

INTERVIEWS JUL. 27, 2012

## Reality at the Core: Q+A with Barbara Kasten

by Courtney Fiske

Photography, conventionally conceived, is an outwardly oriented art, its content culled from the material world of people, places and things. But for the past four decades, Barbara Kasten has relentlessly turned her camera inwards, mounting a sustained meditation on the photograph's mechanics, the tracing of light striking a surface. Refusing the coherent world out there, Kasten creates abstractions rife with spatial ambiguity.

Trained as a painter, Kasten came to photography by way of the photogram. Her early series of "Photogenic Paintings" (1975) finds the artist arranging textured mesh atop light-sensitive paper and exposing the composition to light, creating surfaces that undulate in a spectrum of blues and grays.

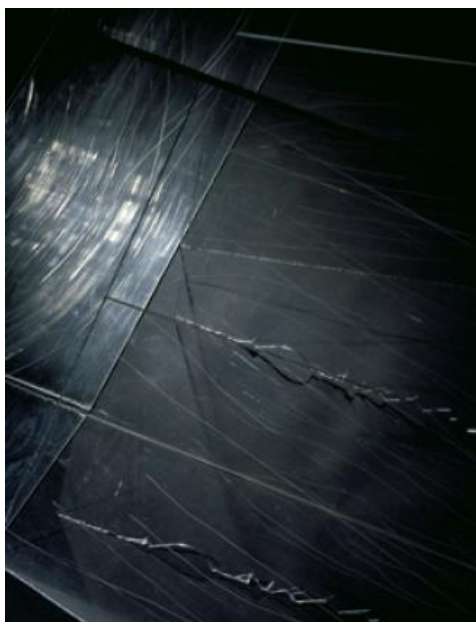
In the late '70s, Kasten moved from the darkroom into the studio, where she assembled found industrial materials—wire, sheet metal, Plexiglas and mirrors—into transitory structures that existed only to be photographed. Flush with color, the "Constructs" series (1979–84) bears a striking, and deliberate, resemblance to the complex geometries of Constructivist painting.

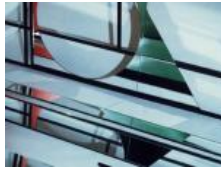
In her ongoing series of "Studio Constructs" (2007–), Kasten reworks the conceit of her earlier "Constructs" in a minimalist vein. Stripped of chromatic value, these latest works—hybrids of photography, sculpture and stage-treat light as a medium.

Featuring works from all three series, Kasten's current two-person

Studio Construct:  
Incidence 3, 2009

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Bortolami Gallery*





show at Bortolami, with sculptor Justin Beal, offers entry into a practice whose experimental core belies a marked formal and conceptual consistency.

*A.i.A* spoke with Kasten over the phone on the occasion of this show, the conversation ranging from West Coast esthetics to the fragility of photographic abstraction.

**COURTNEY FISKE** In your most recent show, your series of "Constructs" hang alongside your recent "Studio Constructs." What is the logic behind this pairing?

**BARBARA KASTEN** Part of the logic is to make people aware of the history and continuity of my work. The "Constructs" and "Studio Constructs" offer a legible point of access into my practice, because they're both created in front of the camera, for the camera. Yet, most of the work that I've done is about pushing the limits of how photography is integrated with other disciplines, such as painting or sculptural concerns, rather than fabricating for the camera. These two series point out, perhaps, an obvious connection.

**FISKE** Abstract photography suffered a troubled reception when you were beginning. I think, for example, of Peter Bunnell's 1970 "Photography into Sculpture" show at MoMA and its censure by conservative art critics. It seems that your work from the late '70s and '80s has only recently received sustained attention within the art world, while contemporary photographers like Liz Deschenes, Wolfgang Tillmans and Walead Beshty appear to have rediscovered abstract photography, in a sense.

**KASTEN** It had to start somewhere, and I think what Bunnell did was brave. But it takes time, as anything does. Negative reactions to new ideas are nothing new. As for what's happening now, it seems that the orthodox idea of the photograph as a tool for capturing reality has run its course. Many of the artists emerging today are returning to the basics of photography, like I did with the photogram in my "Photogenic Paintings."

**FISKE** Reviews of your work cite a diverse array of art movements as influences on your practice: among them, the Bauhaus, Constructivism, and Light and Space art. What artists and styles have had a particularly pointed influence on your work?

**KASTEN** In the 1970s, I was very much influenced by László Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus's interdisciplinarity

fit with my own, unconventional approach to photography. When I moved to Southern California after graduate school at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, the Light and Space artists interested me greatly, especially Robert Irwin and James Turrell. As for the photo world, it was a much smaller community at that time, with artists offering each other a great deal of mutual support. While the New York scene was dominated by street photographers, the mood in Southern California was more exploratory, with many photographers taking light as their subject. California was a very innovative, experimental place in the '70s, and that spirit of experimentation became an important basis for my work.

**FISKE** Regarding interdisciplinarity, how do you understand the relationship among photography, painting and sculpture, as it pertains to your practice? Elsewhere, you've compared the process of focusing the camera (making the image alternately sharp and blurred) to painting.

**KASTEN** When I make a photograph, it's not in the traditional style of using a camera to capture reality or to catch a fleeting moment of life. I use the camera to document a moment, but everything that it records is something that I've made with my hands. My process involves many layers. I use film with a 4x5 or an 8x10 view camera, which allows me to manipulate and distort perspective. (I've never used another kind of camera seriously.) Each sculpture is constructed without nails, glue or other adhesives, so it's the spontaneity of how the individual elements hold together that determine its form. Once I set up the camera, everything happens in front of it, for a particular viewpoint, as I don't physically move the lens. Because I don't rely on natural light-the lighting comes only from studio hot lights-all effects of light and shadow are under my strict control. I constantly return to the camera to see what I've created and interpret it, as if the image were a canvas or sheet of paper. Ultimately, I don't feel that the act of photography is the main element. Each piece results from a convergence of activities, a collaboration that spans performance, installation and light.

**FISKE** You've mentioned elsewhere that you conceive of your "Constructs" not as documents of once extant structures but as self-sufficient pieces.

**KASTEN** Yes, and this is what I was trying to get at earlier. The "Studio Constructs," for example, are not photographs of objects, but rather, of the effects of light and shadow falling on objects. They're experiments, essentially, with turning shadow into form.

Each work emerges as something that perhaps shouldn't be called a photograph but is because of the technical process by which it was made. When it comes down to it, are they photographs? I'm not sure. It seems that we need another name to describe them.

**FISKE** Certain materials recur in your work: Plexiglas, mirrors, and wire mesh, for example. What interests you about these materials?

**KASTEN** Over time, you grow familiar with the possibilities of certain materials, and they become your go-to things to use. The mesh, which is actually fiberglass window screening, came first. I added the mirrors later, along with other industrial materials, like Plexiglas. I like the way that light can transform these industrial objects into forms that seem ephemeral and different than their physical reality. More broadly, I'm drawn to materials that can be altered by the way in which they're used and by lighting techniques.

**FISKE** What is the appeal, specifically, of mirrors and other reflective surfaces? It seems to me that these materials reiterate one of the conceits of your "Constructs": to take three-dimensional structures and flatten them onto planar surfaces.

**KASTEN** You're right to say that these materials warp the dimensions of space by bringing space to the surface, to the front. But I don't approach them with that purpose solely in mind. I think more about trying to transfer information from an unseen place to a place that can be seen. The mirrors reflect objects in the studio environment and place them in view of the camera. I use these materials to direct information from the space that surrounds me to the space immediately in front of me. The effect is akin to that of a collage, a kind of spatial pastiche.

**FISKE** The role of color in your compositions has changed significantly, from the bold, emphatic hues of your early "Constructs" to the restrained palette of your recent "Studio Constructs," where color comes only from dispersed light. How has your thinking about color evolved?

**KASTEN** I've moved away from strong color because I feel that muted hues facilitate abstraction. Shadows can be viewed as forms more easily when you're working with monochromatic tones. In my early work, I was interested in the idea of sculpture and the placement of form within the focus of the camera. Now, I'm geared more towards utilizing the phenomena of light and shadow to change the perception of space. The question is: Can I make a

photograph that is truly abstract, or must photographs always be representational, as reality is there, at their core?

**FISKE** That is a fascinating question.

**KASTEN** Yes, it's what has motivated my work of late. The title of my most recent series, "Studio Constructs," is an attempt to repel any metaphors or identities that might cause the viewer to associate the images with a subject. Photographic abstraction, as I see it, can be achieved either by transforming the physical into an idealized object or by concretizing and objectifying an idea. Scholar Gottfried Jaeger discusses these ideas in an essay, "Abstract Photography" [*EXIT* no. 14, May/June 2004], which I first read several years ago. In the first mode, an object is defamiliarized such that it becomes an abstraction of itself, yet retains part of its original identity. In the second mode, a concept is worked through until it reaches fruition. My work, I feel, belongs to the second process: I'm trying to realize the idea that a complete photographic abstraction is possible.

**FISKE** Are you currently at work on any new projects?

**KASTEN** I've been making some videos that use the "Studio Construct" set-ups as a source of imagery. It's an effort to take my past concepts to a new place by adding motion, in a manner reminiscent of Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* [1930]. For the moment, then, it's back to the past, on with the future.

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