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Leslie Hewitt

NEW YORK,
at Sikkema Jenkins

by Courtney Fiske



Leslie Hewitt: *Riff* (1 of 10), 2013, chromogenic print, 40 by 30 inches; at Sikkema Jenkins.

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For Leslie Hewitt, the photograph is a schizophrenic thing, alighting somewhere among image, surface and object. Such irresolution is central to Hewitt's practice, which melds a cool conceptual idiom with the warmth of personal effects and a loose commentary on race, gender and class.

In this show, her first at Sikkema Jenkins, Hewitt presented selections from two ongoing bodies of work: a 2013 suite of 10 C-prints from "Riffs on Real Time" (begun in 2002)—shot on film, then scanned and printed digitally—and two digital C-prints from a new series, "Still Life," inset in maple frames and angled between floor and wall. True to her training as a sculptor, Hewitt understands the camera's frame less as a window onto the world than as an opaque surface on which to arrange objects, her act of taking a photograph contingent on a prior act of curating. She shoots her subjects—worn books, vintage magazines, grainy photographs and plywood squares—*en face*, centered in the frame and illumed with a single light source. Arrayed on her studio's floor or shored by its wall, they occupy a shallow field in the pictures and are invariably sharply resolved. Nesting rectangles within rectangles, Hewitt privileges horizontals and verticals, abjuring those diagonals that would furnish perspectival entry into the plane. Her pared compositions hold the viewer at the surface, while gesturing outward to the containers—both immediate (the picture frame) and environmental (the gallery space)—that bind them.

Hewitt's "Riffs" depict a book or a page from a magazine, sometimes torn or folded over, bordered by her studio's russet-colored floor.



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Atop each rests a blurry snapshot, its reds too saturated or its blacks dulled by yellow. Culled from the collections of friends and acquaintances, these images date to the heyday of the American civil rights movement: the long 1960s, hemmed by the tail end of the '50s and the abortive first years of the '70s. Their conjunctions are oblique, the deliberateness of Hewitt's selection belied by the snapshots' amateur casualness. Mappable events—*Riff (3 of 10)* shows an excised page from a report on the Kent State shootings—mingle with the quotidian: a gathering of modish black women on a suburban lawn, in *Riff (5 of 10)*, or a floodlit view of the Hoover Dam at night, in *Riff (1 of 10)*. Such images act as ellipses, suggesting narratives that the viewer must complete. In *Riff (8 of 10)*, Hewitt places a faded still of a building labeled, in narrow type, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center" on top of a closed, neon-blue book, whose title the picture occludes. Working in the overlap of reading and seeing, Hewitt hints at her own experience as an African-American woman, if only by way of metonymy.

Like the Pictures Generation artists whose legacy she elaborates, Hewitt frustrates notions of the photograph as a decisive moment, endowing her collages with a multiple, discontinuous sort of time. Far from settled, visual meaning, Hewitt argues, is perspectival, inflected by context and filtered through the prism of the present. Her attraction to secondhand materials, often foxed and exaggeratedly dog-eared, is less about nostalgia than about a concern with the ways in which everyday use conditions meaning. Hers is appropriation at a second-generation remove, stripped of irony and committed to material presence, as the inclusion of two drywall panels, fit to the dimensions of the gallery's storefront window and matched to the white of its interior, made clear. The first propped against a wall, the second buttressed by a column, the two panels pointed to the white cube as photography's ultimate frame, dramatizing Hewitt's otherwise understated concern with spatial and discursive enclosures.

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