

D O R S K Y  
G A L L E R Y  
Curatorial Programs



## SEEING THINGS

THOMAS ALLEN, UTA BARTH, ZEKE BERMAN, SOPHIE CALLE, ROBERT CUMMING,  
DAVID GOLDES, BEATRICE HELG, NINA KATCHADOURIAN, LISA KERESZI, WILLIAM LAVEN,  
LOUISE LAWLER, LAURA LETINSKY, TIM MAUL, ABELARDO MORELL, OLIVIA PARKER,  
WOLFGANG TILLMANS, JAMES WELLING, ZACHARY ZAVISLACK

Curated by Trevor Richardson  
September 9 – November 12, 2007

Opening reception: Sunday, September 9, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

The appearance in the mid-1960s, of a new strain of photographic practice that invoked more imaginative and associated responses, did not fit easily into the rubric of Modernist photography history. Whilst certain Modernist ideas about 'the photographic' could still be found in aspects of the iconography of their pictures, for the most part they represented emblems of an interior realm, of a private, inward sensibility. This new strand of photography had an important parallel practice in the Conceptual art of the 1970s, in which many artists eager to demask photography's 'illusion of objectivity' by lending pictorial ideas of a 'fictional nature' the appearance of authenticity. The idea, in so doing, was to consider the particular laws governing the medium of photography using the specific tools of the medium itself; to show through clever 'arrangements' and deliberate camera direction, how the camera—far from mirroring reality—transforms it in the process of depiction.

It was the increasingly complex play of reference involving both subject matter and medium conventions that grew out of these developments that animated the work of the artists



Zeke Berman *Clothing Stack #4, 2005*



Wolfgang Tillmans *Still Life Tel Aviv, 1999*

in this exhibition. Each celebrates a belief in photography's freedom to embrace a fractured, wide-ranging field of possibilities and in the camera's capacity to transform quotidian matter, to make art from the stuff of daily life. Their still-life photographs define a small universe of action, that record small moments of human ingenuity, vivid yet ephemeral disruptions of the commonplace, breaks in the natural order of things. The objects depicted fall loosely into categories of acts: stacking, propping, leaning, ad hoc displacement, or artful arrangement, by means of which ordinary things are invested with a visual charge and imaginative possibility beyond their everyday function. In each case formal considerations merely provide context as opposed to reinforcing so-called traditional notions of good photography.

A leading figure in this pioneering generation was the artist **Robert Cumming**, who began in the early 1970s to utilize the camera to explore the links between photography and the object, often employing cheap and exaggerated props to draw attention to the artifact of the simulated situation which he himself had constructed. What we see recorded in images such as *Easy Analogy*, were Cumming's improvisatory negotiations with a recalcitrant world. They described a double process; first the manipulation of the objects and their material properties that were the subject of the image, and second the taking of the photograph itself. Their precision only served to heighten the attention to the photographic transformation itself in the creation of images that were at once detailed, yet abstract. The use of the photograph as a substitute for sculpture and the object that came to typify the work of Cumming, also played a crucial role in **Zeke Berman's** oeuvre. His images deliberately take into account our trust in photography's putative 'veracity', gaining their visual impetus—as in *Clothing Stack #4*—from the contradiction between the inherent 'realism' of the photographic image and the visual dissonance imbued within his constructed objects. Berman's impulse to treat objects and elements primarily as material for play—as visually

persuasive incentives or rewards, so to speak, for the viewer's willingness to become involved with the actual, conceptual themes suggested. The photographic practices of Conceptual art also spawned a number of sub-species, including a kind of narrative or story art, often with the artist as narrator or chief protagonist. The French artist **Sophie Calle's** blending of artistic strategy with daily life was one of the most compelling realizations of this particular genre in which fact and fiction, exhibitionism and voyeurism were seemingly conflated. In *Young Girl's Dream*, she exploits the visual characteristics of food-objects for their latent symbolic and erotic properties. Here, the appearance of the body, not as a subject to be explicitly represented, but as an absent instrument made evident through a mix of traces, documents,

and objects, in which the viewer—whether literally or imaginatively—comes to occupy the positions vacated by the artist. Although from a later generation, the constructed photographs of **Thomas Allen** also explore the latent narrative potential in objects. His droll, witty images, employ books not in terms of their customary usage—reading—but rather as objects to be displayed within a sculptural diorama. Allen creates his constructed realities by carefully excising the characters from the novel's trashy covers, then by means of repositioning and carefully manipulated lighting effects, he manages to create an alternative reality, one that invites speculative interest as to its possible meaning.

Many photographers and artists have found themselves drawn to the poetry as well as the prosaic reality of ordinary things. For **Wolfgang Tillmans**, photographs are less to do with the utilitarian, and more to do with the happenstance arrangement of things or ad hoc kinds of display. In *Still Life Tel Aviv*, a shelf in which one empty tupperware container balances precariously on another; a shriveled lemon, coexists with a head of garlic, together with a cork screw which lies on its side in front of a small bowl. There is an abject beauty in the way these unprepossessing objects are presented which serves to remind us that in an ideal world there might be a place for everything, but in the real world things tend to migrate to places where they do not belong. By way of contrast, the austere geometrical order of **Zachary Zavislack's** *Proportion and Harmony: Cotan*—a transcription based upon a work by the 17thC Spanish painter, Juan Sánchez-Cotán, (*Fruit Still-Life*, circa. 1602)—in which the relatively small number of objects depicted seem almost to have been sanctified by virtue of the extreme care and precision by which they have been arranged. By centering his play with art historical reference and simulation on photographic activity, Zavislack reminds us of how the still-life paintings of the Baroque era have always been remarkably 'photographic'—setting up the conditions for photography itself through their objectifying portrayal of real things.

The still-life photographs of **Laura Letinsky** also appear as one of a multitude of quotations or references drawn from art-historical sources as well as the wider context of late twentieth century visual culture. Although the compositional references in her work to Dutch still-life painting of the seventeenth century are clear, Letinsky does not seek to convey a specifically symbolic or metaphorical reading of the objects she depicts. Rather, our attention is drawn to a palpable tension between the flatness and plasticity in her photographs, in which the objects and their carefully calibrated formal relationships become a vehicle through which we may intuit a narrative potential, suggesting perhaps, fraught emotional states, endings and loss. A similar kind of impulse at work in **Uta Barth's** still-life imagery, in which the combination between flatness and plasticity creates a tension that dismantles the monocular vantage point traditionally ascribed to photography. Barth uses the shifting multiple perspectives and picture planes of still-life painting, not so much to focus on the objects she portrays, but rather on the ways in which



Laura Letinsky *Untitled #80, 2003*

we actually see things around us in space. In other words, for Barth, the principle focus is directed not so much upon the scrutiny of specific objects, but rather upon enhancing our perceptual awareness of the spatial environment within which the objects are seen to exist.

The desire to convert into pictorial form, the physical properties of materials, the residue of substances that may not have a fixed state, let alone a cultural status, became a significant concern for many artists during the late 20th century. This process of re-contextualization would have a particularly liberating impact on the tradition of still-life photography. In a number of instances, this practice took the form of a revived interest in the idea of photographic abstraction, not however in the formally based abstractionist style that became the dominant mode of fine-art photography in the mid-20th century, but rather a view of abstraction which saw it as but one of a range of representational practices, as merely another brand or model of cultural representation. Evidence of this impulse can be found in the work of the Swiss photographer **Beatrice Helg**. Often employing a shallow, ephemeral space within which to display a vocabulary of abstract shapes and rudimentary materials—shards of glass, sheets of rusted metal, and concrete blocks—whose muted color together with the coarseness of their dry, scuffed texture, convey a psyche of decay and loss. Helg's images constructed specifically for the camera, represent a translation of the artist's plaintive, lyrical, visual language, that alludes to unspoken histories that are ultimately left for the viewer to decipher.

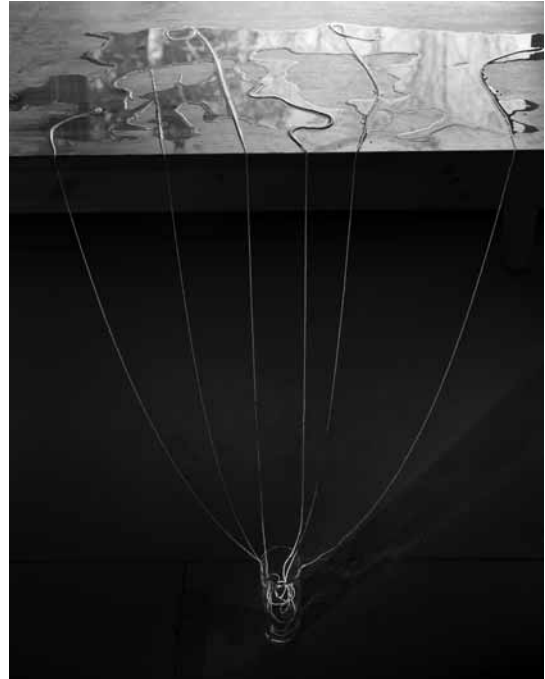
In the enigmatic black and white photographs of **David Goldes**, water is used as a physical material—or object if you will—through which to embody the tension that can often exist between formlessness and form. In *Collecting Water from Table*, the delicate, ephemeral construction which he employs to regulate or give form to the flow of liquid boasts a double appeal, enjoying as it does the economy and precision of a

purely abstract composition, yet calling into play expressive energies which seem always engaged in the realization of intricate poetic scenario. Nothing in the image seems totally firm or completely fixed: something is always threatening to lose its shape even as a new form emerges, demonstrating how eagerly we as viewers seek to read abstraction as something meaningful. The work of **Nina Katchadourian** also explores the complex interaction of materials, process and form in a way that manages to negate the traditional notions of solidity and mass that are often attached to things. In *Austria*, we are confronted with the residue of a shredded map, a physical transformation which has resulted in the document becoming less a formal paradigm of flatness for the representation of abstract space, than a palimpsest for patterns of metaphorical thought. For Katchadourian, to represent something per se would be to tie it down to something altogether too specific, preferring instead to situate her work in the uneasy no-man's land between representation and non-representation, profiting precisely from an unsettled state that challenges our basic modes of looking and interpreting.

Both **James Welling** in his pictures of drapery and **Lisa Kereszi** in her picture of decals affixed to a frosted glass panel, reproduce pictorial information of the most mundane sort to invoke a level of simulated abstraction. In Welling's case, the goal seems always to be the deflation of abstract pretensions; at the same time that he evokes the metaphoric possibilities of the photographic image, he provokes us to recognize its material significance. Kereszi's image of transfer decals functions in much the same vein, with the random cluster of decals suggesting a representation of Modernist modes of abstraction, even as it empties it of its claims to expressiveness and autonomy. Their work speaks, I think, of photography's power to provide evidence; of the natural inclination to group objects or things to form larger patterns, and of photography's ability to shape one's vision and to promote a greater awareness in the subtle clues of daily interaction.

To a large extent the use of abstracted imagery, or recontextualized imagery by a number of artists in this exhibition, could be said to represent a reaction to the masses of information that saturate our culture. On the other hand, it could also be viewed as a reflection of the manner in which that same cultural information is itself becoming more abstract and hence more simplified. The work of **Louise Lawler** has always been cognizant of this phenomena—that art is an integral part of a cumulative and collective cultural enterprise. In *Untitled #511*, one of series of cropped and sized photographs in which Lawler recorded art-objects that had been placed off

to the side in a gallery, she changes the balance of content and gives nuance to the reading by shifting the point of view. The aim is to create a less stable interpretative space for the object that does not enforce a 'more truthful' presentation, but opens up the reading of the work as elliptical and subject



David Goldes *Collecting Water from Table*, 2002



Uta Barth *Untitled (05.12)*, 2005

to interpretation. The conceptualization of abstraction as a form of representation is also very much to the fore in the work of **William Laven**. In his *War Models* series, Laven takes as his subject the raw plastic parts from military airplane kits whose individual fragments—still randomly attached to their piping grid—have been photographed against a monochromatic black ground. Presented in this way, without syntax, the various parts initially read as abstractions, however gradually, upon more detailed perusal, they begin to assume a portentousness far beyond the literal data contained within the picture. Which is to say the individual fragments no



longer represent themselves as mere component parts from an airplane kit, instead they represent the uses of abstraction as containers for culture and as symbols of power and control.

Throughout much of his career, **Abelardo Morell** has contemplated the innocent yet meaningful placement of objects in unexpected positions or relationships. In a series of beautifully composed black-and-white images which serve not only as a meditation on the book as cultural talisman, but which also seek to invest objects typically experienced as compact and flat, with the spatial depth and dimension of the navigable world. In *Two Books*, a thumb-size miniature book sits poised atop of a much larger leather-bound portfolio, a simple gesture by means of which our perception and understanding of the familiar objects represented are undermined without actually having their appearance altered. The creative manipulation of scale, from micro-to-macrocosmic proportions is repeatedly explored in Morell's photographic practice, drawing our attention to details that are all too easily overlooked, but which become charged with visual intrigue by virtue of being framed and photographed in a particular manner.

Not unlike Morell, the work of **Olivia Parker** is also about context, about seeing or sensing a particular quality in objects. With a patient insistence she examines the traces of things, of actions, the residue of something memorable or inconsequential and sees them afresh as matter and form in their own right. In *Palace Potato* the process of decomposition that has transformed the visual character of the vegetable without altering its essential organic nature, adds an abundance of specific associations that evoke the vanitas allegories of Dutch still-life painting. However, in vanitas imagery where a single blemish signifies the inevitability of death, Parker's shriveled potato visualizes the irreversibility of decline and presents us, as it were, with a



**Nina Katchadourian** *Austria*, 2006

glimpse of life after its symbols have died.

One of the most dramatic devices in the context of still life occurs where photographers have placed the emphasis specifically on the ways in which we see (or do not see) the things around us. Something like this happens in **Tim Maul's** diptych, *Untitled (11/01)*, in which our gaze is focused a kind of temporal tension resulting from having two sources of light, one fixed as seen through the window, and the other represented by the shadows, in which it is not so much the objects depicted that become the focus of our interest, but rather the ambient sense of the place in which they are set.

A major purpose of this exhibition is to demonstrate how by creating a heightened sensitivity and awareness to the things that surround us, noticing them, honoring them, thinking them interesting—of how the basic idea of taking a picture can still be regarded as a way of raising the value of something. Each

of the artists included here employ a variety of visual devices that provoke us to critically consider the nature of looking and heighten our awareness of the experience of perception. They do not provide us with closed, resolved scenarios, rather by making us wait and sometimes frustrating us, they leave us in a state of indeterminacy and cause us to be aware of the fissure between what we see and what we expect and desire to see. In this process they destabilize the conception of a photograph as a fixed, concrete object full of meaning and reposition it as a durational human experience open to interpretation—which in the end is all that really matters. □

— *Trevor Richardson*  
*Amherst, Massachusetts*  
*July, 2007*

## BIOGRAPHY

**Trevor Richardson** is currently the director of Herter Gallery, The University of Massachusetts Amherst. He has curated a broad range of exhibitions on the topics of drawing, sculpture and photography, among which are: "Landscape Tropologies: Photographs by Uta Barth, Shannon Ebner, John Pfahl, Sarah Pickering, Jem Southam and Mark Wyse" (2006), "Kinds of Drawing" (2002), "After Nature" (2000), "Visions/Re-Visions: Aspects of Contemporary Representation" (1998), "Fictions of the Self: The Portrait in Contemporary Photography" (1996). In addition to the aforementioned, he has curated solo exhibitions by, among others: Dawn Clements, Dennis Oppenheim, Jessica Stockholder, Leni Riefenstahl, Danielle Tedeger, and Meg Webster.

He is a faculty member in the Department of Art, Architecture and Art History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

## C H E C K L I S T

### THOMAS ALLEN

*THIRST*, 2004  
Chromogenic print, Ed. of 15  
24 x 20 inches  
Courtesy Foley Gallery, New York

### UTA BARTH

*UNTITLED (05.12)*, 2005  
Mounted color photographs  
3 Panels, each panel: 20 x 21 1/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

### ZEKE BERMAN

*CLOTHING STACK #4*, 1997  
Silver gelatin print, Ed. of 3/25  
16 x 20 inches  
© Zeke Berman, Courtesy Laurence  
Miller Gallery, New York

### SOPHIE CALLE

*AUTOBIOGRAPHIES (YOUNG GIRLS  
DREAM)*, 1992  
Gelatin silver print, Ed. of 2/5  
63 x 35 3/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper  
Gallery, New York

### ROBERT CUMMING

*EASY ANALOGY*, 1979  
Polaroid Photo  
20 x 24 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### DAVID GOLDES

*COLLECTING WATER FROM TABLE*, 2002  
Gelatin silver print  
18 x 24 inches  
© David Goldes, Courtesy Yossi Milo  
Gallery, New York

### BEATRICE HELG

*GEOMETRIE 1*, 1984, 2001  
Cibachrome print  
20 x 30 inches  
Courtesy Robert Klein Gallery, Boston

### NINA KATCHADOURIAN

*AUSTRIA*, 2006  
Digital c-print  
48 1/4 x 35 3/4 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Sara Meltzer  
Gallery, New York

### LISA KERESZI

*COAST GUARD DECALS, BLDG. 125  
GOVERNOR'S ISLAND*, 2004  
Chromogenic print  
30 x 40 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Yancey  
Richardson Gallery, New York

### WILLIAM LAVEN

*B-1 LANCER*, 2005  
Pigment Print, Ed. of 5  
43 x 30 inches  
Private collection, New York  
Courtesy Foley Gallery, New York

### LOUISE LAWLER

*UNTITLED #511*, 2003  
Chromogenic print  
29 x 35 3/4 inches  
Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

### LAURA LETINSKY

*UNTITLED #80*, 2003  
Chromogenic print  
24 x 35 3/4 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Yancey  
Richardson Gallery, New York

### TIM MAUL

*UNTITLED (11/01)*, diptych, 2002  
C-print  
13 1/4 x 22 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### ABELARDO MORELL

*TWO BOOKS*, 1994  
Silver gelatin print  
24 x 32 inches  
© Abelardo Morell, Courtesy Bonni  
Benrubi Gallery, New York

### OLIVIA PARKER

*PALACE POTATO*, 2001  
Archival pigment print  
20 x 36 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### WOLFGANG TILLMANS

*STILL LIFE TEL AVIV*, 1999  
Cibachrome print, Ed. of 3  
20 x 36 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen  
Gallery, New York

### JAMES WELLING

*THOREAU (FROM THE AUTHOR'S  
SERIES)*, 2001  
C-print, Ed. of 5  
31 1/2 x 25 inches  
Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York

### ZACHARY ZAVISLACK

*PROPORTION AND HARMONY: COTAN*,  
2001  
Chromogenic print, Ed. of 10  
30 x 40 inches  
© Zachary Zavisak, Courtesy Bonni  
Benrubi Gallery, New York

Cover: Thomas Allen, *Thirst*, 2004

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

As is the case with all such events, this exhibition could not have taken place without the support and cooperation of many individuals. Firstly I would like to extend my gratitude to each of the artists who agreed to make their work available, and to the staff at the various galleries who were of immense help in facilitating the necessary loan arrangements. In particular: Anthony Allen, Associate Director of the Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC, Amy Baumann, Director of the David Zwirner Gallery, NYC, Bonni Benrubi, Director of the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NYC, Jody Berman of the Lawrence Miller Gallery, NYC, Robert Cumming, Michael Foley, Director Foley Gallery, NYC, Rachel Gugelberger, Director of the Sara Melzer Gallery, NYC, Eunice Hurd, Director of the Robert Klein Gallery, Boston, MA, Branwen Jones, Director of the Andrea Rosen Gallery, NYC, Tracey Norman, Director of the Yancey Richardson Gallery, NYC, Tim Maul, Manuela Mozo, Director of Metro Pictures, NYC, Olivia Parker, Alissa Schonfeld of the Yossi Milo Gallery, NYC, and Ethan Sklar, Director of the Tonya Bonakdar Gallery, NYC. Needless to say, I am also deeply indebted to Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs—David, Karen and Noah Dorsky and Bea Blondo— whose generosity and unstinting support made the project possible. To all of the above, my sincere thanks.



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