



# Things As They Are: An Interview with Erin O’Keefe

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*Danni Shen, Curatorial Fellow in Visual Arts, organizes and interprets exhibitions at Wave Hill.*

*(Not So) Still Life*, on view in Glyndor Gallery through July 4, 2016, presents novel ways that contemporary artists are transforming the still life genre to engage with current culture.

Grounded in the history of photography and in her architectural training, **Erin O’Keefe’s** photographs rely on the optical illusion generated by transforming three-dimensional arrangements into a two-dimensional image plane. She uses abstraction and formalism to make images that investigate the nature of spatial perception. In her process, O’Keefe photographs painted boards and tinted Plexiglass that she has arranged into deceptively simple color compositions. By exploiting the distortions that emerge from the difference between the way that the camera captures a scene and how the eye sees it, these assemblages of geometric shapes and lines achieve a seductive combination of still life and architectural illusion.

*Danni Shen: You have both studio art and architectural training. Why did you make the transition into architecture?*

Erin O’Keefe: When I was at Cornell studying fine arts, I also took some classes in the architecture school, and became really interested in the issues I was able to deal with in those classes. So after graduating, I worked for a year at an architecture firm, and then went to grad school in architecture. The rigorous approach to problem-solving was really exciting to me, and still is.

*DS: And have you returned to your art practice full-time, or are you involved in both? Do they cross over or filter into one another?*



EK: Yes, my art practice is now my full-time occupation—which has been a terrifying and awesome development. It has been incredible to be able to work with focus, rather than having to split my time and attention between being an academic and a studio artist. That being said, my background as an architect continues to inform my work, so while I no longer teach or practice, the issues are still a very urgent preoccupation.

*DS: Why photography?*

EK: I became very interested in the built-in distortion provided by the lens, so that what you see in the world is always different from what appears in the image. It feels like very ripe territory for me as an artist. I did work in sculpture for many years, and then began



taking photographs of that work. In 2010, when I was on sabbatical, I began making photographs in earnest.

*DS: Many of our visitors have observed that your works from the Things As They Are series in our current (Not So) Still Life exhibition are a kind of boiling down of what makes a still life- in terms of light and composition in space, which is also very painterly. What do you think about your work in relationship to the still life genre?*

EK: Yes – I would agree with that! I guess I am interested in finding an edge where the image fluctuates between something spatial and concrete, and something entirely abstract. The images are also meant to be ambiguous as to whether they are photographs or paintings. I am not interested in using more traditional objects that have strong emotional or historical associations, so in that way these pictures operate at the outer periphery of the still life genre.

*DS: Are the photographs to scale in relationship to what you're actually photographing?*

EK: In the Things As They Are series, the still life objects are basically to scale.

*DS: Can you talk about color choice?*

EK: Color is something that I respond to in a physiological way—pure retinal pleasure. I taught the Albers color exercises for years, and became interested in the logic of color relationships. The photographs are a way to explore how color operates in space.

*DS: What about the series title? Is there commentary there about the nature of photography/image making today?*

EK: The series title, Things As They Are. was actually inspired by Goethe, and this idea of intense observation as a way of knowing. There is no image manipulation, so the title does make reference to that as well—I was really interested in using photography in a very direct way.

*DS: What are your inspirations?*

EK: It's a very long list, but some of the top art hits are the early Renaissance paintings of Giotto and Fra Angelico in particular, as well as James Turrell, Jan Groover, Fred Sandback, Giorgio Morandi, Louis Kahn, Mies Van Der Rohe and lots more. Everything makes its way in somehow.

*DS: What's next?*

EK: I am in the midst of another series of photographs called Book Of Days. I am still trying to wrestle with issues of spatial perception and representation.