

“I can tell how I aim. I can’t say how I land.”

Judy Linn 06.08.05

This exhibition of fifty-four photographs is the first comprehensive survey of work by New York photographer Judy Linn, and the first exhibition to span the artist’s four-decade long career.

Linn began as a photographer in the early 1970s, first at news magazines and then working independently. She quickly became known for her stark but sympathetic images of her friends Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe and Sam Sheppard. One of Linn’s photographs was used as the cover for the Patti Smith Group’s 1976 album Radio Ethiopia, another for Smith’s 1972 book Seventh Heaven.

It is Linn’s under-recognized and expansive body of photographs that demands wider recognition, and which this exhibition offers a discrete survey. As curator Klaus Kertess states in the essay that follows, “Since 1969...Judy Linn has been urging her camera to infuse the obvious with lyric grace – and quite often with cool humor. Her work is neither “landscape” nor “street” nor “portrait” nor “scene”. Linn focuses on social marganalia and on subjects both incidental and overlooked, and like photographers Robert Frank and Gary Winogrand – two influential artists – she employs the camera’s native cruelty toward humanist ends.

In the 1980s Linn worked alongside Helen Levitt, developing her skills as a street photographer, and from Levitt learning (in Linn’s typically matter of fact summation), “[to] become ever more accurate...” Her work’s compositional clarity and carefully rendered surfaces are evidence of a remarkable and deeply straightforward approach. As critic Bruce Hainley states, her B&W images are “quiet grisailles [that] track... the somber elegance of the nonchalant – suburbia’s anomie, silent moments of metropolitan drift; people at home in cars, turning away, or backs already turned. People guarding a quickly retreating private life.”

The exhibition at Presentation House Gallery will be accompanied by a major publication, the first on the artist’s work, to be released in late summer 2007, co-published with New York artist-run center White Columns.

Linn was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1947. She has exhibited extensively, with recent solo projects at Feature Inc, NYC, 2007, and White Columns, NYC, 2005. Her work was included in ***Good Vibrations: Visual Arts and Rock Culture***, at Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea, Siena, Italy, 2006, and in the 1995 Whitney Biennale. Linn is represented by Feature Inc, NYC.

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JUDY LINN is curated by Reid Shier

For some forty years, Judy Linn has been urging her camera to infuse the obvious with lyric grace – and quite often with cool humor. Neither “landscape” nor “street” nor “portrait” nor “scene” might describe her photography. Although she has explored the realms these labels refer to, they are but shadows of her nuanced purpose. Linn is a seeker/creator of photo life. She has earned the confidence to let the camera surprise her, so we might be surprised as well. Her photographs do not embalm a moment – they are not closed – but rather open up to reveal a narrative in progress, while simultaneously revealing the nature of the camera that endows the subject with its identity. Linn favors the odd juxtapositions – spontaneously encountered, very seldom staged – that push our everyday routine into alternative thoughts. A gesticulating football player woven into the back of a museumgoer’s jacket suddenly calling to the outstretched arms of one of Henri Matisse’s buoyant, paper cutout figures; a sign of the four Teletubbies blending into the ground at a rural rest stop and turning the landscape into a Magritte-like mirage; a wild turkey looking into the passenger side window of Linn’s car, while being reflected in the side view mirror. Surely they would be less believable and seem too staged if painted.

To be a painter was Linn’s first artmaking goal; and she left Detroit to study painting at Pratt, in Brooklyn. Photography was a required course; but, at first, she had no interest whatsoever in it. Not until her third required class taught by Phil Perkis was Linn drawn to the camera. She found her photographs often showed her things “I didn’t see when taking them.” By the time she graduated from Pratt in 1969, Linn had decided to become a photographer. Her resolve was made at a time when much of the art world in New York that she would soon enter still doubted photography’s viability as an art form.

Linn cast herself resolutely in the modernist idiom proselytized by Alfred Stieglitz. Indeed, Stieglitz was an early enthusiasm. Nightly Linn paged through a book of his work, smitten by the “geometry” of his photography and his “goofiness” – those dizzying, swaying skyscrapers with their bases cropped, those oddly angled, mystifying photographs of clouds – and sharing in his obsession with the severe sleekness of Georgia O’Keeffe’s beauty.

One of the earliest photographs (1969) included in this exhibition reveals a book, on the floor, propped against the wall and opened to a full page illustration of a Stieglitz photograph of O’Keeffe’s face with eyes turned upward in solemn reverie. Her face is visually and metaphorically uplifted by the pure whiteness of the pages and book cover surrounding it; and the varying rectilinearity of the book, the baseboard and the floor covering seem to have united serendipitously to create an altar. The setting is banal, obvious, the outcome visually engaging and mysterious – an ad hoc shrine mixing wit and surprise with obeisance.

Like so many of Linn’s photographs that followed the Stieglitz madonna, this one is enveloped in a contemplative silence in which the obvious slowly unfurls into rich visual pleasure. Immediately, I can think of no photograph of Linn’s that alludes to a noise louder than that made by a small tribe of ants consuming several sections of potato chips that have fallen onto a dark carpet. No car crashes, or turbulent natural storms roil her camera lens. Nor can I think of a photograph alluding to smell. All is illusion of bestilled space and bestilled combinations of fauna, flora, and humankind.

Before turning to Stieglitz, there had been television, when Linn was young; she was particularly impressed by the films she viewed on television of Edgar Ulmer – Detour and Black Cat – and films starring Greta Garbo. Later, on the big screen, Fanju, Lubitsch, Rossellini, Bunuel, and Godard sharpened her vision and enveloped her in the possibilities of narrative. However, Linn’s photographs bear absolutely no resemblance to a film still with its momentarily frozen and usually incomplete action. Unlike those of a film still, her narratives are purely visual and

completely contained within the photograph. Often they are driven by an unexpected contrast or juxtaposition spontaneously encountered by Linn, and that spontaneity is still fresh in the final photograph.

Linn’s photographs are meticulously composed but open; they invite the viewer into the illusion, possibly to become as surprised and beguiled as she was upon seeing a toddler’s bonnet calling to the laurel wreath crowning a Roman bronze of a naked boy about the same size as the little child. Elsewhere, she invites us to look into a parked car, through its side windows, to see an elderly couple against a mural of outer space, making it appear as though the car had propelled them on an intergalactic journey. Or we might simply be enjoined to relish the expectation that seems to have been imposed on the female portraitee of a Goya painting, as she looks out into a room momentarily empty of suitors, except for Linn, at the National Gallery, in Washington D.C.

When I asked Linn, what other photographers besides Stieglitz might have impacted her vision, Robert Frank was named first. While Frank’s photographs are grittier than Linn’s, and his frequent socio-political preoccupation is at a remove from Linn’s inclination toward private moments, Frank’s spontaneity, often unconventional focus, and ability to animate the obvious and infuse it with poetry, whether a shoeshine stand, a jukebox, or a urinal, certainly helped empower Linn’s similar inclinations.

Her contact with the countless reporters’ photographs, especially those by Gary Winogrand, that passed by her while working at the traffic desk of Time Magazine, at the beginning of the 1970s, would further her acquisition of the eye to shutter-clicking hand coordination necessary to a photographer of the unpremeditated. Indeed, like her elder colleagues Frank and Winogrand, Linn acquired the ability to maintain an anticipatory openness and near faultless timing that characterize the work of Frank and Winogrand.

Another photographer Linn admires is her elder Helen Levitt with whom she spent some time, in the 1980s, walking around the streets of New York (occasionally on opposite sides of the street) – anywhere from the drug-infested areas of the Lower East Side to Washington Heights. Linn noted to me that, from Levitt, she learned how to be still more accurate in her making. Less sociologically inclined than some of her peers, Levitt’s gentle humor finds echoes in Linn’s similar inclinations.

Like Winogrand and Frank, Levitt has honed her responsiveness to become a sharpshooter – as, indeed, has Linn. However, Levitt is more likely to reveal her compassion for her human subjects, especially children, whereas Linn is more likely to wrap us in the obvious dissolving into the mysterious or vice versa. She is expert at catching the surreal disturbances of the every day that alarm us, usually gently, out of drowsy routine. We see the back of a woman waiting for a subway. Pussy willow branches she holds in front of her, in her unseen arms, rise above her head and suddenly seem to actually grow out of her head and turn her into some demigoddess of the underground, before turning back into just another banal commuter. Countless associations might well have been released in that moment of transformation. Drifting and dreaming in the subway station. Linn is a dream weaver and a sharp shooter – a dream weaving sharp shooter.

The casual segue of the ordinary into the mysterious frequently animates Linn’s photographs. A photograph taken on a trip to Mexico, early in the 1970s, reveals a cropped image of her sister and nephew in a boat. Of Linn’s nephew we only see a closeup of part of his striped shirt and his pants; of her sister we see but her head and torso – her head in lost profile looking out to sea. This might be just a badly framed mistake by an amateur photographer were it not for the slack white line, probably but not necessarily emanating from a fishing rod, drifting between sister and nephew. This line draws Linn’s sister’s gaze – and the viewer’s – into the sea; it becomes the lifeline of the photograph catching a reverie of the sea. It makes magic the kind of inadvertent cropping a beginner might mistakenly commit.

While speed, precision, and accuracy are hallmarks of Linn’s photographs, she is prone to

fuzziness when queried about her chronology. She received a BFA from Pratt in 1969, moved back to Detroit “around 1972,” and worked as a photographer for the Detroit Area Weekly News. Among the photographs she shot for the paper is an immaculately coiffed Shih Tzu. I can almost count the individual strands of its coat that might well have been drawn by the steadiest of hands. The silkiness of the coat plays off the pointy blades of grass the dog is posed upon, as it looks knowingly into the camera. A more perfect photograph can hardly be imagined but for the tiny patch of black in the lower right corner. “Probably the knee of a friend,” Linn surmises.

After returning to New York, Linn learned to print, a skill that has served her well and, amongst much else has permitted her to preserve the unexpected occurrences, like her friend’s knee, that help infuse her photographs with the visual intimacy and vivacity that might well have been eliminated by a professional printer. And, in New York, Linn regularly photographed her friend Patti Smith, as well as Smith’s friend Robert Mapplethorpe.

Mapplethorpe’s partner Sam Wagstaff became an important mentor to Linn. Wagstaff had been a prominent curator of painting and sculpture before turning exclusively, and to the surprise of many, to photography, in the early 1970s. His intelligence and voracious appetite for art made Wagstaff a model for many a new collector of photography. His collection became the core of the Getty Museum’s photography collection and brought new prominence to photography. He was my upstairs neighbor, in the late 1960s and mid 1970’s and not infrequently knocked on my door, led me upstairs, put out a few lines of cocaine, then delighted and informed me with the show and tell of his newest acquisitions. He taught me and countless others that you could look at a photograph the same way you look at a painting – and that you could draw with a camera. His interests ranged from nineteenth century photography to that of the present. Linn was one of his favorite living artists; he collected her work and curated a one-person exhibition of her photographs at P.S.1, in 1980. When Linn learned about and took up color photography, Wagstaff gently urged her to go back to the plethora of grays that nuanced her black and white photographs (that never contain an actual black or white).

While Linn largely followed Wagstaff’s advice, she continues to create occasional color photographs as the aesthetic need arises – for instance, the mirage of those Teletubbies, mentioned above, would be less immediate and startling had they been photographed in black and white. And Linn has managed to accumulate a palette of grays at least as varied as those made possible with color film. Her grays engender shades of seduction, more distanced than those of most color photography and adumbrate the quiet intimacy – now filled with wonder, now with sadness, now with sly, sometime surreal, disjunction – that pervades so much of Linn’s work.

Linn’s development as an artist has not been marked by any radical changes; rather her work has continuously effloresced into quiet but authoritative grace. Wagstaff included her work in another exhibition, Photo Politic, that he curated for P.S. 1 in 1980; and Diego Cortez, also at P.S.1, included Linn’s work in his seminal 1981 exhibition New York/New Wave, that announced and ushered in the freer and more integrated culture of the early 1980s. Her friend, the noted writer Hilton Als, secured a freelance job for her taking fashion photographs and occasionally writing articles on fashion for the Village Voice. Linn’s portrait of Als shimmers with countless grays as his firmly rounded head peers out of and into a panoply of rectangles and nocturnal reflections, from the front seat of a taxi into the back. The seediness of the taxi interior does little to suppress the mysterious glamour of the moment.

Als would call me in 1993 or ‘94 to invite me to dinner in order to discuss two artists with me. I was in the throes of curating the Whitney Museum’s 1995 Biennial and frequently overwhelmed with entreaties from artists and artists’ friends. Necessity had finally taught me how to say “no;” however, Als’ voice is not to be easily ignored. Judy Linn would, of course, turn out to be one of the two artists he urged me to see.

As I stood in her studio, I found myself wondering if epiphanies can be silent and wondered, too, why it had taken me more than a decade to recognize the beauty of Linn’s work. Linn’s art and

that of Jeff Wall would count amongst the great pleasures of curating that Biennial – both artists whose work I had previously not fully recognized. Wall’s oversized backlit transparencies dared to revive the long discredited grandeur of history painting, whereas Linn dared intimacy and fragile reverie – qualities not so highly valued, at the outset of her career. Both have in common an uncanny compositional skill.

How I smiled every time I walked by Linn’s photograph of a fish seemingly suspended in mid air as it confronted, with apparent foreboding, through the murky glass wall of its aquarium, the clarity of Linn’s lens. The aquarium placed against a window becomes a second lens through which a city square dissolving in the aquarium’s glass mists hovers in spectral grayness. The solitary fish memorialized before becoming a seafood dish.

Linn’s work continues to evolve, enchant, and confound. In 1998, she began working with a larger camera that, in the development of her images, yielded a smaller grain, thus sharpening the photographed surfaces more. How clearly we can see the individual blades of grass in the foreground of a photograph of two legs each cropped above the knee, at one end, and above the ankle, at the other end. However, the legs don’t seem to match. The leg further back, with its pant pulled above the knee appears to belong to a different body than its companion leg; but, if not emanating from the same body, these two legs could not be physically so close together. Clarity reveals the surreal. And let’s not overlook the barely visible wrinkles where the ankle meets the shaft of the half bare leg; those wrinkles Linn says “make the photo.” Never mind the conundrum presented by the legs.

More explicable is the tree that seems to float serenely on the surface of a lake in a gorgeous landscape created in 2006 that discreetly revels in endless variations in clarity of focus, tone, and form. The realization that a flood has largely submerged the tree can hardly subtract from the mesmerizing calm of the scene. No props, no tricks, no digitalization, just simple hands-and-eyes-on magic. Quietly and persistently Linn has extended the thoughts and feelings and poetry photography can embody.

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JUDY LINN

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