

A Painter's Photographer: Erin O'Keefe's Bewitching Shapes

By R.C Baker on May 15, 2018



"Built Work #3" (2018), "Built Work #4" (2018)



COURTESY MORGAN LEHMAN

When I first walked into the gallery, I mistook Erin O'Keefe's photographs for smooth-surfaced paintings, with an intense but exquisitely tuned palette and dynamic abstract

compositions. Everything about them — the triangular shadows cast across two emerald-green rectangles by a mottled yellow crosspiece — recalled the way a painting’s built-up strokes impart a sense of time passing, of long sessions in the studio.

When I finally determined, through some nose-close viewing, that these were, in fact, photos, I said a little critic’s prayer: “Please let these not be Photoshopped.” It makes a difference, because if the fragile equipoise O’Keefe (born 1962) achieves in her constructions was born of manipulating pixels, the images would still boast impressive layouts and a feisty palette, but much of their physical wondrousness would dissipate.



“Built Work #8” (2018)

COURTESY MORGAN LEHMAN

In *Built Work #8* (created this year, as are the other works in the show), two right triangles stand before blue, pink, and gray rectangles. A heavier plane matches the height of the blue element, and all of the objects align on one off-center axis. There is a communion in that vertical line, as if these planes were seeking something greater than the sum of their plain-Jane individualities. They attain it, and then some, not least because they cast translucent green shadows, pitched at perpendicular right angles to the vertical fulcrum, undermining with a playful frisson O’Keefe’s carefully structured architectonics. The geometric characters in *Built Work #5* also align on a vertical, as if they were revolving

around a maypole. As I studied the slightly irregular joins and roughly brushed surfaces, I said aloud to a fellow gallery-goer, “Damn, I think these are straight-up photographs.”



“Built Work #5” (2018)

COURTESY MORGAN LEHMAN

A gallerist heard my mutterings and insisted on taking me two blocks north to O’Keefe’s studio, where I could see for myself how the artist achieves her bewitching balancing acts — using only painted boards set precariously on edge with nothing more than an occasional bit of tape on the backs to help hold them in place. O’Keefe worked for years as an architect, which gives her insight into — and endless curiosity about — the ways in which walls, ceilings, and floors interact with each other and the spaces they surround. O’Keefe told me she gets her cast-off bits of lumber from woodworkers she contacts on Etsy, a way to sidestep making the cuts herself. Instead, she works with whatever comes out of the box, painting the wood pieces and setting them up against simple, flat backgrounds. In her studio it was fascinating to walk around one tableau-in-progress and watch the angles of light and shadow entwine, then separate, which helps explain why her homely materials find such animation in the final compositions. Using only a digital 35mm camera and a shallow focus, O’Keefe conjures a palpable realm of space and air, a colorful gravitas.



“Built Work #1” (2018), “Built Work #6” (2018)



COURTESY MORGAN LEHMAN

The artist once told an interviewer, “I look at painting a lot. I feel interested in those issues. When I was teaching architecture at design studios, we did this exercise where we would have students take a purist painting and build it as a model. It was fascinating to think about the translation of something and see what would happen when you would try to go backwards from it, to reverse engineer it. We also did another exercise with [Josef] Albers paintings. I would have the students try to render them three dimensionally to see how the color operated.”

One can easily see how Albers’s color studies influenced this work, but when looking at O’Keefe’s rough edges and bluntly painted objects, I instead recalled the bottles, cups, and boxes that Giorgio Morandi, a true “painter’s painter,” would arrange on a battered tabletop in endless variations in the middle of last century. The remorseless observation the Italian master brought to his mundane housewares captured the very colors in the air — those whiffs of reflection and shadow that traverse the spaces between objects. There is a monumental intimacy in Morandi’s *natura morta* canvases, akin to the off-kilter emotions aroused by the surreal piazzas painted by his countryman (and influence), Giorgio de Chirico. O’Keefe’s keen attention to lighting, surface, perspective, and volume similarly conveys an expansive yet intimate range of corporeal heft and formal excitement.



“Built Work #7” (2018), “Built Work #2” (2018)



COURTESY MORGAN LEHMAN

In a perhaps wildly inappropriate analogy, it occurred to me on the subway home that the intensity of O’Keefe’s imagery recalled the flesh-and-blood stuntmen leaping from one fast-moving vehicle to another in *The Road Warrior* — as opposed to the physics-defying CGI hijinks of whichever Marvel blockbuster is currently showing in the multiplexes. O’Keefe’s rich imagery reminds us that amid our virtual cacophony, sometimes you just want to see some skin in the game.