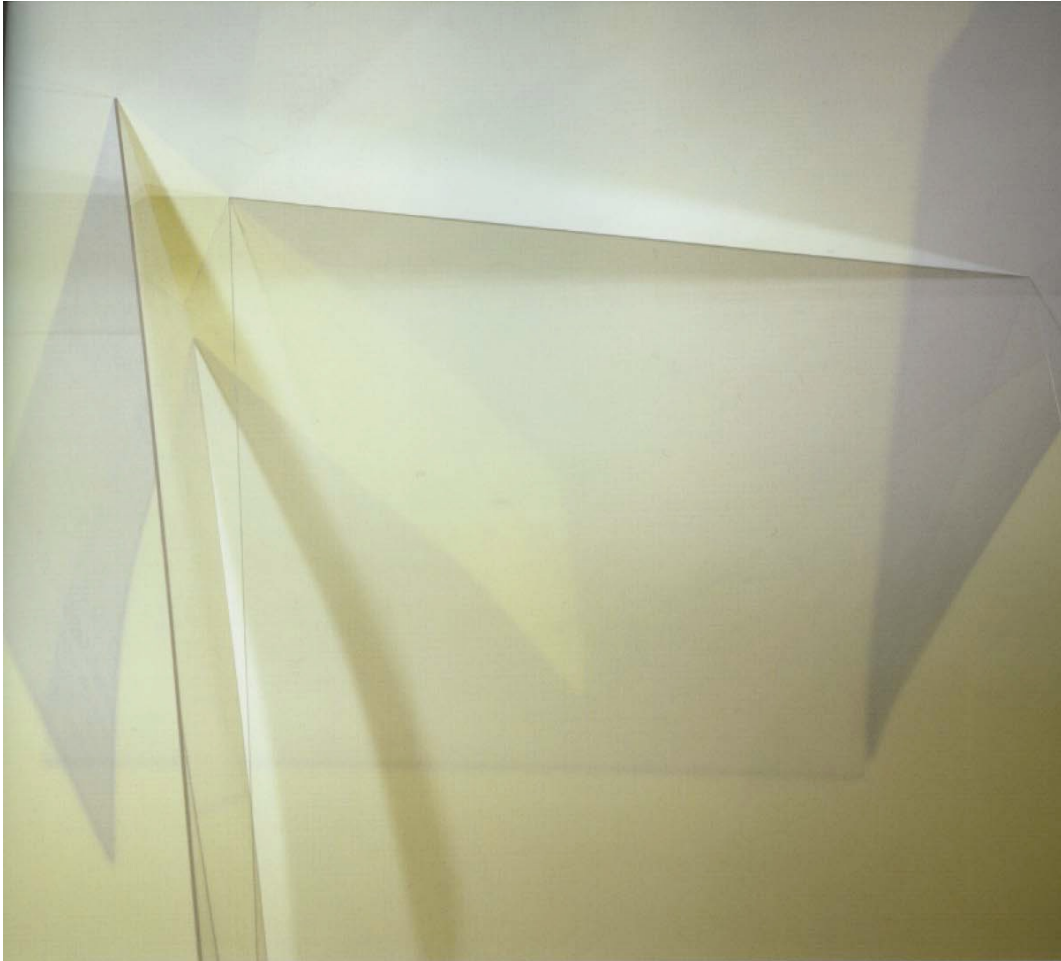


SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Frieze
November 2011



Set Pieces

Barbara Kasten has been creating inventive and influential images for more than 40 years. Artist *Anthony Pearson* talked to her about theatricality, her approach to photography and what it means to 'think like a painter'

Above:
Studio Construct 118
2011
Archival pigment
print
1.3x1 m

Opposite page:
Studio Construct 19
2007
Archival pigment
print
1x1.3 m

November December 2011 frieze | 115

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Barbara Kasten's artistic practice takes place in front of the camera as much as it does behind it. Though the final product of her work is often a photographic print, the journey there draws on her experience of working with found objects, sculpture, painting and architecture. In the 1970s, she began building large-scale models in her studio and photographing them, combining a sculptural and photographic practice in a way that appears uncannily prescient today. Recently the artist returned to the studio to create two new series of abstract photographs that use light and the properties of photography to create form.

ANTHONY PEARSON How did you first start using photography?

BARBARA KASTEN I was never drawn to photography as a documentary medium; I was never enthralled with the magic of the dark-room. I came to it out of necessity, in order to take a part-time job while I was in grad school. The only class I took in photography was as a graduate student at California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco [now CCA] in 1968, and that was where I met Leland Rice, who later became my husband and introduced me to many photographers. The earliest works I made were screen photograms, like *Untitled 13* [1974], which was made with a fibreglass screen material that I was using to demonstrate some techniques while teaching fibre sculpture. For me, this work was still part of the process of painting. I hand-coated BFK Rives paper with cyanotype emulsion, so it still involved an application of paint with a brush. When I began including coloured inks in the emulsion, as in *Untitled 76-6* [1976], it added another reference to painting and colour. If I had been taught to do cyanotype, I don't think I would have experimented in that way.

AP It's always interesting when an artist takes on aspects of a certain medium without being trained in it: it becomes more inventive.

BK And that's what appealed to me about experimenting with photography. I wasn't interested in finding ways to push the boundaries of photography but rather in finding ways to be innovative with painting and sculpture.

The Bauhaus was also a big inspiration for me because the woman that I studied with at CCAC, Trude Guermonprez, had been a second-generation student there. I was attracted to the interdisciplinarity of the Bauhaus and, through that, discovered the Stenberg brothers, who designed sets for Soviet Constructivist theatre. Their sculpture inspired some of the props I built. I also collaborated with the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company while I was an artist-in-residence at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco in the 1980s. They later performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with my set and costumes.

AP Your work does seem to have a theatrical quality in that it seems like you're constructing or staging something, especially in the early 'Constructs' series, which you began making in 1979. It feels like the images are a total environment, as if we're looking onto a set.

BK At that time, I was interested in translating space into a two-dimensional plane. I was making a three-dimensional form in front of the camera with large-scale geometrically shaped mirrors and other found or constructed props made of industrial materials. But I was also engaging in a dialogue with the ground glass of the view camera, to see the form compressed into a flat plane. People are surprised that the first camera I ever used was an 8x10-inch view camera, but it is actually the simplest camera and allows for the most control. The controls are meant to correct the perspective in the image, but I used them for distortion – to change a sharp, focused line into a blur – somewhat like making a mark with a brush and paint. I was interested in creating an illusion using the camera, so the set itself wasn't very important. After I was finished photographing, I took it down or re-used sections of it. In addition to photographing constructions in my studio with the 8x10, I was also using the 20x24 Polaroid camera, which was the newest colour technology at the time. I was one of the first photographers to have had quite a bit of access to it. In fact, they even brought the camera to my studio while I was in New York on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1982. It was a great situation because I would give them an artist's proof from the edition in exchange for the use of the camera. I also learned so much

about studio lighting from John Reuter, who was the Director of the 20x24 Studio in New York.

AP Because you were using Polaroid film, you were making a singular image each time, so you had to use the material very precisely – you've referred to it as 'etching'.

BK The surface of a Polaroid is different than other photographic papers: the layers of colour build a thick emulsion on a heavy backing, so high contrast – black on white for example – appears in relief, or what I call an 'etched line' in the emulsion. I photographed materials like pieces of wire or mirrors, which translated really well into the Polaroid's relief-like edges.

AP In the 'Constructs' you can see how light is illuminating not just the surfaces but also the edges of the materials. It really emphasizes the idea of light being the subject of the work, as opposed to form or colour. Were you also influenced by the Light and Space movement in Southern California?

BK Absolutely. During the ten years I was in Los Angeles – from 1972 until 1982 – there was a lot of experimentation with the phenomena of light, particularly by James Turrell and Robert Irwin, and with light and materials, by artists like DeWain Valentine and Larry Bell. Their work interested me more than any photography that was being done at the time. Photography, although it was experimental, was much more personal and narrative, whereas I was thinking: what can I make this light do? I was also influenced by the Minimalists, particularly Agnes Martin. I think of her every time I look at my white 'Screen Cyanotypes' because they were a direct result of being enamoured with her work.

AP Your works bring together all of these different influences – Minimalism, Constructivist tendencies, your experience with fibreglass art materials, and then, of course, Light and Space – but using the materials of photography. So, in a piece like *Studio Construct 127* [2011], you're making a picture of a non-representational subject but you're using a representational medium to capture it. It occupies a very distinct position.

BK That's right. The piece is not a documentation of anything but an object within itself. The glowing, geometric shape is just the projection of light hitting the Plexiglas, so it's really an ephemeral form that only happens because of the way the light hits the material. The photograms that I made in the 1970s were also created by the penetration and refraction of light with materiality. But the physical process – the action of arranging the screening mesh on the emulsion-coated paper and then placing a heavy glass over it – was also very important to me. I placed the layered structure out into the light where that glorious Southern California sunshine exposed the form I created on the paper, and then I immersed it in water, which developed it into that beautiful blue. Everything comes back to my physical interaction and intervention with the materials. Photography just happened to be in the right place at the right time for me.

Above left:
Untitled 13
1974
Cyanotype (blue)
60x76 cm

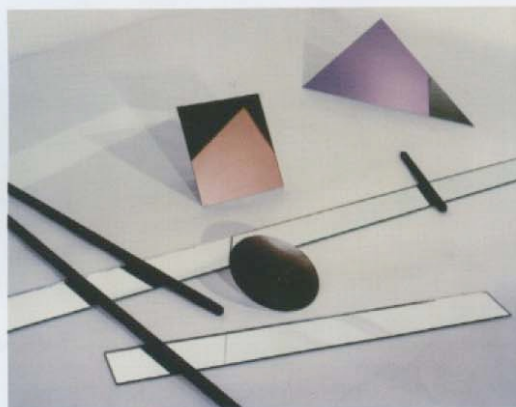
Opposite page:
Studio Construct 125
2011
Archival pigment print
127x102 cm

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Left:
Construct PC-IX
1982
Polaroid
61x51 cm

Below right:
Barbara Kasten
in her studio in
New York
c.1983



Left:
Construct V-A
1980
Polaroid
20x25 cm

Opposite page:
*Architectural
Site 17*
1988
Cibachrome
76x102 cm

‘Everything comes back to my physical interaction with the materials. Photography just happened to be in the right place at the right time for me.



Museum of Contemporary Art in LA and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. I produced big, colourful Cibachrome prints, which were the epitome of colour at the time. When they see them now, a lot of young people immediately think they are digitally produced.

AP And this went on for five years?

BK About five years, yes. And then I started travelling a lot in the 1990s, doing projects in the Southwestern United States, in Native American territory. I also spent time in Turkey, making work with archaeological sites or objects. I did a project with the Museum of Underwater Archaeology in Bodrum, in 1996, where they allowed me to take the amphoras off their walls and put them on cyanotype-coated paper. In 1998, I came back to Chicago; in 2006 I received the Distinguished Artist award from Columbia College in Chicago, where I was teaching, which was a two-year grant to develop work, and that's when I went back into the studio and started a new series of 'Studio Constructs'.

AP How did this new series differ from the 'Constructs' you were making in the late 1970s and early '80s?

BK I thought more like a painter in the earlier days. Maybe I still do, but now I know more about the optics so I'm more sensitive to what happens through a lens. I wanted a materiality that causes light to become shadow, so I use Plexiglas planes as a solution because you can see right through them yet the physicality of the material still casts a shadow. In the 'Incidence' series from 2009–10, for example, the short coloured lines came from the abrasions on the Plexiglas. When you look at the Plexiglas with the naked eye, you can't see them; but when a light is projected on it and you look at it through

AP Many artists today use photography conceptually in a similar way, to represent their sculptural or studio activity. I imagine back then, even though sculpture and painting were more primary to your practice, your work was understood as 'photography'. How did that impact on the way it was received?

BK The photography world embraced and supported what I did, but I'm finding out now that it was at the expense of the rest of the art world knowing about it. People are seeing this work for the first time now, even though it existed in the photography world for a long time. From 1982 until he closed the gallery in 2001, I was with John Weber, a highly respected, well-known gallerist who was showing people like Sol LeWitt and Robert Smithson – great company for me to be in. He brought a lot of my work into an art realm, at a time when photography was just beginning to be acknowledged by the art world.

AP In the 1980s, you went from building your 'Constructs' in the studio to constructing in a much larger environment – the landscape.

BK The 'Constructs' I was building in my studio for the Polaroids were in fact large sets, even though in the photographs they look like they could have been made on a tabletop. They were the forerunner to me photographing on location for my series of 'Architectural Sites' in the mid-1980s. I wanted to use photography to fragment architectural space, so I employed cinematic studio lighting, coloured gels and huge suspended mirrors. I had a gaffer who directed a crew of 12 or 15 people. I was in heaven: it was like creating Bauhaus theatre, and I was the director. I did the first ones in New York at the World Trade Center and the Lipstick Building for *Vanity Fair*, though they were never published in the magazine. To continue on my own, I approached museums that were building new architecture, like the

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a lens, you get that effect of prismatic colour picked up in the scratches. If I moved the lens a few inches in one direction or another, you wouldn't have that.

AP I love that you're using a representational medium to forge an abstraction. So there's a slippage: I keep trying to reconcile the fact that I'm looking at a representational image that doesn't have a true representational reveal, even though all the components are representational.

BK Absolutely. The challenge is how do you use light and shadow to photograph an object in such a way that it questions the veracity of what you're looking at? I do leave some small traces of reality on the materials, such as rough edges, smudges and scratches, but I don't want to create a narrative or a metaphor. I'd rather suggest a sense of mystery.

AP I really identify with this. I never wanted to use a camera to address the real world, because the real world is infinitely more interesting than pictures of it. So, by turning the photographic apparatus onto your sculptural works, in a painterly sense, you've created things that are very specific to you and how you made them.

BK Well, that's it. As artists we want to reveal our thinking. We want that particular point of view, that particular sensation, to come out through the work.

AP But getting at it through photography is very unusual, I think, because generally photography is a device that points outward, to record something external.

BK Yes, it usually is a 'thing' that is photographed, right? But the way we use photography, we turn a concept into an abstraction rather than extracting a form from the world. That means that our inner selves are part of the process. My approach is more of a concrete abstraction where the process ultimately reveals an object. I think that's also evident in the videos I've been working on lately. I'm using the same type of set up I use in the still photographs, but I'm adding movement by placing them on a rotating stage. The original video is then re-videotaped in subsequent projections on architectural forms that I've built. For my installation 'REMIX' at Applied Arts in Chicago earlier this year, I edited two finished pieces into a new one and added my edited sounds of Lucky Dragons, a talented young LA-based experimental music duo.

AP So you've always established a set of conditions and parameters wherein you can allow something very specific to happen.

BK The first time I did a slide show of my work, I found it surprising that I could see the continuity of my thinking, not just a formal connection. For instance, both *Untitled 13* and *Studio Construct 127* have a screen pattern. I've had that material

for 30 years. It's fibreglass window screening. I bought a roll of it and I've taken it with me to the many places I've lived and I still use it.

AP That's very unusual – the same material recurs again and again, but you're transforming it each time.

BK It was just the process of working through it. Some people have a misconstrued idea that a photograph is one snap of the shutter. The reality for me is that there are multiple steps along the way to making the final result, without knowing what that is until it arrives. And then, when it's on your doorstep, you say: yes, I was expecting you. ●

Barbara Kasten lives and works in Chicago, USA. In 2011 she had solo exhibitions at Galerie Kadel Willborn in Karlsruhe, Germany, and Tony Wight Gallery in Chicago. Her solo exhibition, entitled 'Experimental Photography from the 1970s', opens in November at Gallery Luisotti in Santa Monica, USA, in conjunction with 'Pacific Standard Time'.

Anthony Pearson is an artist living in Los Angeles, USA. In 2008 he was the subject of a solo exhibition at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, which was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Tim Griffin. Additional solo shows include Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, USA, in 2009 and David Kordansky Gallery, L.A., in 2010. In 2011 he was featured in 'The Anxiety of Photography' at the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado, USA.

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