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Jenni Lukasiewicz   (Date)

ABSTRACT

My thesis work consists of site-specific installation and photography; using materials with varying levels of opacity, I seek to explore perception through the manipulation of light and planar space. The series of photographs I have taken serves to lock into the perspective from which the work is made. Each photograph captures a singular moment abstracts forms derived from a specific site. The photographs integrate light, shadow, and formal elements within layers of materials and the site itself in an attempt to perplex the eye of the viewer while hinting at the making process. I am collapsing space and playing with the viewer's perception by altering their visual field. My artwork addresses the dynamic nature of light.

Sight Beyond Site

Jenni Lukasiewicz

Department of Art and Art History
Mount Holyoke College

Art Studio Honors Thesis
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The artwork presented in the thesis exhibition is a site-specific installation and a series of photographs that explore and integrate light and shadow within layers of materials in order to confound perception. This final work represents the explorations that have taken place as I have developed my process. By using materials in nontraditional ways, in both photographs and installation, I am collapsing space to play with the viewer's perception by altering their visual field.

My early collages [see 1a-e] stand out as prominent explorations that have informed my current work. Each collage references photographs of light and shadow—photographs I had initially taken as thumbnail sketches to help me think about the composition of my pieces. Each collage mimicked the geometric forms and spatial arrangements within the corresponding photograph through the use of materials of varying transparencies, such as paper, plexiglass, screen, tape, and different mark-making materials. Overlapping these materials and adhering them in different ways resulted in changes of value and opacity.

During this process, I came across artists with whom I felt particularly connected. I began to relate to the work of architect Steven Holl and was profoundly struck by photographs of his architectural spaces[1]; each functions as an image in and of itself. My eye is guided back and forth, in and out of the spaces he creates through the use of light and color within the images. This glimpse at his work moved me toward working in response to the already established compositions that existed in my original photographs. Creating

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[1]   Holl, Steven. *Parallax* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 142-49.

collages with varying levels of translucency, I worked to achieve that similar movement back and forth within the space of an image.

My first piece that aided in the development of my process was *The Illusive Square* [see 2]. This installation consisted of four plastic sheets hanging in parallel, at eye-level. Three of the sheets had four square cutouts each. The backlight cast projections upon the solid front sheet at varying intensities. When viewed directly from the front, the edges of each cutout square aligned through the layers of plastic to create a larger square that seemed to float throughout the space of the sheets. Significant components of this installation were the variety of opacities I achieved, my discovery of new materials, and the creation of a spatial illusion through multiple layers of material and space. This last finding was important because I began thinking about the viewer's perception from a specific vantage point, and subsequently, I began to investigate the ways in which I could alter perception over a greater amount of space in site-specific pieces.

I chose to use windows as a two-dimensional plane upon which I could respond to the three-dimensional world. This has been a dominant concept in painting since the Renaissance. Leon Battista Alberti's method of perspective composition begins "with a suitably large square which he says, 'I consider to be an open window through which I view that which will be painted there.'"[2] Using actual windows as my "canvas," I selected elements in the surrounding space (in this case, elements of the architecture of the art building) and represented them through various media on a transparent plane. Alberti explored perspective by

using this concept of a window as a plane upon which to represent what he saw. I, in contrast, use the windowpane as the vehicle through which I directly respond to the exterior and integrate elements of the space onto this plane. My explorations of the windowpane are not so much explorations in perspective as they are in perception.

I initially explored perception with three different mixed media collages [see 3a-b] located on windows throughout the art building. All were created out of materials such as tracing paper, oiled drawing paper, recycled newspaper, paint, charcoal, cardboard, window screen, tape, saran wrap, and plexiglass. The window was my canvas and each of these materials served as a drawn mark.

Each window presented challenges. I learned that using oiled paper and tape were ways to increase translucency; however, oil slowly seeped out of the paper, and the tape, when ripped rather than precisely cut, detracted from the work. Working on large windows provided a desirable space to work in response to exterior spatial elements; but the window frame worked as an existing border and made it necessary to consider the composition in regards to the entire pane.

Each piece was made in response to the strong geometry of the building and exterior environment. The pieces draw out many of the geometric forms from the outside space and attend to the reflections of the interior upon the glass. By overlapping materials with varying degrees of translucency, I emphasized masking the exterior space, altering what the viewer can see so that the spatial elements are integrated as marks. I was able to obscure the viewer's ability to

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White, John. *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff,8), 122.

perceive the depth at which the actual architectural elements are located.

A spatial relationship exists within my installations that is made complex through the use of layers and their manipulation. Interactions between the viewer, the window plane, and the exterior space take place. Adding layers to the window multiplies and complicates the relationship between the three components.

Generally, the most successful work I have made has come from a struggle – a struggle for compositional balance, a struggle with materials, or a struggle to challenge a viewer to see what it is that I am looking at. Working on windows presented a new but welcomed struggle – changing light. Most often, I built the pieces at night, yet they would be seen during the day. Realizing that I lacked control in regards to having my work seen in the ideal moment was an important turning point for me. Natural light is, in a sense, a material that I am working with; however, it is dependent on time of day and weather, and thus, it is out of my control. I cannot, therefore, predict the viewer's experience. This made me re-examine photography as something more than documentation through which I could capture the ideal lighting and intended vantage point. Those viewing my photographs began to see something beyond documentation of the work in the condition in which I had meant for it to be seen – perhaps the photographs were a way of simply aligning the images with the spatial elements, yet the printed image was necessary for the piece to lock into place for the viewer. Through this method of creation and documentation, it was as though I had an ability to transform depth and space by altering the viewer's perception.

As I continued working, I began taking photographs of different materials and manipulating layers of fabric, plastic sheets, types of construction tape, screens, plaster gauze, and different papers in terms of light and transparency. These studies proved useful in creating installations and making material choices. In essence, I was creating a palette of light. These low-grade materials could be combined and arranged in a way that causes the viewer to look past the materials at first glance, but this makes one question exactly what he or she perceives.

Finding the right location in which to work became an essential. I claimed the window of the sculpture studio [see 4] as a workspace that provided a desirable amount of light and a good view. I masked out a grid of windows in a way that made the architecture of the building opposite as essential a visual element as the strips of paper attached to the window. Again, this piece was created from a very particular point of view; when the viewer was positioned in a specific location in space, (that from which the work was made), the windows of the other building aligned between strips of paper as if they were elements integrated with the window plane. In order to create a balance between top and bottom, I created a stencil of the tree growing outside of the window and brought it forward onto the glass. By adding a taut plastic sheet approximately three inches in front of the window, the cutout tree shapes were cast onto the new layer. This was the first time I included organic forms in any of my work on windows. Using layers and projection proved to be a successful means of obscuring a significant amount of the image – to the degree that a viewer may question the

world beyond the window (i.e. where the shadows are cast from and what depth of space actually exists between the site and image.)

Upon completing this piece, I took photographs [see 5a-d], as it allowed me to present my ideas during hours different from those in which I create the work. Until this point, I had been considering the photographic aspect of my work as documentation. With this window, the photographs were essential to my work because they were able to capture a specific moment and create an illusory space within a 2-dimensional print. As I continued working with photographs I was able to use the camera as a compositional tool in creating abstractions that did not reference the specific site when seen separately.

The work on the window in the sculpture studio successfully involved projection between multiple layers. In order to explore this idea further, I stenciled positive and negative shapes referencing the tree outside of the sculpture studio, layered them on and between the frames and plexiglass, and set them above a bright work light. During this process, I used the essentials of transparency I had adapted from working on previous windows. Conscious that photography was a desirable result of the work I had been creating, I arranged and rearranged configurations of these layers. Varying the lateral orientation, depth within the set-up, and intensity of the light, I took almost a hundred photographs. This group of photos was representative of the organic forms of a tree while hinting at the process of creating such an image. Each image had shifted scale, rendering the viewer unable to determine the size of objects within the images, as

there were no recognizable objects visible within the photos.

At this point, I began to struggle with a disparity between the materials I was using and the ability of the photograph to bewilder the viewer. The photographs felt, to me, like a deceptive product of my efforts. Using raw, often sloppily arranged materials, lit artificially, to create crisp images of abstracted forms did not feel genuine. To counter this, I chose to include either a piece of the frame or the scratched appearance of the plexiglass, in order to expose the materials and cause the viewer to question what exactly they saw. The images [see 6a-b] create a different sense of reality; an illusory representation of a real thing or place, created by hand with tangible, yet less recognizable, materials documented in a photograph.

In my next set of photographs [see 7a-c], I took stencils from my installations and combined them layer by layer the same way I had with the first set-up. This time I was more conscious of composition and had the intention of exposing edges and materials in the final photographs. In this set of photos I worked with the illusion of space beyond the materials, which, in combination with the quality of the light, evoked a more staged feeling in the images. When assembling this shoot, I did not feel that the process was as strongly integrated with the installations I was working on. Essentially, I was photographing a pile of broken glass and layers of paper over an artificial light source. This resulted in an array of aesthetically pleasing images, but led me to return to working more specifically with layers derived from a site.

The final series of photographs used both positive and negative cutouts from the tree outside the sculpture studio, in combination with a larger metal frame, and layers of plastic and paper [see 8a-c]. The site provided the additions of dynamic natural light, the play of the shadows cast by the tree, and the inclusion of the actual tree and sky within a natural space. By returning to the image source – going outside to the tree – and manipulating these objects, I achieved the projection and appearance of multiple opacities within layers that I had sought with the original set-ups

The images that I chose to include in the senior exhibition [see 9] are a combination of photos from the four aforementioned set-ups. The series, *Seeing Beyond*, consists of twelve images, arranged in a grid, four photos high by three photos wide [see 10(close-up a-l)]. I have also included two larger images, titled *Illusion* and *Perception* [see 11 and 12]. In selecting each image I was looking to show specific themes; some hint at the materials while others give a glimpse into the process. Some of the images are clearly composed around a tree or an illusory space. With these, my intention is to display the representation of a real object or space through perceptually confounding means. Certain photos, when taken out of the context of the other works, would leave the viewer without any indication of site and cause one to question the material. The two large prints, (*Illusion*, particularly) reveal the more specific sites in which they were photographed. Allowing the viewer access to concrete surroundings within the photographs takes the viewer out of the more abstracted images in the *Seeing Beyond* series.

Documentary photography is a large component of my work. The manipulations of light, space, and materials within the photographs are what I am most drawn to. My aim is to capture a moment and make visual decisions that in some instances confuse the viewer. My work explores a visual truth and creates an honest record of a moment, although the images imply a mood and evoke a staged feeling. My intention is to confound perception.

By using both natural and artificial light to expose the raw nature of my materials, I arrived at the dominant color scheme in *Seeing Beyond*. The blues are a result of natural light and the golds result from the artificial light of a work lamp. I find beauty within each photograph, as they have an ethereal feeling created through the varying focus, intensity of light, and compositional balance.

Although I find each photo visually striking, I continued to think that the process and 'product' were not satisfactorily integrated. I found that when I was shooting some of the photographs, the images were incongruous with the process. There was a disparity between that which was "under the hood"—the materiality of each set-up—and the ethereal qualities of each photograph.

In my struggle to counter this incongruity, I created an installation, *Cite Sight Site*, in the museum window [see 13]. I wanted to provide an installation that gave the viewer an indication of the source of the photographs, while creating a clean and well-crafted collage. I framed a piece of plexiglass within the 84 x 55-inch window and, similar to my earlier pieces, marked out one spot from which I would work and trace out elements from the exterior space. This simple

alignment from one point of view, however, was not gratifying in terms of what it required of the viewer, nor in the overall composition; thus, I added to the collage from multiple vantage points. Working from many positions throughout the museum space allowed for a variety of marks that, when juxtaposed, created a more engaging composition. Although certain elements snap into place when viewed from my positions (and height) as maker, I found that when viewing the work, it is unnecessary to choose a single position.

A very important concept as I worked on many of my pieces was controlling the perceiving eye. A window is one facet common to all architectural spaces; by obstructing the viewer's ability to see clearly out of the window, I demand the viewer's attention. When starting out with each site-specific installation that I made, I found it was important to have a specific vantage point to work from. I would mark out my position and look at each pane from my standing height. This consistency created a way for each work to 'click' into place. This idea of control remained throughout all of my work, however it has evolved through the methods I used to conceal and expose in my final pieces.

Although the museum window piece has horizontal elements that correspond specifically to my eye level, the verticality of the image allows the viewer to align the collage with exterior elements. I am interested in the connection between bodies and space. Although my final installation does not require that a viewer place himself or herself at my exact vantage point in order to make sense of the image, I ask the viewer engage in my work. By intermingling

perspectives, the piece becomes a kinetic experience. To hold the viewer's attention and keep one's eye and body traveling throughout the space, I used materials to draw the viewer in, and simultaneously mask and reveal elements. Each mark was a response to a distinct element in the surroundings, the overlapping elements express the cubist principle of "'simultaneity,' – the simultaneous presentation of different views of an object in the same picture."[3] An essential to the piece were the multiple vantage points. I was able to step back and respond to the piece as a whole as I continued working on the installation.

Abstraction is an important idea in my final installation. The elements that I combine are derived from different angles, but together they communicate through placement, overlap, similarity of material or opacity, or in the way that they are contrasted. The final prints I chose to display, in many cases, also move toward abstraction, as they hedge away from the idea of capturing the site-specificity of the installed pieces. Although some photographs clearly depict the local space, such as the tree, for the most part, each photo only strongly references the site without making details of the location essential. My intentionality in using photographs moved away from documentation and forward to abstraction in the sense that I decided not to limit the photos to documenting the alignment of marks with objects in space. A specific example of this is the photos I have taken from a low angle. The viewer loses the feeling of seeing a form representative of a tree and instead sees material in organic forms. This

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3   Barr, Alfred H. *Cubism and Abstract Art*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 31.

move to further abstraction through photographic means was the most essential turn in my photographic process. The combination of more revealing photos with those that are abstract lends the viewer an appreciation of the source from which the images were derived.

Robert Irwin has been a strong influence in my work. In particular, he says, "Qualities exist only as long as a perceiving individual keeps them in play."[4] Engagement of the viewer with my work follows this same idea. Looking at the photographs that I have exhibited, I hope to convince the viewer of the title of Irwin's biography, "Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing that One Sees."[55]

Over the course of the year I have developed my own way of creating artwork that asks the viewer not only to look at each piece but to see something, both in a literal and figurative sense, beyond the surface of a window or photograph. When engaged with each piece, the viewer consents to having their perceptions shifted by my use of materials and manipulation of light and space. Both my installations and photographs share a dependence upon the transitory nature of light, and subsequently, time.

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[4] *Robert Irwin--The Beauty of Questions*, videocassette. Produced/Directed/Edited by Leonard Feinstein. (Berkeley, CA. UC Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1997).

[5] Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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Weschler, Lawrence. Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

White, John. The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958.

CD-ROM Information

1. Early Collages
a.   2007   Collage   (2.5" x 2.5")
Plexiglass, tape, tracing paper on glass
b.   2007   Collage   (4" x 2.5")
Tracing paper, tape
c.   2007   Collage   (2.5" x 6")
Tracing paper, tape, mesh wire, plaster, screen
d.   2007   Collage   (9" x 7")
Oil paint, vegetable oil, tape, tracing paper
e.   2007   Collage   (4" x 3")
Tracing paper, tape

2. *The Illusive Square*
         2007   Installation   (4' x 4' x 1')
Plastic, wood, string, 60 watt light bulb

3. Window Collages
a.   2007   Installation   (42" x 48")
Paper, tape, mesh wire, plaster gauze, screen, on glass
b.   2007   Installation   (12" x 48")
Saran wrap, paint, tape, charcoal, on glass

4.   Sculpture Window
         2008   Installation
Paper, plastic, tape on glass

5.   Samples from Photo Set-up 1
a.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
b.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
c.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)

6. Samples from Photo Set-up 2
a.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
b.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)

7. Samples from Photo Set-up 3
a.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
b.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
c.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)

8. Samples from Photo Set-up 4
a.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
b.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)
c.   2008   Digital image (39" x 29" at 72 dpi)

9. View of photographic work in exhibition

10. *Seeing Beyond* (Exhibition view)
        2008   Photographs   (86"x 82")
a.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
b.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
c.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
d.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
e.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
f.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
g.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
h.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
i.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
j.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
k.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")
l.   2008   Archival Pigment Inkjet Prints (16.5" x 22")

11. *Illusion* (Exhibition view)
        2008   Photograph   (27" x 35")
Archival Pigment Inkjet Print

12. *Perception* (Exhibition view)
        2008   Photograph   (27" x 35")
Archival Pigment Inkjet Print

13. *Cite Sight Site* (Exhibition view)
        2008   Installation   84" x 55"
Plexiglass, wood, paper, tape, tulle, contact paper
a – e.   Views of installation from differing vantage points