



Some Things I Know
Photographs by **Laura Letinsky**

Thursday, Sept. 26 to Saturday, Nov. 2, 2002

Gahlberg Gallery
McAninch Arts Center

"Naître, vivre et passer, c'est changer des formes." —*Diderot*



Untitled #32, Rome, 2001

Leftovers by Nico Israel

Greasy silverware, crumbed tablecloth, crumpled napkin, sponge: Laura Letinsky's recent photographs expose leftovers of everyday life. Whereas her earlier works focused on sites of domestic intimacy, particularly bedrooms and the human couples that inhabit them, these newer images address the kinds of objects you might find in your kitchen or on your dinner table the morning after a dinner party. The images' poignancy inheres in the fact that they seem animated by a bodily presence we don't actually witness: the hand that must have touched that fork, the teeth that bit into that apple, the lips that left their smudged mark on that wine glass. Through these barely perceptible signs of presence and proximity, she demonstrates that the tradition of still life still lives, in and as a leftover.

Letinsky revels in a particular kind of reification: objects made or partially consumed by humans seem, in their silent, quotidian banality, somehow more human than humans. This predicament for Letinsky is neither tragedy nor farce. The pictured scenarios are dramatic, but in a matter-of-fact way — the matter being the fact that the things pictured are precisely things that surround us in our daily domesticity. And yet, there is little of the snapshot feel of much contemporary photography. Letinsky's images are carefully planned and lit. They manage to meld classical composition with a depiction of a contemporary mode of life.

If still life painting's chief features were dramatic lighting, exquisite detail and a sense of plenty — features which are present from the Northern Renaissance through Post-Impressionism, serving as celebration or critique of the societal richness that accompanied the rise of painting as a medium (as well as the private ownership of works of art) — what seems to interest Letinsky in her still life photographs is less a technical virtuosity of presentation per se or a broadly launched social critique of late capitalist excess than the ability of objects, as material, phenomenological entities, to express quietly personal, if fragmented, stories or histories. Meanings, in these photographs, seem embedded and carried forward in things.



Untitled #40, Rome, 2001

Most of these things concern the preparation of food or the act of eating — bread, knife or bowl of fruit. They bear an intimate connection to the human body. Yet in Letinsky's photographs, as with still life painting, we never see the act of eating or cutting performed. Instead, Letinsky investigates the moments, or mornings, after eating — a slightly off-kilter time infused with the excessive brightness and rumpled sexiness of what came before. The leftover moment, as it were.

In her most direct invocation of the still life tradition, *Untitled #35, Rome, 2001*, three large figs are carefully positioned on a plate on a wooden table, next to what look like two small peaches. The top third of the image shows the warmly colored wall behind the table, the elegantly illuminated table occupies the central third of the image, and in the foreground, in shadow, is the rest of the table. But certain details dislodge the image's classical composition and lighting. On the lit part of the table, next to the figs and peaches, sit little sugar candies that, in their reds, greens and whites, mirror and mock the fruit's luster. The peaches, it turns out, are not in fact two but one deformed "twin" peach. In the obscure foreground, and initially unnoticeable, the table appears smudged and water-stained from use; on its top, there is a little ring from an aluminum can — decidua from beer or soda. The image thus emphasizes a tension between a classical form and (to invoke the jargon of lifestyle magazines) "the way we live now," but also, and more importantly, between the documentation of a "found" scenario and a creative playfulness that troubles both the idea of a document and the inheritance of a form.

While *Untitled #35*, Rome draws on the fruity iconography and warm, plush colors of Northern Renaissance painting only to mess with them, the predominant shade of this series of still life leftovers is white. From *Untitled #43*, Rome's foregrounded, unironed white tablecloth; to *Untitled #32*, Rome's wilted white flowers against a flat white wall; to *Untitled #40*, Rome's white kitchen counter with lemon rinds, white plate stained red with residue from a sweet dessert sauce, and half-empty glass of water pictured against generic, rather hideously patterned blue and white kitchen tiles — there is a pale, blanched quality to much of the work. Although white is typically associated with goodness and purity, here we sense lurking danger. Despite the impressive array of white tints explored — bright white, off-white, white yellowed with age and use — the predominant feeling these images exude is the mortuarial unease of the shroud.

In his obsessive catalog of significant and insignificant details pertaining to the white whale his crew is chasing in *Moby Dick*, Melville's Ishmael claims that, "in its profoundest idealized significance," the color white "calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul." "In essence," he notes, "whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors." "Is it for these reasons," he goes on to ask, "that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning ... from which we shrink" when seeing a white landscape? To translate this question to the realm of Letinsky's photographs and the peculiar apparitions they conjure, how is it that all this whiteness within the hearth tends to convey a melancholia usually associated with the Hamlet-like "inky cloak" of white's opposite hue?

If melancholia is defined by a refusal or inability to let go of what-has-been, a traumatized temporality in which the past forcibly recurs and intrudes upon what we call "the present," extending as far as we can see in to the horizon of what-will-be, then melancholia is the "left over" par excellence. It is that which, like white, "the concrete of all colors," cannot be eradicated, thrown away. It is what stays.

Oddly, the "left over" temporality of melancholia is best revealed by its apparent opposite, fashion, the realm of onrushing, passing newness. This is a question that Walter Benjamin addressed with typical illuminating brilliance in his Arcades project. "The impression of the old-fashioned," Benjamin claimed, in the aphoristic and fragmentary "Konvolut B," "can arise only where ... reference is made to the most topical." This is to say that the "latest" fashion is always in tension with what it is just superceding or has just superceded, which itself, en passant, becomes in Benjamin's terms, "the most anti-aphrodisiac imaginable." (Of course, this fate — to be "late" — always awaits the "latest" fashion as well, which precisely increases its aphrodisiac potency.) This is why Benjamin, who (from his earliest work on the Trauerspiel to his lifelong project on Paris's late 19th century Arcades) was always fascinated with the (just-) out-of-date, goes on to claim that fashion is "a collective medicament for the ravages of oblivion." Fashion is never newness ex nihilo; it is only fashion because it carries something over from the past. While fashion is thus the pharmakon of oblivion, melancholia is the opposite of oblivion: It is the trauma of too much memory, the memory of a loss, frozen in time, that won't go away, that returns, willy-nilly, like a ghostly revenant.

Photography stills life. In the very essence of its technology, it is precisely positioned between fashion and melancholia, between a rendering passé and a holding on. By placing the "old fashioned," leftover matter of still life next to images of the passing present (shiny candy, smudge, beer can pop top, colorful new sponge), Letinsky exploits photography's inherent ambivalence: She at once invigorates or animates that-which-has-been and demonstrates the obsolescence of that-which-is-passing. Moreover, in focusing on food preparation, a realm, like fashion, which is typically associated with what Benjamin calls "the feminine collective," Letinsky implicitly responds to a masculine rendition of (art) history and historicity, demonstrating the peculiar eroticism of the leftover — the almost necrophiliac eroticism of the morning after.

The logic of leftovers can be seen, retrospectively, to apply to Letinsky's earlier body of work on human couples as well, including the four self-portraits from 1995, with her husband, Eric, on view in this exhibition. The domain is the bedroom, and the gestures are simple and quotidian. In each, Eric is lying prone on the bed, while Laura is standing, performing an action: looking at herself in the mirror, getting dressed, preparing to go somewhere. The bed, with its rumpled whiteness, occupies the central space in each photograph, but, despite the potential pornography of the scenarios, there is only the slightest trace of sexuality, a sexuality that may have come in the moments before the shutter fell.

In one particularly resonant image, *Untitled (Laura and Eric, Jesus)*, Rome, 1995, we see the white-sheeted bed and edge of the wooden bed frame lying horizontally in the foreground, and in the background, a window letting in filtered greenish white light. In the center of the frame is a disembodied, almost dead-looking human arm and hand placed horizontally on the bed.

To invoke John Ashbery in his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the hand, in its very stillness, "protects/ what it advertises," it invites the viewer in, offering something, some key to figuring out the logic of the scenario, only to hold something back, in abeyance. Indeed, it is only in looking closely at the photograph that we realize it is precisely a self-portrait in a mirror: Laura's body is at once standing in the foreground (a blurry thigh, occupying the left side of the image and apparently melding, surrealist style, with Eric's prone, Marat-like arm) and, in the distance and smaller in the background next to the window, glancing in a mirror at her own face with a slightly surprised, slightly coquettish expression. She offers two modes of self-presentation, the naked and the nude, and neither one is particularly revealing of an inner core or essence.

As with Letinsky's still-life images, these bedroom self-portraits capture an eccentric temporality in everyday space. They expose the drama of romantic love, and of the mirrored gaze, and indeed of the self-portrait itself, in their leftover state. In doing so, they alert us to the fact that the before and the after are consoling fictions of the now.

Nico Israel is an assistant professor of English literature at Hunter College, City University of New York, and is a frequent contributor to Artforum.

Untitled (Laura and Eric, Jesus), Rome, 1995



LAURA L. LETINSKY

EXHIBITIONS Solo and Two-Person / Selected

- 2002 *Morning and Melancholia*, Edwynn Houk Gallery, NY
Venus Inferred, Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto
Morning and Melancholia, Jane Jackson, Atlanta
2001 *Laura Letinsky*, Vox Gallery, Montreal, QUE
2000 *Morning and Melancholia*, Carol Ehlers Gallery, Chicago
2001 *Venus Inferred*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (touring), Ottawa
1997 *Coupling*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago
1995 *Venus Inferred*, pArts Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1994 *Intimate Stages*, Presentation House, Vancouver, BC
1993 *Intimate Stages*; Le Mois de la Photo, Optica Gallery, Montreal

EXHIBITIONS Selected Group

- 2002 *Home Stories*, Winnipeg Art Gallery (International Touring Exhibition)
Feminine Persuasion, Kinsey Institute Gallery, Indiana
2001 *Subjects/Objects*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
2000 *L'image complice*, Nederlands Foto Instituut, Rotterdam, Brussels, Casino, Chicago (Touring)
Interiors, Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NY
Private/Public, Carol Ehlers, Chicago
1999 *Domesticated*, Worcester Museum, Worcester, MA
1998 *Surface: Contemporary Photographic Practice*, London, England
1996 *Kiss This*, Focal Point Gallery, Essex, England
1995 *Undertow*, NAME Gallery, Chicago
Versimilitudes and the Utility of Doubt, White Columns Gallery, New York
1994 *Personal Quests: Use of Contemporary Color Materials*, C.E.P.A., Buffalo
1991 *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

AWARDS AND HONORS / Selected

- 2001 *Anonymous Was A Woman*, New York
2000 Guggenheim Fellowship Award, Photography
1998 Canada Council Mid-Career Grant for Visual Artists, Photography

EDUCATION

- 1991 Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT, M.F.A. Photography
1986 University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, B.F.A. Honors, Photography

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1994-present Associate (assistant 1994-1998) Professor, University of Chicago, Chicago
1999 Artist, Yale University School of Art, Yale-Norfolk Summer Art Program, Norfolk, CT

PUBLICATIONS AND CATALOGS

- 2003 *Architecture a la Carte*, Princeton Architectural Press, New Jersey
2002 *Blink: 100 Contemporary Photographers*, Phaidon Press, London, England
2000 *Venus Inferred* (w. Essay by Lauren Berlant), University of Chicago Press
Intimacy, University of Chicago Press, Photographs
1997 *Surface: Contemporary Photographic Practice*, Booth Clibborn Publishers, England, Photographs
1996 *Exploring Color Photography*, 3rd Edition, Robert Hirsch, Photographs

REPRESENTED BY

Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Monique Meloche, Chicago

COLLECTIONS

LaSalle Bank Photography Collection	Canada Council Visual Artbank
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT	Manitoba Arts Council Visual Artbank
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago	Yale University Sterling Library
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago	Air Canada
Museum of Fine Art, Houston	Winnipeg Art Gallery
San Francisco Museum of Art	Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography
Portage la Prairie Art Center	Private Collections in the United States and Canada

PUBLICATIONS AND CATALOGS / Selected

- 2002 *Blink: 100 Contemporary Photographers*, Phaidon Press, London, England
Eating Architecture, MIT Press
2000 *Venus Inferred* (w. Essay by Lauren Berlant), University of Chicago Press
Intimacy, University of Chicago Press, Photographs
1999 *Voyeur*, Steve Diamond, editor
1997 "On Intimacy," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1997-98, Photographs
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Winter, 1997, Photographs w. essay by Lynne Tillman
Surface: Contemporary Photographic Practice, Booth Clibborn Publishers, England, Photographs
1996 *Exploring Color Photography*, 3rd Edition, Robert Hirsch, Photographs
1995 "Versimilitudes and the Utility of Doubt," *White Columns*, Essays by Gregory Crewdson and Bill Arning
1991 *The Photo Review*, Juror: Peter McGill, Photograph, Summer 1991

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Barbara Wiesen
Gahlberg Gallery, Director

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Untitled #43, Rome, 2001

