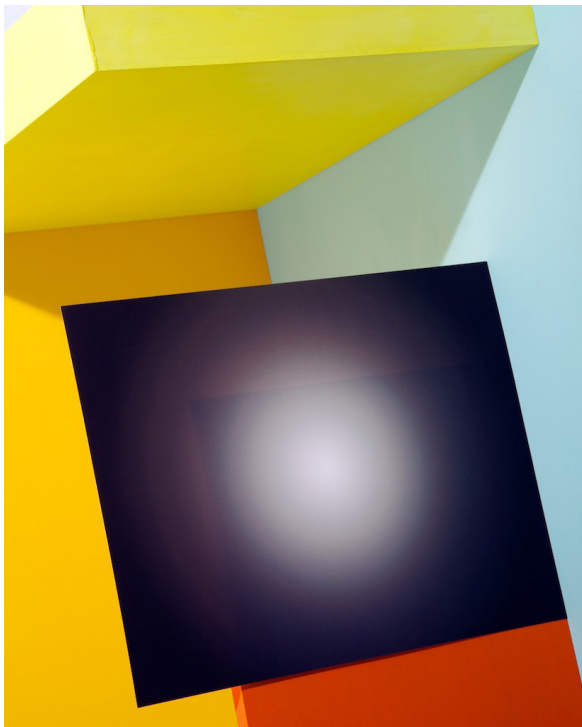
## Erin O’Keefe: Surface and Depth

by Darren Campion

Given that we are surrounded by pictures and make constant use of them, it might seem inevitable that we should understand how they work, how the space within them operates to produce a certain kind of meaning – the cultural and practical saturation of images that we experience should ideally result in an equally pervasive measure of fluency when it comes to visual media, especially with regard to “reading” photographs, which obviously make up the vast majority of images that we both consume and produce. There are any number of reasons why this is actually not the case, of course, most of them related to the general qualities of photography as a medium and our assumptions about it.

Apart from its self-consciously aesthetic uses, photography also has a range of other applications where the conditions of the medium tend to disappear, so when it comes to reading those images we see through the photograph itself in the belief that we are actually dealing (more or less directly) with its subject. In certain contexts this does make sense, but at the same time we are always confronting a subject that is seen photographically, that is to say, a picture specifically and not whatever reality that might have preceded it. In her work Erin O’Keefe is explicitly concerned with exploring the mechanics of photographic space, its material as well as conceptual terms, at a time when such questions are more pressing than ever. Hers is most obviously a studio-based practice, taking the still life tradition into a newly fragmented – one might almost say post-digital – direction.

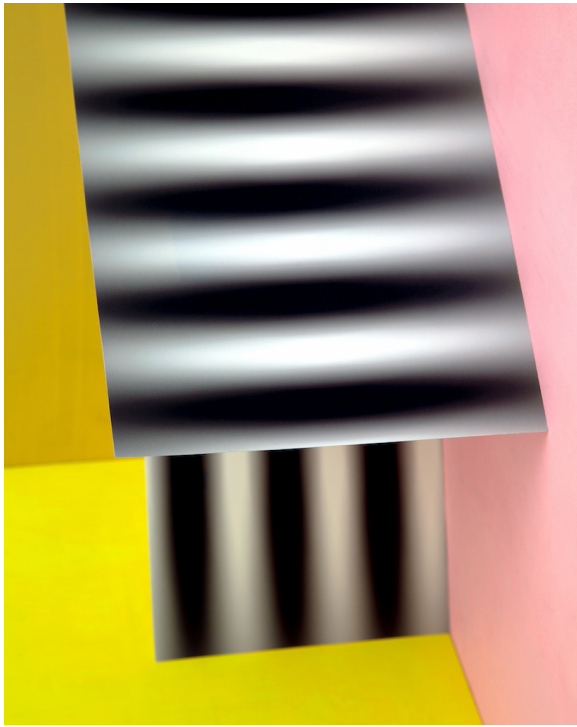
There is a sense in which O’Keefe’s work fits very neatly with a noticeable trend in contemporary photographic practice, a kind of formalism that seems to have more in common with the distinctive concerns of mid-century



The Flatness #1 / Erin O’Keefe



The Flatness #2 / Erin O’Keefe



The Flatness #5 / Erin O'Keefe

modernism in painting, for example, than it does with what might typically be thought of as the conventional practice of photography. That link is intentional, of course, and has a significant role to play in the effect of what O'Keefe is doing, but it is more than a straightforward reiteration of those same concerns or even a simple pastiche of painterly methods. The critical precepts of modernism suggested that the proper intent of art-making was to pursue an ever finer articulation of those values seen as being essential to a given medium. This entailed a clear shift away from representation, which is nearly always contingent on some kind of narrative and O'Keefe's work certainly alludes to this legacy at least in terms of style, but her use of such devices, as well as her persistent references to the illusionistic space of painting is less a continuation as it is a wholesale reconsideration of both those historical terms and in particular, the contemporary currency of images. Of course, photography is not painting and O'Keefe is still very much a photographer, but her interest in questioning the terms of our visual landscape means that her references will be necessarily that much wider, seeking a

historical perspective on the otherwise unseen architecture of photography as a rhetorical construction – or rather, a way of framing certain kinds of meaningful statements.

The vocabulary of references and forms that makes up O'Keefe's work undoubtedly draws on a range of possibilities or themes made available by the sense that information is now basically unmoored from its historical contexts. The "classical" and seemingly coherent space of the still-life image is subjected to this same process, so that the way in which it has been put together becomes apparent. Exposing the construction of images is a key aspect of O'Keefe's practice and she achieves this by breaking them down into their basic elements, which are reformulated into fundamentally new images. Her thoughtful consideration of modernism's legacy is most apparent here - as is her use of what might be called "post-modern" strategies, in particular a critical reappraisal of the medium as the sum of its supposedly "essential" values.

If a picture is little more than a recirculation of styles that only make sense in a given context then there can be no fundamental quality that defines what a picture is or how it might be made, but O'Keefe's work goes beyond restating what are by now familiar critiques. Concerned with physical objects and the material experience of vision, these images appear as much about with the present state of the medium as they are with its history. As photographs have become steadily less concrete so too have questions about how the medium operates increased in significance, not least because conventional assumptions are now more and more untenable.



The Flatness #6 / Erin O'Keefe



The Flatness #7 / Erin O'Keefe

O'Keefe doesn't provide any fixed answers for how to think about photography in the 21st century, of course, but she does convincingly illustrate what the core problems of formulating such answers might be - and these serve as an emphatic reminder of the fact that we are no longer tied to a single notion of what photography is or what it can do.

All of which is not to suggest either that O'Keefe is merely describing a series of concepts or historical references in a very dry or dispassionate sort of manner, as nothing could be further from the truth. In a way, aesthetic considerations are at the forefront of this work, which is also a visually satisfying, even beautiful consideration of line and form, flattened into the virtual space created by the camera lens. These photographs are deliberately puzzling; the spaces within them can shift abruptly, their structures are porous. What they return to is the sense that representational styles or strategies are deeply linked to their social and historical context. The ruptures of modernism were possible only in the wake of immense social change. The transition

within photography to the intangible spaces of digital technology has meant that artists have been freed from the specificities that once seemed essential to their medium, but it also means we have to think of photography in new ways. O'Keefe makes use of this cut-and-paste age to blur the line between real and imagined space.

Erin O'Keefe is a visual artist and architect based in New York City and New Brunswick, Canada. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Cornell University and a Master of Architecture from Columbia University. Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in the US and abroad. Her photographs were included in the Humble

Arts Foundation "31 Women in Art Photography" and the "Hey Hot Shot" showcase at the Jen Bekman Gallery. She is a 2013 NYFA Finalist Fellow in Photography

Darren Campion is a writer on photography, with occasional digressions into contemporary art and related topics. Since 2009 he has maintained The Incoherent Light, which is a blog dedicated to exploring various perspectives on photography. He is a frequent contributor to several publications (digital or otherwise), most notably Super Massive Black Hole, Of the Afternoon and Paper Journal, where he has a regular series of features. Initially engaged with making pictures, his attention is now focused on expanding the discussion around the medium. He currently works at the Gallery of Photography in Dublin.



The Flatness #14 / Erin O'Keefe