

## Barbara Kasten: New Peers in Contemporary Photography

By Natalie Hegert  
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"Barbara Kasten: Stages," curated by Alex Klein at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, is the first major survey of Kasten's work, from her fiber sculptures from the early 1970's, to a newly commissioned site-specific installation involving a nearly 30-foot-high video projection interacting with the architecture of the gallery. For a practicing artist with nearly five decades of work to survey, some might duly note that this first museum retrospective is long overdue. Certainly it is, and there's no doubt that Kasten has long been underrecognized, however, this exhibition comes at a time when Kasten's work is perhaps at its most relevant.

Though she never trained formally as a photographer, Barbara Kasten is best known for her highly staged photographic series of studio constructions and architectural spaces, particularly for their lush, saturated colors and perspectival manipulation of light, shadow, and space within the photographic frame. Influenced by the Light & Space movement in California, Constructivism, and Bauhaus experimentation, in particular the work of László Moholy-Nagy, Kasten uses sculptural



Documentation of Barbara Kasten working in her studio, New York, NY, 1983. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kurt Kilgus.



Barbara Kasten, *Construct 32*, 1986.  
Courtesy of the artist.

forms, mirrors, props, and lights to investigate the interplay and tension between three-dimensional and two-dimensional forms, abstraction and material, and the object and image.

These concerns have come to the forefront of consciousness due to the work of a new generation of artists and curators, particularly with respect to the medium of photography. This next generation engages with photography not as documentary medium, but as a medium with inherent formal properties—digital and analogue—ripe for experimentation. Kasten's work, with its absence of narrative and precisely staged constructs built for the camera, situates her right in the midst of these new contemporaries, artists such as Kate Steciw, Elad Lassry, Sam Falls, Eileen Quinlan, Jessica Eaton, Lucas Blalock, and many others. On April 7th, the ICA hosted a panel discussion entitled "Kasten in Context: New Peers" between Kasten and Sara VanDerBeek, David Hartt, and Takeshi Murata, to discuss shared processes and precedents. And in an interview with Liz Deschenes in the exhibition catalogue, Kasten comments on this exchange with a new generation of artists: "I never felt that I had a peer group before, and now I do. There are younger artists who respect what I do, and I respect what they do. So what if there is a thirty-year age difference between us? We are talking on another level."

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To explore this intergenerational conversation I invited four young artists to comment on and provide insight into Kasten's photography vis à vis their own, to provide a lens, or frame, or mirror by which we can understand various aspects of Kasten's work, and her impact on contemporary photography. I asked them how and when they had become familiar with Kasten's work, and how it made an impact on their work and their view of photography.

"I don't remember exactly how I first became aware of Kasten's work, but I know when I did, it was a revelation." Erin O'Keefe, a visual artist and architect based in New York, makes photographs that exploit the translation of three-dimensional form and space into two-dimensional images. For her, Kasten's work "presented a range of possibilities for photography that felt really important to me, and deeply relevant to my own interests as an artist. It set out an alternate method of working—that it could happen in the studio, and investigate phenomena of light and space within a pretty tightly controlled still life. These were not things that I had encountered much in photography—and it was both inspiring and validating to find an artist working this way."

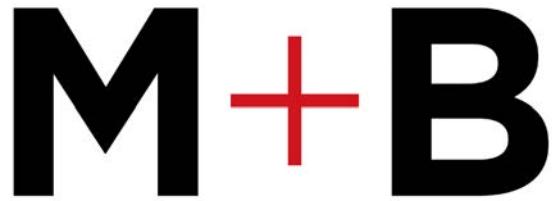
Hannah Whitaker, who began her studies at Yale as an undergraduate in the early 2000's, when Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia were pioneering cinematic scenes loaded with narrative content, told me, "Looking back, I realize that I didn't then have a sense of what was being left out of these conversations, which were totally dominated by either narrative tableau (influenced by Jeff Wall) or typological (influenced by the Bechers) work. When I first became aware of Kasten much later, my admiration for her work rivaled my indignation that I hadn't been aware of her sooner."

Chicago-based artist Jessica Labatte concurs, "I never felt like my practice was exactly in line with the 'tableaux photography' that was so prevalent in the early 2000s, as I always thought of my constructions as more sculptural and formal than cinematic or narrative. [Kasten's] photographs provided historical precedence and context for my own, at a time when I wasn't really sure how to contextualize my own practice." Despite the fact that Kasten taught at Columbia College in Chicago for many years, Labatte, who attended the School of the Art Institute (SAIC), only discovered Kasten's work in graduate school: while "making still life constructions in my studio and thinking about the paradox inherent in abstract photography," a curator of photography at the Art Institute suggested she look at Kasten's work from the 1980's. "I had been living in Chicago for almost ten years, but had never seen any of her photographs," Labatte says. "I think it was before there was much of her work online, so it was a little bit more difficult to find. I still find it remarkable that our paths never crossed before that, since we had such similar interests and influences, from mirrors and colored light to the Bauhaus and Moholy Nagy."

Jaclyn Wright, a recent MFA graduate who now teaches at SAIC, contextualizes her discovery of Barbara Kasten's work in terms of finding a female role model in an otherwise very male-dominated medium. "I find it comforting or empowering to see female artists referencing other female artists. I've been actively seeking out female artists that I can connect with (visually, conceptually, etc.)...I never had a strong female presence in my academic life—so I make it a point to show all of my students (but especially the women) amazing work created by talented women, such as Barbara Kasten." Wright describes the way her work shifted after she became more acquainted with Kasten, as well as other contemporary photographers working in the same vein: "Visually speaking, there were several aesthetic choices and modes of creating that began to appear in my work after experiencing hers. I am really drawn to the color or monochromatic choices she makes for each series...[and] the way she uses the studio to confuse the way you perceive depth within the image. This has been really insightful when I'm attempting to create images that defy how we think we should be perceiving an image."



Hannah Whitaker, Blue Paper (Albers), 2014.  
Courtesy of the artist and M+B Gallery, Los Angeles



Barbara Kasten: *Stages*, 2015, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Photo: Constance Mensh.



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Kasten's practice provided a new paradigm to look at and respond to, drawing out new possibilities beyond portraits, landscape, and street photography—those “windows on the world” the photographic frame was meant to represent. “In my experience, being a photographer seemed to mean taking pictures, as a kind of keen observer,” O’Keefe remarks, “the decisive moment ethos kind of thing. Kasten’s way of being a photographer was another model altogether. She was making photographs—not so much finding the frame as filling it.”

“I find it interesting how much of the writing on her contextualizes the work an amalgam of sculpture, installation, and photography,” notes Whitaker. The retrospective exhibition at the ICA indeed emphasizes Kasten’s interdisciplinary background and practice—but Kasten’s work can provide us with a more expansive view of what potentialities the medium of photography can hold. Whitaker continues, “There is a persistent and unnecessary insistence that her work is not just photography. [Kasten] shows us our own narrow view of the medium—that photography can involve making pictures, not only taking them.”

Kasten, when reached for comment, expressed a feeling of gratitude, and perhaps some sense of vindication, at the renaissance her works are currently enjoying. “Twenty-plus years ago I set out to do a documentary video on women artists in photography who I felt were not getting the recognition they deserved,” she told me. “I never thought that I’d be the recipient of similar attention later in my career. Thanks to Alex Klein and the ICA Philadelphia, my career is being looked at by a younger generation just as I did in High Heels and Ground Glass. It’s a return of all the good karma I set in motion in the 1980s.”

*“Barbara Kasten: Stages” runs until August 15 at the ICA Philadelphia. Kasten’s work is also the subject of a solo exhibition at Bortolami Gallery in New York, on view from April 2 – May 2.*

*Jaclyn Wright is currently exhibiting in a group exhibition, “Moving Forward, Looking Back,” at Filter Space, Chicago, until May 1, and her work will be featured in the upcoming issue of The Plantation Journal, No. 4, Geometrical Photography.*

*“Erin O’Keefe: Natural Disasters,” a solo exhibition at Platform Gallery in Seattle, opens May 7, through June 27.*

*Hannah Whitaker’s recently published book Peer to Peer is available from Mörel Books. Her work will be on view at NADA in May with M+B Gallery.*

*Jessica Labatte’s critically acclaimed solo exhibition “Underwater Highway” is currently on view at Western Exhibitions in Chicago, through May 2. Her work will be featured in the upcoming Contact Sheet: Light Work Annual 2015, published by Light Work.*