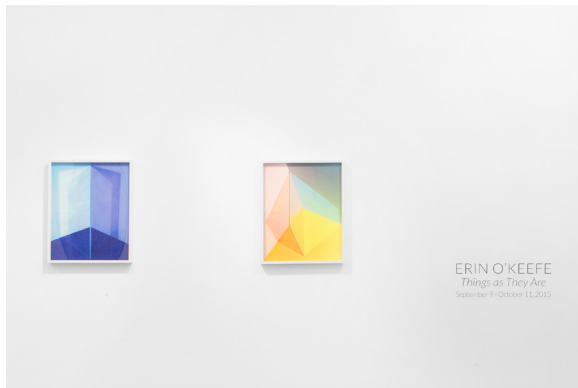


Erin O'Keefe, Things As They Are @Denny

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / September 15, 2015

JTF (just the facts): A total of 13 color photographs, framed in white and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the two room gallery space. All of the works are archival pigment prints mounted on museum board or Sintra, and were made in 2015. The ten prints in the main gallery (from the Things As They Are series) are each sized 20×16, while the three prints in the back room (from the Natural Disastersseries) are each sized 31×24. All of the images are available in editions of 3+2AP. (Installation shots below.)



Comments/Context: Erin O'Keefe's newest photographs pull us into a graceful dance with the nuances of photographic optics. They're the kind of pictures that merit careful up close observation, as her sculptural made-to-be-photographed constructions intentionally upend our spatial assumptions, testing our powers of perception and forcing us to reconsider the boundaries of the flattened two-dimensional reality imposed by the camera. Her combinations of painted boards, wooden sticks/dowels, and Plexiglas sheets form the raw material for deliberately manufactured visual uncertainty, where meticulously combined layers of filtered colors blend with unexpected geometries and disorienting patterns.

In this period of increasing artistic intermingling, it isn't surprising or unusual that O'Keefe's photographs start as small-scale sculpture (or perhaps architecture if we are more concerned with the definition of the space rather than the form), take a short detour into painting (and/or experiential light-based art, for an intense investigation of Albers-like additive color), and ultimately arrive back at photography and its own inward looking concerns. This kind of interdisciplinary deconstruction of the medium has its roots in the work of Florence Henri and more recently Barbara Kasten, but has been expanded aggressively of late by contemporary artists like Jessica Eaton, Yamini Nayar, and many others. In fact, O'Keefe finds herself among a growing cohort of artists unpacking the foundations of photographic seeing by building, rethinking its limits with more freedom than ever before.



Her works from the *Things As They Are* series are an exercise in taking a handful of simple elements and recombining them into controlled iterative complexity. Her setup is the same for all the images in the project: a bare space of three sides (two painted tabletop “walls” and a painted “floor”, coming together at a square corner), interrupted by generally one sheet of clear or tinted Plexi and one or more wooden sticks, with light cast through the space at varying angles. While these items may not seem like much as a starting point, this reductive set of stripped-down inputs generates a surprisingly robust selection of visual outcomes in O'Keefe's capable hands.

Depending on the camera angle, the vertices of the planes, the thick edges of the Plexi, and the thinner lines of the wooden rods all become straight linear forms like drawn lines that divide the compositions into sections, often overlapping and intersecting creating polygons of various shapes. With this framework in place, the light becomes the star, or actually the cast shadows if we are being specific. When the walls are painted different colors (say blue and pink, for example) and a yellow tinted filter is inserted, the shadows create tactile color mixtures with the underlying wall hues, with yellow and blue making a green

rectangle and yellow and light pink creating a light orange polygon. Bright candy colors and soft pastels emerge and build on top of one another, with stripes, triangles, cubes, and other hard edged geometries popping out, a delicate balance between sharpness and softer blur massaging the tensions. The best of the works are those that seem to have an innate sense of unlikely precision in space, twisting our view into exacting symphonic alignment, with the intimate knowledge of how the perplexing architecture in three dimensions will be collapsed into two.

O'Keefe's works from her *Natural Disaster* series are meaningfully more overstuffed, playful, and chaotic in both conception and execution, introducing mirrors, images of carved stone drapery, painted boards, and colored tape into larger studio installations, and tossing the materials into the visual blender. What emerges is a maelstrom of contradictory planes and multiplied reflections, layered in seemingly impossible ways, where long metal rods don't seem to line up or billowing folds get chopped into Cubist-style misaligned pieces. These works are more optically disorienting than her more elemental color studies; here she's pared pack the color set in favor of highlighting more conflicting and confusing visual effects and discrepancies. As with the other series, part of what's exciting is that the pictures aren't made by digital manipulation – they're in-real-life distortions and instabilities consciously derived from painstaking physical construction.

Given O'Keefe's architectural background, her formal thinking about the malleable qualities of space, light, and color gives her a different perspective than those who are aggressively interrogating photography from the chemical or digital inside. With set-ups and model-making becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary image production, perhaps artists with architectural minds will be the ones that reorient the discussion in unexpected directions, with formalism, craft, process, and abstraction taking on new meanings. If this quietly refined show is any guide, O'Keefe will be one to watch.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced as follows. The 20×16 prints are \$2800 each (in rising editions), while the 31×24 prints are \$4000 each. O'Keefe's work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.