



Studio Visit

Photographers at Work

With Barbara Kasten in Chicago

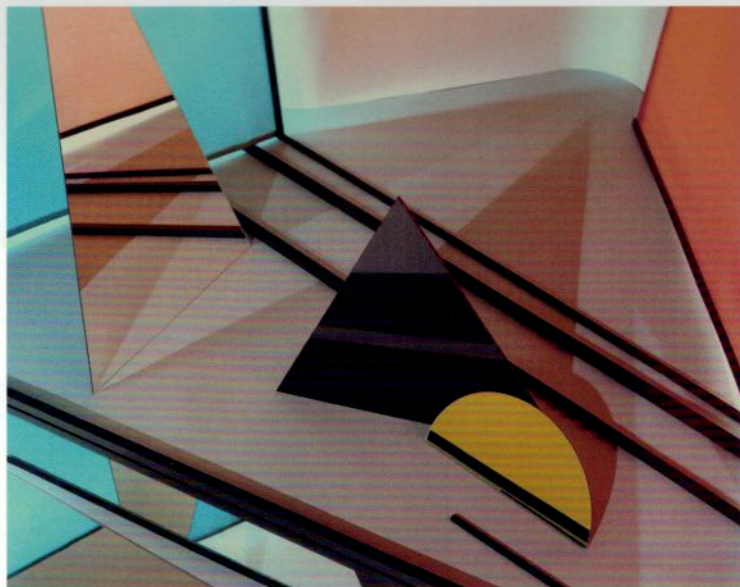
Alex Klein

After sliding open the heavy metal door to Barbara Kasten's studio, we step into a large, white-walled, high-ceilinged room. Walking through the gallery space and through the work area, we pass familiar-looking sculptural props and large framed works by Kasten until we arrive at a meeting room and office lined with windows opening onto a stunning view of the downtown Chicago skyline. In a sense, this new studio is a fitting metaphor for the latest chapter in Barbara's career. Best known for her colorful studio constructions and prescient, cinematic architectural interventions of the 1980s, Kasten these days is busy fielding more and more requests from curators and galleries, stimulated by a dialogue with a younger generation of artist peers, such as Anthony Pearson, Liz Deschenes, and Sara VanDerBeek, who are finding a model in the interdisciplinary nature of her process. Despite this accelerated pace, she is invigorated by all of the activity, producing more work than ever since her return to the studio in the mid-2000s. It is amid this whirlwind that I join Barbara to organize her first survey exhibition, which we will be mounting next year at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

Over the past century the building that houses Barbara's studio has alternately functioned as a warehouse, an auto-parts supplier, public storage, and now an artist-studio center overseen by Mana Contemporary. This latest conversion is still partially under construction. Soon, I'm told, the floors will be bustling with artists; there will be a café, gallery, classrooms for students from the University of Illinois, shipping resources, and a library formed from the collection of the esteemed Chicago gallerist Donald Young. For the time being, though, Barbara is one of few settled tenants. The heating ducts and Internet have yet to be installed, but she doesn't have time to wait for all of the amenities—there is too much to do.

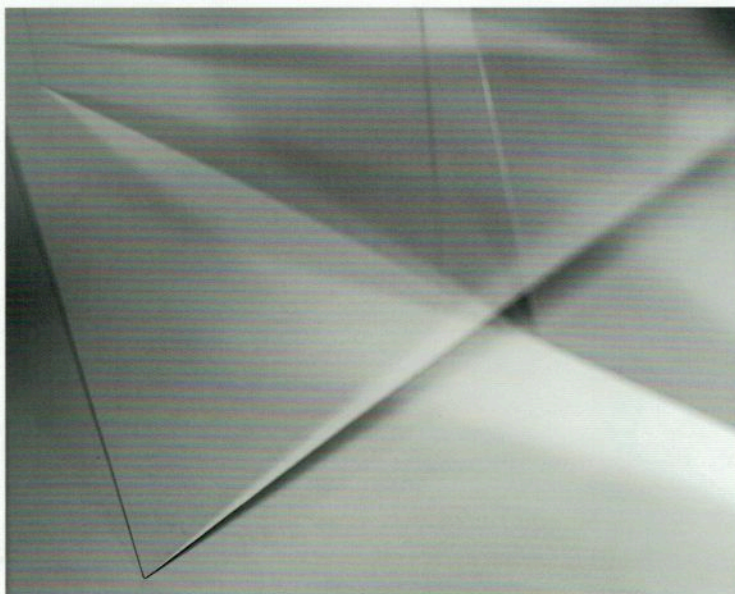
Although Chicago is her hometown, Barbara's work is informed by the atmospheres of the many places she's lived, including the Southwest, the San Francisco Bay Area, Germany, Los Angeles, and finally New York. Returning to Chicago in the early 2000s after forty years, at the invitation of Columbia College Chicago, she found herself back in a familiar city and with new resources. "My practice has always been studio-based, but in the 1990s I had more of a mobile studio," she reflects. "I worked with museum collections so I had to go to them—they weren't things I could bring back into the studio. Being grounded in one location in Chicago gave me an opportunity to look at what I've done in the past and think about work that had the possibility of expanding."

While this has resulted in a stunning group of minimally elegant yet abrasive photographs and videos that utilize many of the same materials, such as screens and plexiglass, seen in her earliest constructions from the late 1970s, at its core her work is a consistent and rigorous investigation of materiality and perception. Her train of thought can be followed clearly in her diverse output, from the fiber sculptures she produced as a graduate student at the California College of Arts and Crafts and the cyanotype works from the mid-1970s that she referred to as *Photogenic Paintings*, to her intimate *Constructs* and ambitious *Architectural Sites* produced in the 1980s and celebrated for their bold palette and postmodern conceits. While the 1990s saw her venturing increasingly out in the world to make work that focused on talismanic objects, ruins, and artifacts, her current videos and photographic series can be seen as a literal return to form, inspired, in part, by the site of the studio.



Left:
Barbara Kasten,
Construct XIX, 1982

Right:
Barbara Kasten,
Studio Construct 15, 2007
Both photographs
© Barbara Kasten
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Studio Constructs (2007–2011) and *Scene* (2012–present). For a year now we have been reviewing Barbara’s extensive archive and thinking together about how to contextualize her multifaceted practice. It is an intense and rewarding process to look back over a lifetime of work, the experiences and locations in which it developed, and to think about its shifting resonance and reception. With this in mind I ask Barbara to reflect on how this latest change of environment, her new studio space, will affect her work. She considers a moment before responding, “When you change locations it always opens up new possibilities, and I see this as an entirely different atmosphere than where I was before. It’s much more open; it’s bigger; it has more flexibility in terms of how many photographic sets I can make. As well as making photographs, I have space to work with video and installation. It gives me an opportunity to follow a line of thinking from a photo to a video without breaking things down in between—it can be more simultaneous. So I think this expansiveness is a good way of describing both my state of mind and my ability to do two or three things at the same time.” As we wrap up our conversation and make plans to rendezvous on the West Coast in the coming weeks, it is clear that it is precisely this expansiveness, both physical and temporal, that will be central to transition from the studio here in Chicago to the galleries in Philadelphia.

Reflecting on my observation about her career path she says, “One of the things that motivated me in going into the studio was that my interest has really been in abstraction and the constant examination of what a photograph is—I am asking the question ‘can a photograph be an abstraction?’ simply because it seemed almost impossible. A camera has to have something to record. It became a kind of pedagogical question that I posed to myself. ‘Can I really prove this? Can I make a photograph that is based in something that is not tangible?’ When returning to the studio I really had this in mind—it became more of a formulated question that had to happen through the process in the studio.”

Today, however, the big task is to sort through several boxes of 30-by-40-inch Cibachrome prints of *Constructs* dating from the 1980s and send them off to Germany for framing. Kadel Willborn, Barbara’s gallery in Düsseldorf, will be devoting their entire booth at the 2013

Frieze Art Fair in London to both new and vintage photographs of her studio constructions. Barbara’s assistant, Caitlin Arnold, starts pulling large boxes out of the adjacent storage racks that house neatly stacked containers of prints and framed works spanning the breadth of Kasten’s career. Suddenly the table is covered with an array of deeply saturated colors produced by the advanced lighting techniques that Barbara honed to create her sculptural tableaux. The Cibachromes have a marvelous watery surface when seen outside of their frames, and it is fascinating to be able to look at them up close and in person and compare the differences with the more muted, cool palette of their Polaroid counterparts.

While the *Constructs* are just one series within Barbara’s rich oeuvre, they consolidate questions of representation, form, and illusion, thus setting the stage for the work she has been producing over the past ten years, including

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