

# ARTFORUM

**Erin O'Keefe**

DENNY GALLERY



Erin O'Keefe, *Things as They Are* #42, 2017, ink-jet print, 20 × 16".

More than a little of the considerable appeal emanating from Erin O'Keefe's photographs lies in the difficulty we encounter deciphering them. With these works—razor-sharp depictions of abstract, brushily painted, sculptural tableaux, for the most part—not only does one struggle to identify the medium, but the compositions traffic in shadowy illusion and spatial ambiguity, making it hard at times to know exactly what is being portrayed. Consequently, the eye moves searchingly across the picture plane, propelled by the pleasures arising from the work's bold construction and rich yet subtly balanced palette, and by the curiosity attending cognitive discontinuity and contradiction.

This show, the artist's second with Denny Gallery, was more or less split down the middle by a bifurcated display of two distinct bodies of work. To the left, from a new series of images titled "Book of Days," 2017–, sat a suite of medium-size, generically cubistic compositions—some contrasting high- and low-key colored shapes, others consisting of color photos of black-and-white forms, or, more accurately, color photos of matte-black forms rendered as many shades of gray via skillful lighting and camera technique. Indeed, the artist's command of her process and materials is impressive. Vaguely figurative cardboard forms have been torqued and angled, then arranged in clusters upon a tabletop in such a way that when seen from the fixed focal point of the camera's viewfinder, each component surrenders a degree of legible autonomy—through befuddling overlap or misleading linear convergence—to the formal cohesion of the resultant image, which is then immaculately printed and presented. Here, O'Keefe effectively reconstructs, for depiction, and with aplomb, the planar faceting and perspectival dispersal of classical Cubism, but with a final perceptual corrective courtesy of the image's still-evident foundation in photographic realism, with its single, overarching vanishing point.

To the right of the gallery entrance lay a string of glistening jewels: small, brightly colored geometric abstractions from the ongoing series "Things as They Are," 2015–. Crisp photos of tabletop constructions once again, these works feature precisely lit, ingenious arrangements of opaque, reflective, or translucent materials. Simple, punchy compositions are struck from the juxtaposition of variously textured planes of flat or graduated color. The viewer's initial response is typically a rush of retinal delight coupled with a quizzical pondering over the material makeup of the constituent parts. Upon close inspection, we see that some of these colored planes appear to consist of opaque surfaces, while others are perhaps a function of lighting. Take *Things as They Are* #42, 2017, an intimately scaled, portrait-format configuration of elements that centers upon a jagged, mirrored form nestling into a convergence of flat planes suggestive of a three-dimensional corner space. On noting the thin line extending beyond the point at which the wall-like surfaces meet the supposed floor, one might surmise that we are looking, end-on, at a sawtooth-shaped piece of tinted, translucent Plexiglas pressed into a right-angled fold of solid material. If so, it would seem that the jagged form is lit in such a way that differently colored shadows or reflections are cast or projected left and right, in perfect symmetry. Warm, harmonious tones of red, pink, burgundy, and ochre quell and consolidate the jittery, angular formation, while the unreality effect sparked by the uncertain material status of each of the elements is cemented in the picture's resistance to tenable depth perception.

As is the case with most abstract photography, be it historical or contemporary, these works place willful obfuscation in dynamic tension with objective disclosure. Once identified as photographs (and despite our diminished faith in representational veracity in an era of pervasive digital image editing), O'Keefe's works draw the viewer into a conscious examination of components as an instinctual effort to wrest meaning and purpose from equivocal information. It is this sense of quandary, in combination with the artist's mastery of technical and formal principles—her ability to extract such a remarkable concinnity from the collapse of painterly, sculptural, and photographic effects—that makes these works so exceptional.

—Jeff Gibson