

ARTFORUM

October, 2007

Laura Letinsky

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY 535 West 22nd Street, 3rd Floor September 15–October 27

R. B. Kitaj once wrote, in a foreword to a book of Lee Friedlander's work, "The religion of photography rather insists on remembrance." Nowhere does that notion seem more resonant than in Laura Letinsky's luxuriously lit still lifes, in which what asks to be remembered always occurs before our witness. In this exhibition, titled "To Say It Isn't So," Letinsky moves her elegiac images of abandoned tables after a meal, formally reminiscent of classic Dutch and Flemish still lifes, out of their domestic sphere and into the studio. This time, rather than using religiously fraught objects such as decaying fruit and dead flowers, Letinsky chooses contemporary detritus (crushed Styrofoam cups, paper plates, white gift boxes) to populate her tables, with the aim of shedding the burdens of symbolism. These white or neutral-toned objects, bathed in natural light, challenge our sensitivity in perceiving them, not only against white tables but also against the gallery walls. A monochromatic decision like this could easily come off as overly self-conscious or academic, but Letinsky's averts such a fate with the images' stark evocations of loss and temporality. Indeed, these painterly, large-format photographs are saturated with the quietest nostalgia: Gifts have been opened, cake has been eaten, and the cast of characters has vanished, leaving behind its debris. According to the artist, this new series is intended to do away with both symbolic inferences and narrative; but it is the lost narrative—implied but, finally, irretrievable—that infuses the work with a depth and lyricism beyond its formal concerns. Those familiar with Letinsky's work will not be disappointed, though they may balk at seeing a Target bag and a ripped McDonald's cup included in her otherwise unassuming repertoire. Suddenly, brand associations—louder, it would seem, than any earlier religious ones—threaten to upset the decorum of Letinsky's meticulously considered aesthetic, reminding us that even the richest, most private pleasures often take place at the periphery of the banal.

—Debra Kuan



Untitled #6 (From "To Say It Isn't So"), 2007, chromogenic print, 38 x 50".



THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 15, 2007

LAURA LETINSKY

With nods to both Irving Penn and Jan Groover, Letinsky makes large color photographs of elegantly dishevelled tabletop still-lives that are at once antic and restrained. In her newest series, however, she's no longer imagining the remains of a dinner party; the wine-stained tablecloth has been replaced by a wrinkled sheet of white paper, the stemware by a bitten Styrofoam cup or a crumpled Sunkist can. Although there's no pretense that these arrangements are accidental, they never feel anxious or overdetermined, and every bit of color (a crushed berry, a pink net bag) pops in these witty, otherwise white-on-white landscapes. Through Oct. 27. (Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

photo-eye
BOOKLIST

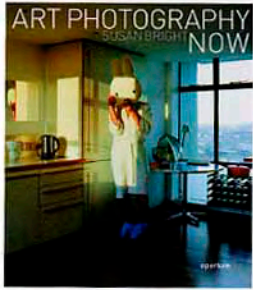
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Photography Fights Back

Art Photography Now
surveys the situation
By AVIS CARDELLA



Excerpt from Article:

That in mind, the recently published *Art Photography Now* (Aperture) affords Bright the chance to show off some of photography's burgeoning muscle. And that she does brilliantly, selecting eighty of the top names in the art photography world today including Tina Barney, Cindy Sherman, Richard Misrach, Craig McDean, Andreas Gursky, Nan Goldin, Gregory Crewdson, Joel Sternfeld, Mario Testino, Laura Letinsky, Martin Parr and Philip-Lorca diCorcia.



I Did Not Remember I Had Forgotten: Untitled #63, 2002, Laura Letinsky

lauraletinsky



Laura Letinsky, #60, Chicago, from *Hardly More Than Ever*, digital C-print, 29.2x37 in., 2002.

I began to think about the idea of leftovers. It became important for me on a number of levels, because it has to do with what you do after the promise, when you realize the promise is not possible. This is fundamental

to any utopian notion--the promise and its demise. You can't have utopia without its loss.

interview by julie farstad

What's a nice Canadian like you doing in Chicago?

Well, I came here for my current job at the University of Chicago, mainly. I went to University of Manitoba for undergrad and did my MFA at Yale. I'd always thought I'd go back to Canada, but then when I started applying for teaching positions, it was almost as if there were two different circuits, and somehow I'd gotten onto the United States circuit. The opportunities were much fewer in Canada, whereas I kept on getting teaching jobs here. And I felt comfortable being an artist in this milieu. Part of it is the kind of work I make, and part of it's just the friends I've made.

Do you like being part of the Chicago art world?

I'm comfortable here, but it has taken me a long time. With the predominance of the School of the Art Institute and the University of Illinois at Chicago, everyone in the art scene knows one another very well, so I felt like an outsider for a number of years. Also, the kind of work I do is--well, it's "Yale" photography. If art is a religion, I went to a different church, you know? And yet it's what I believe. I'm pretty open, but this is what I make. It's about trusting oneself, and trusting that if you do something long enough, it becomes who you are. So I feel a measure of acceptance now.

What drew you to the photographic medium in the first place?

Initially, I *wasn't* drawn to it. It was more of a fallback; I found I couldn't take painting without a prerequisite fundamentals course, but I *could* take photography. I did horribly for the first part of the semester--so horribly that I took up the professor's offer to meet with students. During my meeting, something she said finally made sense to me, something about making a picture versus taking a picture. I began thinking about the photograph differently, and this enabled me to throw myself into the work. I thought about the photograph as a translation of the world: three dimensions--or four, if you will--made into two. When I was finally able to do painting, I was simply too enamored of the materials, the stuff of painting. I couldn't figure out what to do with those materials that I was so in awe of. Whereas with photography, there was a kind of love/hate relationship with the medium--loving the descriptive possibilities, the way it enabled me to stare so unabashedly, and yet hating the way it seemed like the truth, like proximity, and wasn't. Perhaps it just suited my personality.

Audiences who are just now coming to your work might be surprised to learn that you started out photographing people.

I'd been photographing people for a number of years, starting when I was 18, 19, or 20--around there. I was really taken by the work of Diane Arbus; she was my hero/goddess. I started using a 2-1/4 medium format camera and carrying around a strobe, photographing people in public at fairs, contests--different places that involved showing and looking. I was convinced that by working in this way I was avoiding any charge of voyeurism, as people knew they were in public, on display. Carrying the camera, to quote Arbus, gave me permission to look, to stare at those around me. At that point, I actually thought I would always take pictures with people; I thought I couldn't take a picture and *not* have a person in it. Then, when I was a graduate student--like all graduate students--I was asked to question everything I do. The flash I'd used had become so mannered; I'd come to rely upon it to make the picture look a particular way. One of the questions that was asked of me, and that I asked of myself, was: what would things look like with a different light? So I began using natural light. We were also given an assignment in which we were asked to bring in three visual images or objects we loved and wished we had made, or felt some kind of affinity to. I brought in a Belloq photograph, a Julia Margaret Cameron, and a Bellini Madonna--these intimate, personal, romantic images. Meanwhile, I'd been making pictures of people that were so different from what I proclaimed my affection for, and my professors and peers said, "Why are you photographing *that* stuff? If you love things like this, why don't you make images more in their sentiment--images about love, romance, and people?" I'd always been really wary of that, because I thought the pictures would be too over the top, too sentimental. But I started thinking about how I could make pictures about *love*. I was interested, for example, in the way pop songs say exactly what you want to say and feel

completely individual and idiosyncratic, when of course they're programmed and manipulated. What comes first--the feeling or the song? Do I feel this way because the song tells me to feel this way? Does popular culture inform how I feel? I was interested in the tension between these personal emotions that are really true--when you're in love with someone, there's no denying that feeling--yet at the same time are completely socially scripted. So I began trying to make pictures about love that were different and more complex than that kind of Hallmark or mass-media approach. I was also starting to read a lot of feminist film theory, beginning with Laura Mulvey's 1976 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" essay, which was seminal--as ironic as that term is--to feminist film criticism. Other theorists included Mary Anne Doane and Teresa de Lauretis. I was interested in how they dealt with the whole issue of the gaze, and how, in Mulvey's view, "looking" is reduced to the looker--the person with power and agency--and the looked-at, the subject who is without agency or power. I was interested in looking, and being looked at, as places of *pleasure*, albeit wrapped within power issues. So I started trying to make pictures that asked some of those questions about who gets looked at, who looks, what these positions entail, and so on.

Your *Venus Inferred* series, which spanned 1990-96, shows people involved in some sort of intimate relationship within the secret spaces of the home--they're embracing, lying together in bed, or getting dressed in the morning. The earlier work with the strobe, and in public, suggested a kind of spectacle. Now, we're being drawn into a dialogue with the private persona, the way people are behind closed doors.

Absolutely. And lots of things amazed me when I started doing that. I mean, I was surprised people would let me photograph them--it had just never occurred to me to ask before, or to consider that people *liked* being photographed. Then I realized that, just like in public, people like being paid attention to. Which relates to these other questions I was asking: what does it mean to be demanding of the gaze, to be subject to the gaze? It's a position of pleasure. It's not just being objectified; it isn't about a removal of power. Rather, there's a dynamic about being looked at that's really interesting, and my role in that is sort of halfway between. Another strange connotation of this location is the primal scene, or the idea of watching your parents having sex. I'm watching these two people engage in a love act--if not sexually then in some psychological space--so I'm enacting a notion of the peeping-tom. But I'm also *allowed in*, as an almost objective observer. Then, in about 1995, after four or five years of the project, I started photographing myself and my partner. I'd always shied away from photographing myself because I was scared of making something like a self-portrait. I saw my friends do it, because that's what you do when you're in undergrad and you're a woman. You take pictures of--

Yourself naked.

Right! And I'd always thought, "I'm not going to do that." But I started to realize that the pictures I was taking of other people were as much autobiography as any picture I took of myself.

Were you posing them?

Yes and no. I would have an idea. For example, I'm interested in religious painting, and the ways we express emotion and psychology through gesture, as handed down from media--which includes religious painting. The way the Madonna touches the Christ child has become universally read as a gesture of love--so you'll see an ad for Eternity perfume, with Christy Turlington holding an infant in the same manner as a Bellini Madonna. It's the same format, the same gesture. What's really interesting to me is the way that stuff gets transferred from this sacred environment to this secular environment, and how, post-Enlightenment, individual love has taken over whatever religion used to be.



Left: Laura Letinsky, *Laura and Eric: Dress* from the series *Venus Inferred*, C-print, 19x23 in., 1995. Right: *Francesco and Dov* from the series *Venus Inferred*, C-print, 19x23 in., 1991. Courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

You were asking your subjects to do something pretty intimate in front of you, and on camera for all to see. Were they models you hired, or people you already knew?

They started out being friends, then friends of friends, then friends of friends of friends. At the beginning, I was living in New Haven, which is a really small community. It was like Hyde Park in some ways, without Chicago being so close by. If I was in a bar, chances were there were students there, so I could go up to people and say, "Hi--I just graduated from Yale; would you let me photograph you?" Then, in 1992, I moved to Seattle and put an ad in the newspaper asking for subjects, and found people that way. I also asked my acquaintances, friends, anyone. Then I moved to Houston in '93 and put another ad in the paper--and for some reason, I had the weirdest responses. Someone would say, "I'd like a blonde to be photographed with," and I'd say, "No, no; I'm not supplying you. You have to bring your own date. Sorry!" (*laughs*) Or I was asked, "Are you all naked, too?" And I'd have to explain, "I'm not into that..."

"This is art!"

But then I did have a couple people answer the ad whom I ended up photographing. Using the ad engaged a different class issue, a different population, and it shifted the project slightly--which was interesting for me.

Did things ever get out of hand--when you felt uneasy?

No. For whatever reason, I never let myself go anyplace I felt really uncomfortable.

Have you ever photographed a non-heterosexual couple?

I did for a while, but then I felt the project was turning into a kind of survey. Granted, I'm a heterosexual woman. Not that one is strictly heterosexual; one of the issues in the photographs *is* gender, and how gender gets played out. But I just felt that photographing non-heterosexual couples was a different project, and it seemed too much like tokenism in any way I could conceive of doing it. One thing that always comes up in discussing those photographs is whiteness. Almost everyone in them is white--maybe there's 10 percent who are not. But I tried to figure out: how much of this is autobiographical? How much of this is *my* story, *my* fantasy, *my* little fairy tale about love and romance? And again, it was a compromise.

I've had similar reactions; people ask me why I don't paint boys. And part of my answer is: it's not my experience, so the work would risk turning into a sort of cultural tourism.

That's what it felt like, too. And while there are things I or anyone else can identify with, I felt that if I were gay, I'd be insulted if somebody heterosexual thought they had to do this for me. That community has its own voice. I don't need to speak for them.

I'm interested in the idea you brought up earlier, of the power of being watched. When I was in grad school, I attended a Camille Paglia lecture that got into this big debate about stripping and whether it's empowering or victimizing. Her view was that it's very empowering, but I think that opinion is problematic, because I see it as both, in a way.

Absolutely.

And I see that going on in your work, as well. Your subjects definitely have a sense of vulnerability, which was maybe too simplified by the gaze theories, but I also feel there's a power in staring back at the camera, or being the subject.

Well, Madonna is another case in point, because she's in control of her image and the way it's marketed, which is an interesting problem. I mean, why do we look to her? Because she's beautiful, yes--but then she *presents* herself that way; she has power because of the way she looks and the intention she defends. Another way it made sense to me was through some contemporary psychoanalytic theories about mother-and-child or infant-parent relations, which maintain that, in order for a healthy relationship to develop, it's intrinsic that the child feel the gaze of the mother and also that the mother feel the child reciprocating and looking back at the mother, or caretaker. So this sense of looking and being looked at is necessary in establishing relationships; it's not the negative association that voyeurism typically entails. Freud also talks about the ability to switch between subject and object. Those positions are not fixed; in fact, they are mutable and they do change. One can be subject and object within the same situation. There's an exchange of power, an exchange of pleasure. Certainly, it can be problematic, but I think it's too reductive to claim that to look is *only* a position of power, and to be looked at is *only* a position of passivity. That doesn't make sense; it's not the way our culture, or any of us, operates. When you look at your lover and your lover looks at you, it's *fun*. To say that one shouldn't take pleasure in that just seems so bloody puritanical, and so allied with other kinds of oppressive regimes that I'm not thrilled about. I remember around the time I was doing the *Venus Inferred* work--in 1991 or '92--I went through Grand Central Station in New York City, and on one side of the station was this feminists' table asking for signatures on an anti-porn petition. I went up to them and said, "I can't sign this! I support feminism but I won't support anti-porn." Because on the *other* side of the station was a religious-right movement that was also pro-censorship. The moment these two fields get along, I want no part of it. I think it's really dangerous that feminists align themselves with these kinds of fundamentalist movements, in the sense that they say we must deny the gaze altogether, because it's "bad." It just seems so wrong-headed to eradicate it, or reduce it in that way, and I'm not ready to give it up. I did an interview with Lauren Berlant for the book of *Venus Inferred*, and at one point she commented, "You want to have the promise and you want to have the problematic." And I said, "Yeah, I want both. I want the promise and I want the possibility of the promise." I know that's odd, but I think it's better to deal with things on a more complicated or nuanced level than to say, "If I can't have it all in this utopian way, I'm going to get rid of the whole thing entirely."

I think many of us who grew up with mothers who were influenced by second-wave feminism thought that, to be a feminist, you had to throw out your sexuality. With that point of view, you throw out desire, and you throw out the whole pleasure of looking and being looked at. Now a lot of the next-generation artists and feminists are saying, "No, no, no! We want the pleasure!"

And the ability to play. Instead of saying, "No, play is bad, because men are the ones who have controlled it," they're recognizing that there are other ways we can deal with this.

And play is much more anti-hierarchical! It's a really great resolution to patriarchy, because it's constantly subverting any one authority.

Absolutely. And it allows you to work out other kinds of things.

Though from the reviews I've seen, it seems people take a very specific, one-line read of *Venus Inferred*--that it's just about the woman returning the gaze. But the way you shoot these images renders the position of the viewer unstable--sometimes our sightline is more direct, and other times we only get to see the reflection of the subjects in mirrors. So I see it more as the back-and-forth of flirtation--that continual exchange of power.

I agree. Some pictures are more one way, and some are more another way, because they're static, in-between moments on a continuum. I really felt like I was working out different possibilities. In the pictures I took of myself, there's this idea that I am the photographer, so I am the author--yet I'm subjugating myself through the gaze, so I'm making myself into the subject at

the same time I'm the object. These notions of subject/object/author, and content/form/fiction, become really interestingly wound up for me.

And for our non-S&M audience, *Venus Inferred* is a pun, right?

Yes, on Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*--which is where the term "masochism" comes from--and his idea that all love is a power relationship.

So there's an analogous relationship between the gaze dynamic of the photographer and subject, and the power dynamic inherent in these intimate interpersonal relationships.

Yes!



Laura Letinsky, *Laura and Eric: Mermaid* from the series *Venus Inferred*, C-print, 19x23 in., 1996. Courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

After the *Venus Inferred* series, you transitioned from photographing people to shooting still lifes. How did that come about?

It was somewhat circumstantial, and somewhat self-directed. I really felt I'd come to the end of the *Venus Inferred* project. I wanted to turn away from that narcissism of love and relationships that I'd been completely immersed in. I also realized that one of the things that really impressed me was the construction of the space in the photograph--how people's belongings, and the way they're described photographically, really told a lot. I saw a lot of potential there. So I found myself wanting to

empty the space out; the people were moving more toward the edges of the image, or they were being broken up by the mirror space, or disappearing. Then I switched formats and started using this monster of a camera, this stupid 4x5 that I love, but it's like an elephant...

It looks like a robot!

Yeah. But because of its size, it slowed me down and allowed me to make the pictures differently. The larger negative produces a more detailed image, so I was able to look more closely at things, and then picture--that is, photograph more photographically--what was around me. Actually, I'd started trying to make still lifes as early as 1994, but I couldn't reconcile myself to that traditional notion of the still life as a representation of symbolic objects. I kept choosing objects that seemed to have some kind of meaning and trying to make pictures of them, and they were just dumb--because I actually don't believe that we use symbols, or that symbols have value in our culture. We're such a mixed culture that things don't gain the kind of meaning they did when you lived in a small town in the 17th century, and everyone knew that a lap dog meant fidelity, a pomegranate meant fecundity, and an orange meant whatever. We just don't have that same kind of commonality right now, for better or worse--I think for better. I began to realize that what was important to me in the Dutch/Flemish still-life tradition was the construction of an atmosphere, and the way objects were imbued with meaning through their description--and also the way in which their representation showed that that society cared about that subject matter. I began to ask why those people cared about that stuff. What was it about that particular place? The 17th-century Northern Europeans were a mercantile trading culture--they were early globalists--and very capitalist-oriented. There are so many similarities to our culture in their ideas of capitalism, Puritanism, and the conflict or ambivalence about wealth and prosperity. You see it all over today, when you have SUVs driving around consuming large amounts of gasoline, and then you have the Mini. I also became very interested in the decoration and aesthetics of the home--at the time, there was this proliferation of shelter magazines, from *Martha Stewart Living* to *Elle Decor* and *Nest* and *Wallpaper*--and how manipulating that domestic environment becomes a way of expressing one's identity. Meanwhile, the stuff you can't notice, that escapes your consciousness, reveals your identity as well, so the home communicates who you are despite yourself. In trying to control it, you're really trying to control who you are, but there are certain things you can't control. I was interested in control, accidents, and contrivance. The home isn't a naturalistic space; it's very much a *made* space, and constant work, constant maintenance. So out of that came the series *Morning, and Melancholia*, which dates from 1997 to 2001.

How would you characterize *Morning, and Melancholia*?

The title is a reference to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," which talks about two possible responses to loss, and the idea that everyone suffers trauma in the process of becoming a subject. You go through this transition when you have to separate from something or someone--in Freud's example, from the mother--and how do you cope with it? You either go through mourning--which is a healthy process in which you grieve the loss of the idealized object, but then make a good substitute and move on--or become melancholic. The melancholic embraces the mourning, the pain, and never lets go of it, because it would mean letting go of the lost object. So the pain becomes a kind of substitute for whatever was lost. Also, I was really interested in the idea of the photograph as death. The photograph shows something that can no longer ever exist; the picture is a construction of something that only exists for the moment of the picture. In that sense, the photograph embodies the possibilities of both mourning and melancholia. On the one hand, it's the substitute that allows you to let go. On the other hand, it's an inadequate substitute because it's not the real thing--it's this plastic, flat object. It satisfies, and it's *not* satisfying. It sets up a repetition compulsion. Christian Metz talks about this idea of the photograph being not quite satisfactory, how it sets up this fetishistic response that necessitates more photographs, and the desire to take a picture. Yet what's pictured is only possible photographically. It's not actually real; it's a kind of myth.

That also seems to relate to Freud's idea of the death drive: you can't get over the separation with the mother, so you seek that point of loss again and again, in the hope you can eventually master it. In a sense, that's what language does, and that's what photography does. Every time you take a photo you think you're capturing the moment, but it's already dead--so you're stuck again. It's an endless search.

That was happening, as well. Anecdotally, in 1997, my partner had a DAAD, which is the German equivalent of a Guggenheim or Fulbright in Berlin, and I went to Germany with him. I knew the *Venus Inferred* project was finished and I thought, "OK, I'm going to figure out what I want to make pictures of." I didn't speak the language, and we were living in this big, empty, sort of dilapidated house that was built in the 1920s. He would be working and I would be reading, and then I'd cycle off to the market, go get groceries, and then cook for five hours, making these elaborate meals. Then we'd go out and stay up late at night, and the next morning there would be all this debris. I began to look at the debris and think about the idea of leftovers. It became important for me on a number of levels, because it has to do with what you do after the promise,

when you realize the promise is not possible. This is fundamental to any utopian notion--the promise and its demise. You can't have utopia without its loss, and so you're always stuck in this position. What do you do? Do you mourn the loss of it and feel somehow tragic, or is there some other way of seeing it? I was also thinking about the fact that we live in this culture that's calling itself "post." We've got postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcapitalism, postglobalism, postfeminism. What does it mean to be "after" something? It's this idea that the narrative has already occurred; the meal has been eaten, the cornucopia has been consumed, something has been consummated, and this is what's left in the early morning light. All the knowledge we have, all the ideas that have been handed down to us--everything is transmitted to us through a sediment that has settled. There is no original. So the idea of the leftover just seemed really fitting for me; I was fascinated by it. And I'd always kept around stuff that was dead. I would get flowers, let them die, and just leave them out, or I would keep fruit that had started to mold because I thought it was so beautiful.

It seems a frustration for many artists to find themselves in this "post-everything" era--or at least, as Arthur Danto and many others claim, a time that is "post-art." We've found ourselves stuck in a time not of invention, but rather of looking at what has been left to us.

Absolutely. I never felt, even when I started making art, that there was the possibility of saying something new. Rather, I was always interested in trying to deal with what was already here. And I would argue that if there's a potential for anything new, it lies in using those "givens." Things change, new things get said, culture and materials begin to shift, but at the same time, a lot of stuff is about rehashing or re-entering a certain kind of dialogue. I guess I've always been aware of how much I'm influenced by the things I look at. People are smart, and visually sophisticated, even if they don't realize it. I teach a fundamentals course at the University of Chicago, Visual Language 101, and one of the first things I tell my students--and they're increasingly more and more aware of this--is that they might not think they know a thing about art or about seeing, but they do. I say, "Look at what you're wearing. What are your choices of jeans? You're wearing socks that match your sweaters. You made all these choices about how you look, what you buy to drink, what you buy to eat, and it's all based on visual information that comes to you." I try to make them more aware of how they're being marketed to, and develop visual understanding, or visual literacy. That's the awareness that enables me to look at Marshall Field's Christmas displays, and look at 17th-century Baroque painting, and see all these different references and crossovers that really interest me. So I don't feel this "post-everything" moment as a burden; rather, I'm really curious about it. I'm fascinated by the way stuff has different importance at different times, and why certain movements will resurface, or play back, in contemporary culture.

In 2002, you started a new series, *I did not remember I had forgotten*.

In 2001, I got a Guggenheim and went to Europe to photograph again. This time, I wanted to go to Rome, because Rome is just so "left-over"--there's so little contemporary art. Anyway, I was looking at a lot of old paintings--which I've always done--but as it happened, I lived a block away from a church that had these two amazing Caravaggios, a Velázquez, and all these religious paintings, and I wound up going in there every day. Eventually it struck me--duh!--that the Last Supper was a scene of food and a narrative of leftovers. The food on the table was like a sub-character, a supporting cast to the main characters. I began to wonder what would happen if I took the main characters out and just had what was left--the table and the atmosphere. So I started to structure some new photographs in that way, thinking about how, in religious paintings, the table and the food play out this biblical and mythological depiction without the characters. I wanted there to be a palpable absence, this feeling of something missing--like it's the end of the play and the curtain has not only fallen, but re-opened, and now they're sweeping out the theater. I also began to think about light differently, because in a lot of religious painting you often get two different lighting sources--a cool one and a warm one, or a golden glow.

The divine light.

Exactly. I began to play with the possibility of that kind of lighting against a cooler light. And when I started photographing intensely again, beginning in 2001 and continuing into the summer of 2002, the work really shifted for me.

In what ways?

Well, the title of that series comes from St. Augustine. There's this book on memory where he says, "One would never say I did not remember I had forgotten"--but I was thinking, "No, that's not right!" Actually, I felt I had just come to this moment where I did not remember that I had forgotten, and it had to do with music. I'd gone for three years without listening to music. I would drive in the car and I would want silence, or I would listen to talk shows. Then for some reason I began listening to the radio, and some of the CDs I had around, and it was almost like drinking water after being really thirsty. I took such pleasure in it. Somehow, I did not remember that I'd forgotten to turn on the music. I'd been stopping myself from going to

these places music can take you, and then it sort of opened up for me--or I opened it up--and I began making work about that experience.

How did that translate into the photographs?

I think they have this redemptive quality to them, although I don't want religion or spirituality to be associated with them, because I'm really not like that. But something definitely changed. For one thing, those pictures are more empty; I pulled back from the subject matter a little bit so there's more space, more of the content of the room. There's also a kind of delicacy--but also a kind of edge--to the color that feels more precise, although it's really hard for me to articulate how. It feels more right-on: where there is color, it's more intense. And I started being really focused on photographing sweets. Part of it came from having a 4-year-old child, but I was also thinking about how fruit is to candy in the way people think the original scene is to the photograph. Somehow fruit is "found," or natural, and candy is contrived and sweet and desirable--it's manufactured, like civilization or culture. The original scene is seen to be somehow natural or organic, while the photograph, of course, is contrived and artificial. Yet both have elements of each other in them. The fruit is mass-produced and harvested, it's managed with pesticides--

It's just as factory-based as the candy industry!

Right. And the original scene is just as manufactured, in that I buy blue soap because I like the color of it, or because I think it's going to work better than the yellow soap. Everything in that original scene is stuff I've *chosen*, however consciously or unconsciously.



Left: Laura Letinsky, #38, *Rome*, from *Hardly More Than Ever*, digital C-print, 17x23-3/4 in., 2001. Right: #11, *Berlin*, from *Hardly More Than Ever*, digital C-print, 18-7/8x29-1/4 in., 1997. Courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

You seem to have been very influenced by the history of painting--particularly the art of the Northern Renaissance--and you talk about your work in much the same way a painter would.

Well, as I've come to understand, 17th-century Northern European painting set up the conditions for photography, in that it demanded a kind of monocular seeing. It required equal attention to everything, which is what a photograph does. So photography came along less as an invention, and more as a realization of a way one sees, and a reinforcement of this way of seeing. Martin Jay wrote this great essay on modernizing vision, which talks about how Baroque depictions of space mix the Northern Renaissance tradition--which reflects a capitalist culture of ascribing value to everything, so that everything must be paid attention to and controlled--and the Southern Renaissance tradition, in which the perspectival system is not just about authority, but about relativizing a position. The perspectival image presents one possibility of viewing a scene, but at the same time infers an infinite number of other ways to see it. This Baroque mixing of Northern and Southern traditions creates a very ambiguous, confusing, and fraught space, which is something that really interests me in my pictures--what I call "a sense of unease." For example, there are different possibilities for where gravity is; if you look at one part of the picture in relation to another part, things are slightly off. That's why it's so important for me that the photographs hover between being

painterly--in the sense of light, color, composition, and plasticity--and being insistently photographic. They're photographs on photographic paper; they're made with a camera, they aren't digital effects. I'm really interested in the plasticity of photography and the way one reads it--like, "How can that be possible? That must be digital!" But no, it's *not* digital. Photography is like painting; it's an incredibly plastic medium.

Is analog versus digital technique an issue for you?

The recent works are digital C-prints. I started printing this way in 2002, basically because I couldn't find a place that does analog here in the city. I make an analog print from the enlarger at 20x24 inches, and get the negative scanned on a drum scanner. Then I clean up the scan to get rid of any dust spots, and take it to a person who has a Durst-Epsilon, which basically does the job of the enlarger. It outputs light onto photographic paper, so it's the same paper that I use when I'm printing with an enlarger. I've tried inkjet printing, but the technology isn't where I want it to be yet, in terms of how I want the pictures to look. Also, I want them to be photographs, because there's something flatfooted about a picture. They need to be photographic because that's what they are. There's something humble and Dutch European about that--a kind of Protestant work ethic--but also, the fact that they're photographic communicates a meaning that's vital to the pictures.

One thing I've noticed throughout all of your work, beginning with *Venus Inferred*, is this idea of distance. I'm never *in* someone's space; there's always a gap between me, as viewer, and the subject. With your newer photographs, you're showing me things that have been left behind, but I can never get so close that they become disgusting, which allows me to view the work more poetically, as opposed to interpreting it in a way that brings up a discourse about the grotesque or the body. The objects are always beyond my reach; there's a chasm I cannot bridge. It seems to be about that yearning or melancholy you were talking about earlier. Not only are the objects left behind, but we've lost our connection to them.

When I first started doing the still life work in 2001, I was thinking a lot about point of view, and shifting from that earlier stance as a third-person, objective observer watching a couple, to a kind of play that involved a first-person point of view, as if I were watching myself take the photograph. I began to imagine the viewer as being a person in those stories or in those pictures, looking at the stuff in front of them. Then, in 2002, I started thinking about being a kid, and things being just out of reach--the sweet things, the things that are desirable yet also bad for you. I wanted that push-pull: the wanting but not being able to have, the having but not being able to want.

It seems like all of your titles create some sort of linguistic relationship with a theory, or some intellectual thought, that's meant to cue the viewer. So tell us about the title of your recent Renaissance Society show, *Hardly More Than Ever*.

"Hardly more than ever" is a phrase from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and I chose it to talk about *Morning, and Melancholia* and *I did not remember I had forgotten*, both of which were featured in that show. The phrase specifically interested me because of the qualifier of the word "hardly." If you say, "I love you more than ever," everyone knows what that means, whereas if you say "hardly more than ever," does that mean just a little bit *more* than ever? How can you have more than ever? It's kind of asking for the impossible. Or does it mean *scarcely* more than ever? Is it an accelerant or a diminishment? That ambiguity really interested me in terms of the work: is it an intensification of desire, or just a pile of stuff? I want to argue that it's both, but I don't know if that's just having my cake and eating it, too.

As a teacher, what are some of the issues in photography that you feel are important to impress upon your students?

I'm kind of old-fashioned, kind of a modernist, in the sense that I think the medium imparts the message. You have to be aware of your tools and then use them to say something, because otherwise the work's just a bunch of noise--it's incomprehensible to anyone else. I do believe in understanding what the photograph is. It's light exposed on a light-sensitive surface. The photograph is not a picture of something; it's a *picture*--so formal language applies. Artists are responsible for whatever is in the picture, and one can use accident and chance, but then one has to be aware of that and pay attention to it. When I'm teaching beginning photography, I don't teach things from a purely formal point of view. That's partly a reaction to my own experiences as a beginning photography student. My assignments were all about things like texture and depth of field, and I always felt that no matter what I photographed, those things would be in there--so what was the point? Instead, as a teacher, I try to relate those formal qualities *to* something; I talk about the idea of inclusion and exclusion, how you use the frame to provide context, how light is used to obscure and reveal. When I give a depth-of-field assignment, I talk about the idea of a photograph as a translation of the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface.

You said you started out loving Diane Arbus, who's known for taking photos of freaks or things that seem strange or uncanny. Yet now your subject matter is very domestic and everyday--the quiet moments.

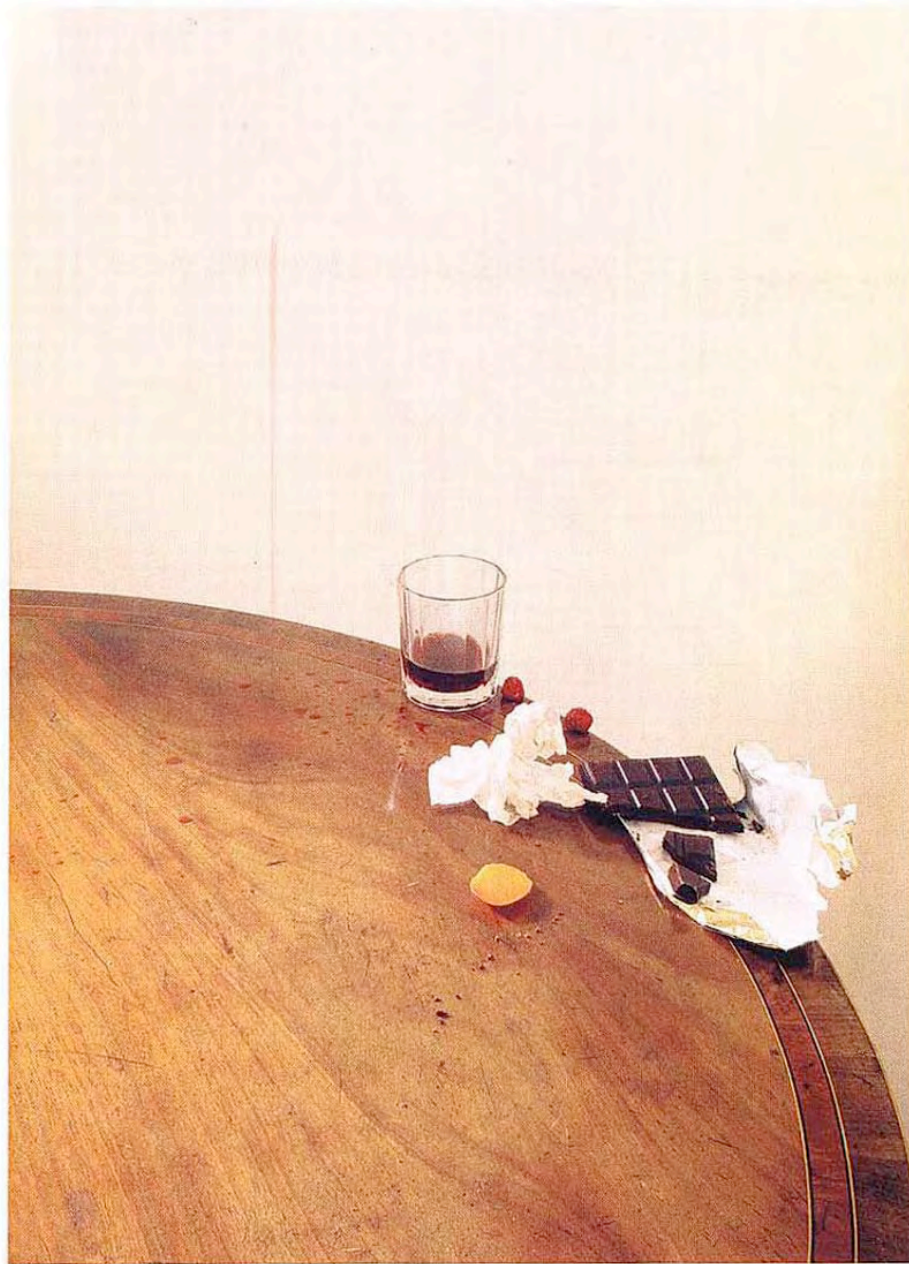
I think I was really afraid to look at myself. I had some resistance toward autobiography--I thought if I just photographed what I knew, then nobody else would be able to identify with it. But I also felt like I needed to try to figure out what I really cared about, and I guess part of my art idea, or the way that I work, is about using that as motivation--because it's so hard to make artwork. It takes so much time, it costs so much money, and there's no guarantee that anyone's even going to like it. So you might as well do something you really care about, because I don't know what other reason there is to do it. Whenever I feel like I'm floundering, or I can't locate what I want to do, I always stop, look around, and think about what makes me feel something. For example, I collect things. I can't afford to get expensive things, but I would always go to thrift stores and buy things I thought were beautiful. I love objects, so I began to photograph that subject, and the still-life work coalesced from there.

So looking at this photograph on your wall, I'm wondering: did you buy that cantaloupe because you thought it would taste good, or because you wanted to shoot it the next day?

That has become inseparable. Now I have an excuse, right? When I go shopping, it's my *work*.

ON EDGE

THE UNSETTLING ARRANGEMENTS IN LAURA LETINSKY'S PHOTOGRAPHS INVITE US TO SPECULATE ON PRIVATE MOMENTS by caroline cunningham



"Untitled #39, Rome, 2001"
(24 1/4 by 17 1/2 inches)
is from Laura Letinsky's
"Morning and Melancholy"
series. The offhand
details of domestic debris
hint at a narrative, enticing
the viewer to imagine
the missing story line.

voyeurism and invite us to invent stories that explain them.

The photographs acknowledge the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting, but the photographer's gaze is modern and unflinching. Her images are cropped to emphasize diagonals and compress space. They draw you in and then throw you off with arrangements that are deliberately provocative: plates and cups are placed at the margins of the frame, poised to fall and shatter; an abandoned lollipop leaves a sticky pink smear, like a kiss, on a plate.

In "Untitled #39, Rome, 2001," a partially eaten chocolate bar rests on the edge of a table; its wrapper floats off the surface like a torn sail. A twisted paper napkin rises up from the scratched surface, poised for flight. Two distinct planes—the table and the white background—flatten the space and trap a nearly empty glass of red wine in the center. The glass seems ready to slide off the table; a pattern of

Laura Letinsky's photographs of deserted tables littered with stained linens, melon rinds, crumpled paper, and coffee cups are poignant records of intimate repasts, and of intimacy itself. Her luminous, large-scale images capture the drama of household debris, making something beautiful and revelatory out of what has been cast aside. They encourage

shimmering red drops indicates that some of its contents have already been spilled. It's like a photograph of a crime scene—everything points to unease and escape.

The Renaissance Society, in Chicago, is having a show of Letinsky's work, "Hardly More Than Ever," through April 19, and will publish a book of the same title later this spring. □

Remains of the day are fodder for Laura Letinsky's still lifes

By Alan G. Artner

Tribune art critic

Published March 25, 2004

For seven years, photographer Laura Letinsky has shot still lifes in color that treat the condition known as letdown.

She acknowledged as much a year ago when she showed some of the pictures and gave the exhibition the comically exaggerated title "Morning, and Melancholia," which suggested not only the burden of cleaning up after a dinner party but also guilt following the indulgence of the night before.

Today, on the occasion of a show of nearly 30 such photographs organized by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, we are reminded that Letinsky's still lifes grew out of an earlier series on intimacy and domesticity, which might have implied a similar letdown through the tackiness of the settings the pictures revealed as her couples made love. There now seems to be an attempt to emphasize a link between the two series. Can it be they have the same theme, that after ecstasy and gluttony alike participants are left with environments that externalize their letdown? If so, Letinsky is a more interesting artist than proponents have claimed. All the foodstuffs in her still lifes are natural or processed sweets, most at least partially eaten. She has described the progression of the edibles as, "from sweet, like sweetheart, to too sweet, sickly sweet, and then disgusting, insect-infested." Colored lighting in a number of the photographs emphasizes the progression, changing from peach or pink to green.

In Letinsky's pictures of lovers, they are in the midst of the environments they've made. But people are only implied in her still lifes, which introduces a temporal element. What takes place before the gluttony we never see; all the pictures have been taken after the act. Viewers have to work back toward people from the evening's remains.

Counters and different wooden tabletops are the scenes of the mess. Letinsky usually views them from an angle slightly above that reveals the table's far edge. But in one memorable instance, she comes down close to the surface of the cloth-covered table and shoots across it, toward bits of

refuse receding as if to a horizon line. That picture suggests a field after battle.

The range of color in Letinsky's photographs with white wrinkled tablecloths is narrower than in the others. Letinsky would not be the first to notice a kinship between tables and beds as domestic fields of battle. Is all this too obvious? Perhaps. So the artist emphasizes how her still lifes are in the tradition of Dutch still-life paintings and how they often bring together freshness, ripeness and decay. Some also introduce the notion of precariousness by posing objects at a table's edge, but that comes across as worse than obvious because it's so clearly a compositional contrivance. The best pictures here are those in which structure appears as natural as the letdown it communicates.

"Laura Letinsky: Hardly More Than Ever, Photographs 1997-2004" continues at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., through April 18. 773-702-8670.

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YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY



THE NEW YORKER

LAURA LETINSKY

Letinsky's tabletop still-lives are infused with a lurid sense of humor. Her subject is party detritus—rotting fruit, candy sprinkles, lemon slices, paper napkins. Letinsky, who until now has photographed couples, imparts a postcoital edge to these pictures; there are suspicious stains on the white linen tablecloths. Through Jan. 17. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070.)

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The New York Times
nytimes.com

Art Listings

LAURA LETINSKY, "I did not remember I had forgotten,"
Edwynn Houk, 745 Fifth Avenue, (212) 750-7070, through Jan.
17. Ostensibly, Ms. Letinsky's luminous photographs are tabletop
still lifes: lovingly composed, bird's-eye views of the scattered
remains of meals on wood or wrinkled white cloth. An elegiac
mood emerges as you study the stains, crumbs, dried fruit peels,
crumpled napkins, broken glass and congealed stuff on dishes. The
pictures become morality tales — proffered with a delicately
poetic touch — about eternal beauty and the perishability of life
(Johnson).