

Uncertain Things by Richard Paul

Erin O’Keefe is an artist using photography; formerly an architecture professor, she lives and works in New York City. Below is a picture of her studio in 2018; she has a new one now.





Rudy Burckhardt, *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1954
Silver gelatin print

Here is a photograph of another studio, but this one is from 1954: *Brooklyn Bridge* by Rudy Burckhardt. Erin introduced me to Burckhardt's image. Erin had come to the realisation that many of her favourite buildings—buildings she felt she really *knew*—she had only experienced through images. This suggested a possibility, a possibility realised to an extent in *Brooklyn Bridge*, but not exhausted by it: “The dissonance between real space and image space—the slippages and misreadings, and the sense of infinite mutability became a focus for me—both in the way the ‘real space’ was constructed, and the way the photograph could convey that.” *Brooklyn Bridge*

has a remarkable combination of shallow (the bottom of the image ends before the floor; we feel we are seeing only about a foot of depth in the studio) and deep space (the majestic view of the bridge stretching across the river to Manhattan). I can see why it should be such a touchstone for Erin. Despite a certain paucity of information (it's black and white, no information as to whether it's hot or cold, its smell—cigarettes, damp? etc.) I can imagine, even believe, that I've been there (although, in the words of Talking Heads *How did I get [t]here?*). We know that Susan Sontag (or was it John Berger?) believed that photographs replaced memory, but it could also be claimed that they invent memories too (*Bladerunner*). And when I describe this photograph from 1954, which tense should I use? ●●● In his analysis of fin-de-siècle philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of memory, Christian Kerslake states that: “[I]t

is the past that truly is, while the present is so fleeting and impossible that it does not have the right to be said to be. Our consciousness is merely the fragile tip of an immense cone which contains all the past, an enduring, ever increasing whole... But the past is not just ‘behind us’, it is also alongside us. In fact, each present moment is registered as past at the same time it happens... Bergson explains the phenomenon of déjà vu as a ‘memory of the present’: we suddenly realise that this moment will have

been. It is and was at the same time.” This description of déjà vu is for me a good *analogy* for the curious nature of the photograph and begins to answer the question on tense that I asked above (it’s close to Roland Barthes’s concept of the photograph as *having-been-there* — “What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then.”). Bergson also seems to suggest that the registering and storing of memories is analogous to some kind of photo/video process; how easy then to disrupt or even replace ours with others. Particularly in the image-soaked now (the original *Bladerunner* is/was set in 2019). But... I’m not so sure about the importance of the past — more specifically, a past event — in Erin’s photographs. They’re different to documentary photographs, or decidedly evidential images. I think, perhaps, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s statement about the film *Last Year at Marienbad* (for which he wrote a very detailed screenplay that Alain Resnais directed to the letter) gets us a little closer to the nature of Erin’s work: “The universe in which this entire film occurs is, characteristically, that of a perpetual present, which makes all recourse to memory impossible. This is a world without a past, a world which is self-sufficient at every moment and which obliterates itself as it proceeds. This man, this woman begin existing only when they appear on screen

the first time; before that they are nothing; and, once the projection is over, they are again nothing. There can be no reality outside the images we see, the words we hear...just as the only time that matters is that of the film itself, the only important ‘character’ is the spectator; in his mind unfolds the whole story, which is precisely imagined by him.” In Erin’s photographs, the set-ups exist as long as it takes for her to take the picture; the elements (wood blocks, background, particular position of the lights) are then broken up, repurposed or repainted, discarded. Erin describes this process in the following manner:

“I’m interested in finding/discovering/choreographing moments of uncertainty that exist in the image, but not in the ‘real’ spatial condition. You are left with just the image and its wrongness—you can never backtrack to compare, although the question of how it was made is still present. I think the sense of an open question is something that feels really fruitful.” These *moments of uncertainty* are not decisive moments in the Cartier-Bresson sense: the formation of a pregnant—stilled—moment of a spontaneously composed tableau, with its suggestion of both past and future. This is replaced by a slower coalescing, or better, *choreographing* as Erin describes it: when the camera lens is positioned in such a way that it produces a



Sideways 2020
Unique archival pigment print
on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper, 20×25 inches

view that collapses or contradicts depth, or certainly keeps expected depth and curious flatness in an oscillating irresolution (*moment of uncertainty*). This tension/uncertainty is not unlike Roger Penrose's impossible triangle—the *Penrose Tribar* (you know it, perhaps even from the ubiquitous Palace branding). ●●● Wood cut to mimic perspective (most clearly in the leaning rhombus-shaped foreground block in *Sideways*); trompe-l'oeil painted shadows and highlights; edges meticulously aligned. Erin subtly marshals a range of techniques to manipulate and abet the camera's monocular distortion. And colour; colour is key. Let's take a close look at *Pink Slip*: a fabulously glowing almost ace of spades pink (womb-like?) *space* is revealed between a soft E shape cut in a foreground block of wood that is parallel to the picture plane, and the cut cartoon-nose-profile in another block at a 45° angle behind. But the pink space must be a flat block; there is an obvious brushstroke pattern of light and dark pink. The *nose* edge of the angled block is painted black to suggest a shadow (there's a lovely hint of pink reflection)—despite the lighting from the right—and forms an almost unbroken line with the white E of the foreground object's edge. This *almost* is important. Erin leaves clues; she lets us see where one object ends, and another begins (it doesn't help). She obviously enjoys painting on these blocks; the rear, angled block features a scumbled or partly rubbed off coat of soft magenta that reveals

the yellow base; the translucent pink brushstrokes with their gentle leftward drift. The front block is matte gold over a darker base. The overall effect is a *suggestion* of early Renaissance painting: Mantegna, Giotto, Fra Filippo Lippi. Weird pink isometric



Pink Slip 2020
Unique archival pigment print
on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper, 25 × 20 inches

architecture, brightly, symbolically coloured togas. Or... De Chirico's melancholy plazas, awkwardly realised perspective of receding arches, long shadows in the setting sun. Maybe. Architecture, painting, trips to the Met and MOMA; magazine covers from youth—half-remembered. Something briefly glimpsed takes on greater significance later, maybe much later; years. Kerslake on Bergson again:

“Each moment... occurs on two levels simultaneously, one as an actual present, and simultaneously as a virtual past that will be preserved independently to be accessed by future interpretations... it is as if these events were alive, pulsing with significance.”

In *Pink Slip* the low horizon monumentalises the objects; in *Sideways* there's the viewpoint of the *establishing shot*. Scale becomes ambiguous. Verticals are corrected in-camera in the manner of architectural photographs—skyscrapers don't converge as they ascend. Of course, in depiction the actual size of the support—canvas, photographic print—is uncoupled from that which it depicts. Notions of scale are determined through relations of objects within the depiction itself. René Magritte enjoyed disrupting relations of scale, but when we have no reference to what an object is, such as in *The Annunciation*, we are in the realm of science fiction and dreams. The scale of the object—in Erin's case, the framed photographic object—is important too. Large prints intensify monumentality and presence



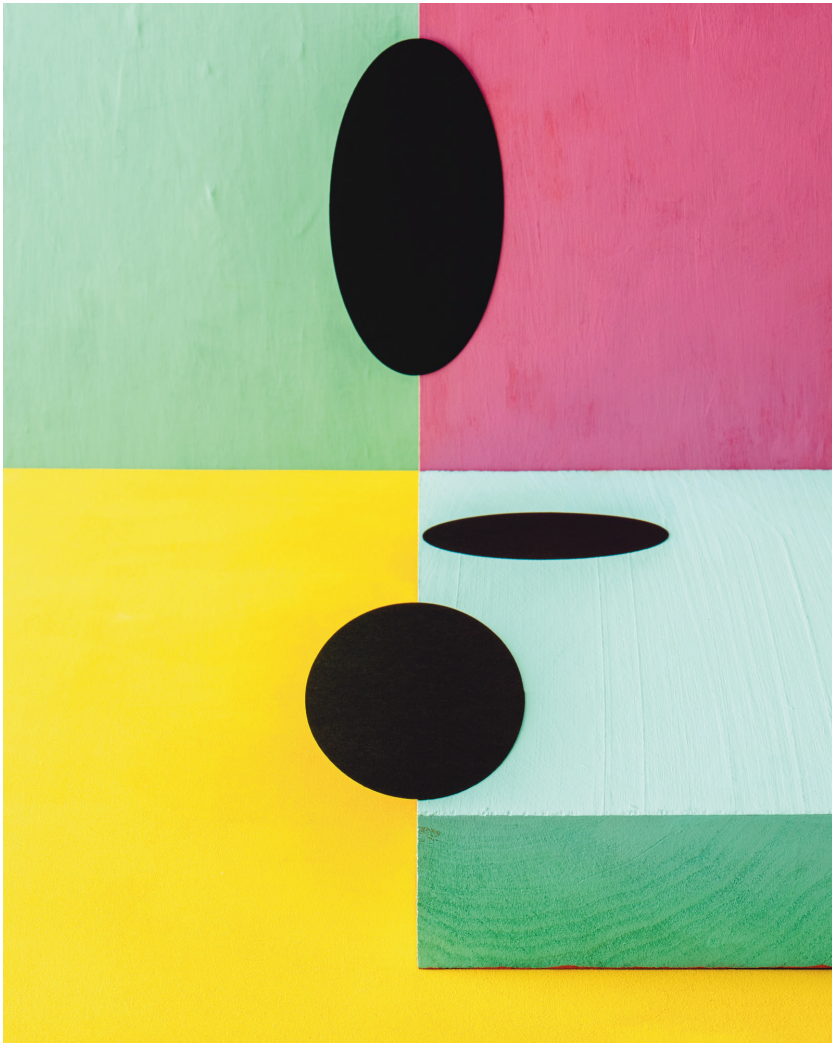
René Magritte, *The Annunciation*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 114 × 146 cm

—you step back, before coming closer again to appreciate detail: brushstrokes, edges, blur and sharpness. With smaller prints, it's as though you are peering into another world. Before the advent of high-quality digital printing, photographs had three surface finishes: matte, lustre and glossy. Matte was closest to the quality of an etching or lithograph; lustre was for wedding photographers; glossy for reproduction (deep blacks, good contrast). This is not strictly true; gloss fibre-based prints (used for exhibitions) had a beautiful, almost bur-nished gloss surface, as opposed to the plastic/glassy face of resin-coated prints (cheaper, everyday). The

most repellent (for me at least) was the cibachrome. Printed from transparencies (slides) cibachromes were over-contrasty with a brittle sheen. The recent emphasis on surface brings back the old 19C/early 20C *Pictorialist* anxiety — art not science. Erin's prints are matte, glazed with reflection-free glass, painted wood frame. The prints are of such a quality that depicted surfaces are almost indistinguishable from the surface of the objects they depict. This only adds to the impact of their visual ambiguity or irresolution. Blur (out of focus that is, not Richter blur) is a surprise; *this is not a painting*. ●●● There's a great story about Henri Matisse meeting Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Renoir haughtily reviews Matisse's work: "I should like almost to say that you're not really a good painter, or even that you're a very bad one. But there's one thing that prevents me from telling you that. When you put on some black, it stays right there on the canvas. All my life I have been saying that one can't any longer use black without making a hole in the canvas. It's not a colour. Now, you speak the language of colour. Yet you put on black and you make it stick."

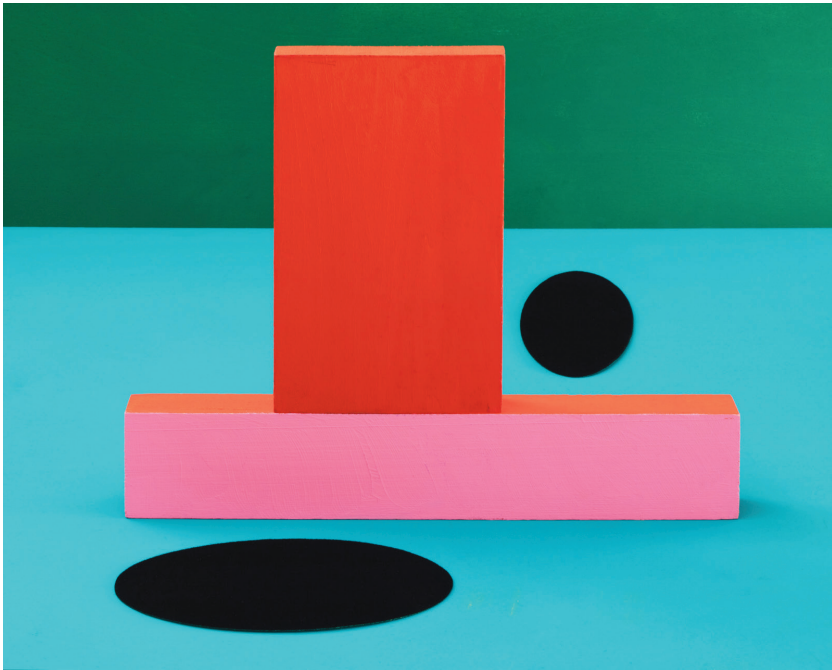
●●● *Circle Circle* and *Ellipse Ellipse Ellipse* have a different mood to *Pink Slip* and *Sideways*. Black ellipses — not unlike Roadrunner's Acme holes — puncture the set-ups, giving the works a more graphic quality. Sixties/Seventies design magazine covers perhaps, but less resolved, more visually challenging

/exhilarating. Take *Ellipse Ellipse Ellipse*: I grasp the placement of the light marine green of the block which fills the lower right quarter: edge facing us, top receding. One ellipse painted on its top face. The top and bottom ellipses flattening the image;



Ellipse, Ellipse, Ellipse 2020
Unique pigment print
on Hahnemühle Photorag, 40×32 inches

graphic symbols. *But...* that lower ellipse (almost a circle) doesn't quite line up at the bottom (*another clue*). The top one has a slight shadow. And the middle one could be a hole. It has the strange quality of looking through a window that has symbols painted on the glass — the same push and pull. The texture on the green and chalky magenta panels pulls the background forward. (I now see the magenta panel is in front of the green. Is the back green the same as the foreground block with the yellow from the base reflected into it?). The colours are less accommodating; a deliberate suppression of harmony. There is a nod to the painting of Mary Heilmann and recent abstract painting. For some reason I'm particularly taken by the hint of a pink line left uncovered at the base of the front-facing edge of the marine green block. **Erin's works require close viewing; this is where they reveal themselves (up to a point). They apprehend you immediately but take time to properly experience. Below are my notes on *Circle Circle*, in which I try to *navigate* the image:** “—cubist emoji; Domus? The rear a circle, as opposed to the foreground ellipse (hole) — anamorphic? But it looks stuck on (is that a shadow, bottom right?). Cubism feels right — simultaneous viewpoints. Initially, the dominant view seems to be that of a foreground leading towards a horizon line — where the cerulean blue meets the olive green. Seeing the tops of the red and pink blocks confirms



Circle, Circle 2020
Unique archival pigment print
on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper, 32×40 inches

this. But the rear circle introduces an invisible hinge directly behind the pink block, flattening the image. The top edge of the pink block has a warm tinge as though reflecting another colour above, just out of view (the golden hour?). The just-right asymmetry of the composition assuages the (not unpleasant) frustration of (not) identifying the picture plane.” Let’s return to *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the most commonly reproduced still from the film, that of the figures standing in the ornamental garden. Neither the cone-shaped topiary

nor the statues have shadows — it looks like an over-cast scene — but the figures do: long, end-of-the-day shadows. Director Resnais had the shadows painted on the gravel. A section from the voiceover seems — for me — apt as a summation and a (more poetic) guide to the experience of looking at Erin’s photographs:

“The park of this hotel was a kind of garden la francaise without any trees or flowers, without any foliage... Gravel, stone, marble and straight lines marked out rigid spaces, areas without mystery. At first glance, it seemed impossible to lose your way... At first glance... Down straight paths, between statues with frozen gestures and granite slabs, where even now, you were losing your way forever, in the stillness of the night, alone with me.”



Last Year at Marienbad (Production still), directed by Alain Resnais, Screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1961

Richard Paul is an artist working with video and photography, focusing particularly on moments of perceptual slippage. In addition to producing his own work, he has performed numerous, conflicting roles, including running the project space Hoxton Distillery (2000–2004), teaching in higher education, curating exhibitions and playing in a band. Recent exhibitions include: a video commission and screening at Tate St. Ives; a solo at Theodore Art, NY; and less recently—in 2009—his solo exhibition at Seventeen, titled *I was a teenage hand model too*. Richard Paul (b.1965, Paisley, Scotland) lives and works in London.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition Erin O’Keefe, *Certain Things*
4th November – 19th December 2020 at **Seventeen** 270–276 Kingsland Road
London E8 4DG Design by Hanzer Liccini

Seventeen