

# Laura Letinsky





Laura Letinsky. *Untitled (Laura and Eric-Jesus)*, from the series *Venus Inferred*, 1995. Chromogenic print. 40 x 54 in. (101.6 x 137.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

## She's Lost Her Perspective

Lauren Berlant

In the past, Laura Letinsky portrayed a fantasy. In the photographs, there were beautiful homes. The homes had nice bodies in them, living lives in them. There, there was sex; there, there was desire; there, there were the furnishings of comfort. *There, there*. There were also rumblings. You knew the spaces held stories—they were *storied*, relaying between pasts and the present image that hovered, slightly out of joint. Letinsky's book titles focus on pasts as the causes of the present: *Now Again*, *After All*, *Space/Sight/Self* (and notice what comes last).<sup>1</sup> But the narratives were all, as the title went, [*Venus*] *Inferred*.<sup>2</sup> In the early work, photographs staged a complex encounter in the intimate spaces where desire wished for something simple. In her version of the portrait, subjects aspired to be objects in a still life. In her version of the still life, objects moved toward the present, decaying their potential. The theatrical materiality of fantasy's ordinary life emerged. It was the ordinary of desire seeking an event and attaching itself to a blueprint, a gesture, a posture, a purchase.

How to materialize a fantasy without literalizing it, inflating the risk and drama, or becoming an accountant of disappointment, betrayal, and desperation? Letinsky's photographs have always been very, very quiet in pursuit of these questions. As time went on, the people disappeared, their stuff left behind and their desire appearing scenically as the memory of desire. Meanwhile the objects of appetite she photographed reappeared not only as decayed but abandoned. Fruit and napkins appeared already used, marked with stains, alongside dirty glasses and dry fallen leaves, each image an archive of something that sometime had happened. Life lay cut into on white/gray tables in white spaces, white gray spaces, shadows. In these settings of table settings, amid these beautiful leftovers, one sensed the exhaustion of the conventionally intimate event. There must have been birthday parties and dinner parties, but something happened to wipe out the joy to which *party* ought to refer. Fantasy remained, but diminished in the fragment, the piece, and the discarded object; fantasy remained, but as an atmospheric concept in the near-empty room.

Facing the large, beautiful, quiet image of abandoned intimacy, the spectator could infer nothing about whether enjoyment happened or whether the only enjoyment was bound to the aesthetic experience, in the present. It was clear only that fantasy had accompanied everything into the room to sustain the hunger without which there is no flourishing in life. A squatter takes over an abandoned home: Letinsky squats in the home's magnetizing fantasy. Yet it would be hard to call this a squatting aesthetic, with its implication of political reappropriation or a desperate scrambling for life. But what do we see in the photographed space abandoned

1 Laura Letinsky, *Laura Letinsky: Now Again* (Antwerp: Exhibitions International/Galerie Kusseneers, 2006); Mark Strand and Laura Letinsky, *Laura Letinsky: After All* (Bologna: Damiani, 2010); Laura Letinsky, *Space/Sight/Self* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999).  
2 Laura Letinsky and Lauren Berlant, *Venus Inferred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

of people and their gestures? After *Venus Inferred* it became progressively clearer that the photographs' return to optimism *one more time* was becoming unbearable, even in exchange for the bribe of atmosphere and gorgeous form.

In the series *Ill Form and Void Full*, which you're seeing in this exhibition, all of this loss and these aesthetic gestures reappear in a tumble, and yet we have moved even beyond all that, subtly, gently, the rolling pin trying not to rip the uncooked crust. These intimate spaces and domestic objects are no longer captured in a room. It is now a surface dimension of whites and shadows. The digital and the analog image have been coupled; they set their own space in motion and set their own rules for encountering objects. No one has ever been or ever could be in the space of these images. There is no life to recognize. No one can tell whether any of her photographs are of an image or a singular object becoming 2-D for the very first time. There has been no world, no event, and no semblance of an event. No spectator has a place from which to project an ordinary life to observe. One may look for familiarity in these objects—there, a napkin! a roasted marshmallow!—but the object world is not a lifeworld. A common modernity also does not hold us here in proximity to the image. No, no, no. But the series is also not merely a crypt for the good life fantasy and tired melancholy.

The Letinskian image now holds open a space without predicting the form of the world to come. It is what Gilles Deleuze calls a "percept," a resonant perception wrested from the object.<sup>3</sup> It is a scene of something without the assurance of incident, event, or continuity. But without assurance, the work moves on assured. In the strongest pieces here, form is vomiting out color, color that startles with a resistant sharpness. In *Untitled #3*, the bag holding an orange is like a fish shot with infrared under the sea, a figure of a container that has lost its way but whose object—an orange—is revealed with a liveness that has nothing to do with its function or history. Images like this are repeated throughout *Ill Form and Void*, intense color escaping the home objects that had held it (an orange, a papaya, a melon, meat), leaving forms behind to become fossils, outlines, ellipses falling into theoretical space. But this process does not amount to a palate liberation theology, either; it is no celebration of color freed from form. The photographs demand an aleatory eye prepared for dimensions of unfocused cruising.

In short, Letinsky has lost perspective. Her aesthetic is now beyond ambivalent, and its seduction toward a guessing game about aesthetic dimension is more than a nudge to reform our modes of living. The rooms in which Letinsky used to store the desire to stay attached to the world are now white flatnesses and folds. In the image, edges are at once horizons and floors and nothings, never quite but straining toward pure color; the objects' stillness provides an incentive to look and to look away to all of the whitenesses, the spaces otherwise lost to the objects. The background is also foreground; the recessions also shadows, openings through a crack, flat atmospheres. One no longer has the sense of walking into a room and looking; one scans, because the photograph throws a membrane over the entire situation of sight. There is no point



Laura Letinsky. *Untitled #20*, from the series *Ill Form and Void Full*, 2011. Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle paper. 45 x 35 in. (114.3 x 88.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist; Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago; and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York.



of adequate focus. Even the intensity of shape and palate is too small and crushed to absorb the eye. Color acts on the need to make a space for desire that has lost its home. In a world that's all edge, all of the objects rest on a ledge and could slip off of in an instant.

This is what still life looks like after the ordinary. The remnants are no longer beautiful modernist decay. They are no longer uncanny garbage. This is not Hannah Hoch's kind of collage, with its insistent uncanny trace staging the echo chamber of a terrifying, terrified life. This is not Richard Tuttle's collage, with its color lifting from the surface into the spectatorial space, almost offensive in its non-darkness. Letinsky's colors are vibrant, sure, holding the remnants before you. But they are no longer evidence of anything, any failed something, nor a kind of compost for potential that we cannot know. A person arranged them, but the photographs stage a space no longer human. A new world for object relations must emerge, but as yet it has no traction, no form.

Amid cubist remnants, minimalist remnants, modernist remnants, and surrealist ones, there is, then, potential for another tableau. It reveals that a story about life, form, intimacy, and art has become genuinely, tenderly tired of itself, no longer able to animate melancholy, trauma, or any drama in order to fill up its own, or the spectator's, holes. It cannot even get up the energy to title the images. The work is delicately alive to the possibility of vaporizing its attachment—not as punk, not as eulogy, but as the arrangement of fact. But beauty in the trace of loss has been passed beyond, as has the insistence to force fantasy to become all twisted up in procedures of the everyday.

The work is thus post-exemplary in the sense that one can no longer organize a life around its intimate objects. An attentive viewer will notice the prevalence of pits and seeds in the archive of the shriveled, the torn, and the dehydrating (see, for example, *Untitled #3*, *Untitled #12*, *Untitled #29*). Why are there so many pits in Letinsky's work? A pit is trace, waste, and potentially a seed, depending. A pit is a kernel or stone,

Laura Letinsky. *Untitled #29*, from the series *Ill Form and Void Full*, 2011. Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle paper. 35 x 45 in. (88.9 x 143.3 cm). Courtesy of the artist; Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago; and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York.

4 Gertrude Stein, "A Long Dress," in *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (New York: Claire Marie, 1914), 17.

or a depression in form. Pits could signal a memory of lush appetite, but that doesn't seem to have showed up here. They could be tiny obituaries for pleasure, too, but that doesn't seem sufficient either. They could merely signify a pit and nothing else, but Letinsky chose to attach your gaze to it, so it has to be some kind of asterisk, anchor, or hook. On the rough surface of these works, the uncanny of the pit is the indigestible, vibrant fruit of a knowing that is not knowledge.

Thus the vibrancy beyond form in *Ill Form and Void Full* represents not just the glowing fever of objects consuming themselves or evaporating into atmosphere. They perform the action of objects without a promise to act in a certain way. The work has so receded from the ordinary world of the still life that the objects are merely there, without being post-formal or revolutionary. Meat near fruit near napkin near plate near line, in and out of shadow, it all collects propped onto realism without a life implied there, so that the orange pink of meat and fruit sears like a sunspot and turns your face elsewhere. Even as a point, it's almost too much. This elsewhere, this otherwise, is the beginning of movement. Think about Gertrude Stein's ekphrastic animated pinks:

Where is the serene length, it is there and a dark place is not a dark place, only a white and red are black, only a yellow and green are blue, a pink is scarlet, a bow is every color. A line distinguishes it. A line just distinguishes it.<sup>4</sup>

Letinsky's colors resonate here beyond the objects that brought them to the table and beyond fantasy's conventional forms. There is no solidity here on which to depend for living on, except in the curatorial gesture of gathering up and making space for yet unimagined relations.

In the end, then, what the work has lost in perspective it gains in the promise of dimension. These photographs are a beyond-memory box. *Ill Form* is a purgatory for the fantasies unforgotten, but more than that it is a holding station for the attachment drives that the artist is not reenlisting in the war for love, if all that love can offer is a form that can hold fantasy and people in the old way. Without a world for events, one cannot repeat, copy, or repair what's broken. Where the objects' surfaces are riven with pits and pittedness, the photograph asks you to look toward the creases to produce something other than more roughness and waste. What is the function of a plate and a napkin when they are no longer accessories to life? This fading but pulsating post-intimate aesthetic remembers the good life, but, stored in forms that are only affective, it has not yet found the good life's better symbolization.

Lauren Berlant is George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago. Her most recent book is *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011). As Laura Letinsky's colleague at the University of Chicago and co-author with her of the book *Venus Inferred* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), Berlant has followed the artist's work for more than a decade.

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# Chicago Works 02

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition BMO Harris Bank *Chicago Works: Laura Letinsky*, presented from February 7 to April 17, 2012, in the Sternberg Family Gallery, Rabin Gallery, and Susman Lounge, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Pamela Alper Associate Curator.

Special thanks to Lauren Berlant for her contribution to this publication.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Association of Museums. MCA Chicago is generously supported by its Board of Trustees, individual and corporate members, private and corporate foundations, and government agencies, including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. The Chicago Park District generously supports MCA programs.

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Produced by the Design, Publishing, and New Media Department of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Designed by James Goggin, Director of Design, Publishing, and New Media; Scott Reinhard, Senior Designer; and Carole Courtyllé, Design Intern. Edited by Kate Steinmann, Director of Publications and Senior Editor; Sarah Kramer, Associate Editor; and Molly Zimmerman-Feeley, Editorial Assistant.

Printed in the United States. Typeset in CMCA Schulbuch.

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Cover: Laura Letinsky  
*Untitled #14*, from the series *Ill Form and Void Full*, 2010–11  
Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle paper  
47 × 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (119.4 × 93.2 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist; Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago; and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

**Laura Letinsky** is a professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, she earned her BFA from the University of Manitoba (1986) and her MFA from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (1991). Her work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa (1998), and the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago (2004), and in group exhibitions at national and international venues including the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1991), and Nederlands Foto Instituut, Rotterdam (1999).

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