

RELATIONSHIP AS MEANING

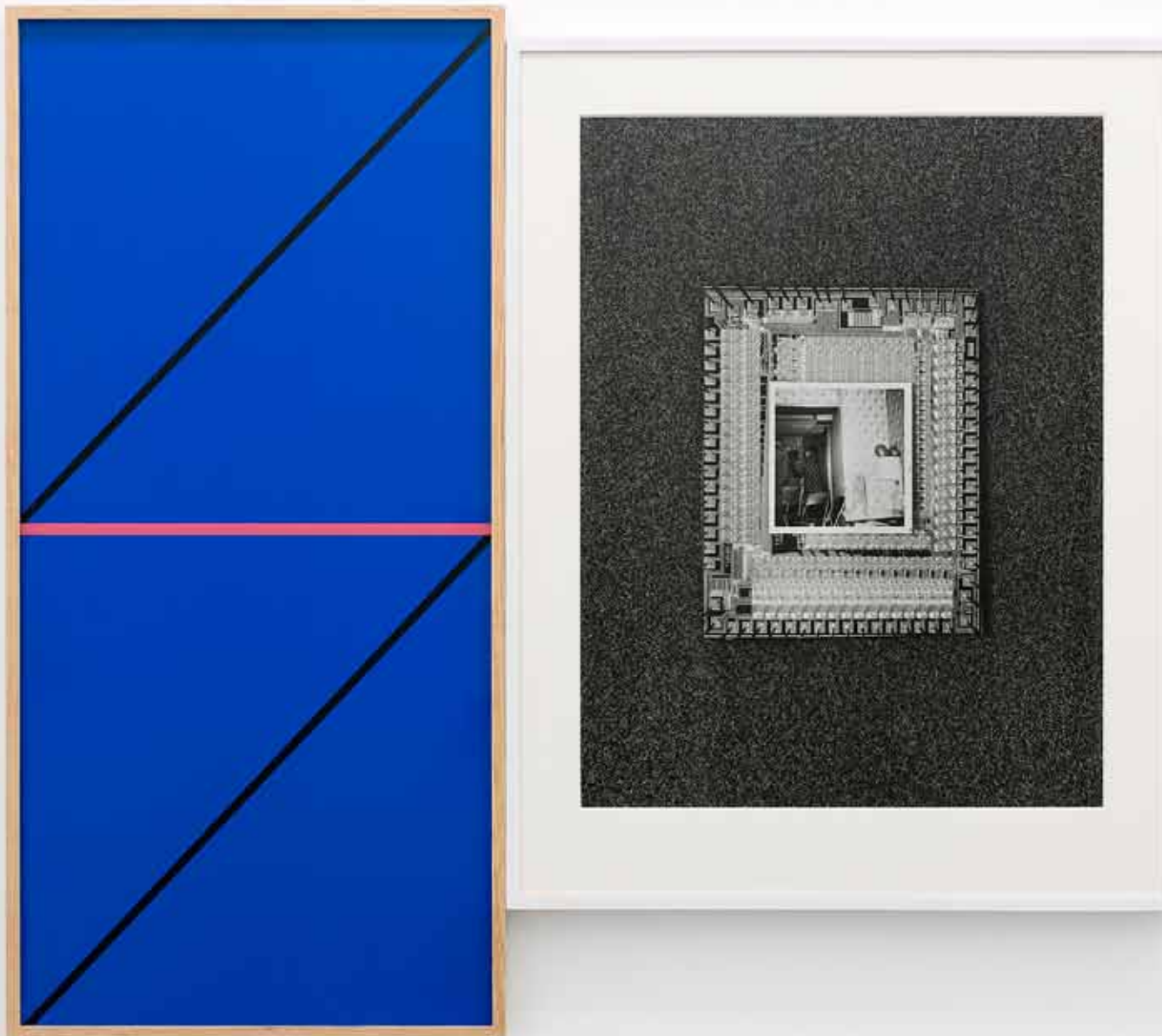
A LESLIE HEWITT INTERVIEW

RAJESH PUNJ

I am attracted to aesthetic things. But where it became more interesting with photography or the medium, was certain questions that images left me with.

American photographer, artist and academic Leslie Hewitt in conversation explains her visual configurations as the culmination of historical, and here and now evidence. Of the information inherent in her choice of images, together with her reasoning for applying coloured and calculation paper panels to the wall, that combine to create a series of pictorial puzzles. Aesthetic algebra, for want of a better phrase, Hewitt's configurations appear born of her academic appetite for theory, and much as they are of her experience of the image as photograph growing up; and of its art historical significance thereafter. In context the image in her hands becomes a vessel for a wealth of related ideas, associated with time, location and identity. Which explains why she sees the photograph as an integrate part of a constellation of forms and colours. For which she invites her audience to look very differently at the image - to see it as an element rather than an entire idea. Encouraging us to critique everything we understand of the photograph, and of the images we hold here.

Photographer Ansel Adams suggested that 'when images become inadequate, to be content with silence', and it is that salvation from sound that appears positively palpable in Hewitt's coloured constellations of pictures and prints. As the world, as we see it through her architected arrangements, appears reappraised in the present past. The nucleus of Hewitt's work begins with a photograph, that loosely references reality, animated by a whole host of associations, which she applies to a decorative under pattern of a table or floor as context, that in our physical presence is enclosed by a metal or wooden frame - that operates to involve a metaphysical frame of reference, of a physical image within a frame, within the context of the works location. And where Adams captured the gravity of the image as art in his black and white landscapes, follow American Andy Warhol saw his urban portraits as entirely of the moment, and the people in his polaroids as prize symbols. But such an approach is what appears to torment Hewitt about photography, that she deserved more from what she was looking at as a child, and that the more intimate pictures of the people she knew should have been more truthful to who they were. This failing of photography, to capture the truth entirely, has Hewitt determine a very different outlook for her choice of photographs. In order we understand the image not just as a representation of the world, but more as a document for a particular situation and circumstances. Less celebration as Warhol envisaged photography, and more an examination of the condition 'of self'.



< Leslie Hewitt
Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Mirror Blue with Black Diagonal and Horizon Daybreak), 2018
 Digital chromogenic print, silver gelatin print
 114,3 x 137,2 x 5,1 cm | 45 x 54 x 2 in
 © Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist

Seeing beyond the surface experience, Hewitt perceives the image as an explanation for sensations that are reactive to a particular moment as it was seen through the lens of the camera. Yet for all the emotion that comes with looking at the past through the photograph, minutes and even millennia's before, it is as if the images in Hewitt's collages and constructs are intended to remain detached from the idea of the photograph as we understand it. Surrendering instead to the authority of the adjoining parts.

And for all Hewitt's critical interest in the human being, as crucial to the experience of her work, a human presence appears missing from her works, with everything is cloaked in a layer of complexity. As her configurations are visually less crowded, more conceptually satisfying. Introducing the real by way of a trompe-l'œil effect, the image as a point of entry into the work is for the majority at the centre of her works. With the re-pictured and re-contextualised picture one part of a carefully considered arrangement of patterns and coloured prints - test sheets if you like for the order of things as she sees them. Choreographing the significance of what we see, against that which isn't there. Encouraging the idea that for every image there is another reality beyond the edges of the picture, and that for all the inactivity captured by the camera in a still image, that there is the potential for an avalanche of activity somewhere else.

Curating a deliberate choice of image into her work, Hewitt's pictures tell a greater story about historical, political and social narratives associated with what we see. Not only unearthing evidence of how the photography came into existence, but of its life as a document thereafter. Emphasising its value in time and space, whilst inviting her audience to fall a little further into the context and condition of when the picture was taken. Hewitt's constructs appear as much informed by her mastering of minimalism, as they of her own personal experiences, together with that of the African American.

More specifically of her works the inclusion of an image as evidence of Black activism in American in the 1950's and early 1960's, in the work *Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Nightshade)* 2018, demonstrates how a photograph, for its content, can mass a greater narrative than the figures photographed tell us. Yet as much as the image invites such gravitas to her work, Hewitt is also wary of our belief that the photograph holds the truth, and that the real is present in every image we see. On the contrary Hewitt argues that the picture is more a piece of propaganda, that should be measured against the physical narratives heard and unheard, at the time the picture was taken. Which requires us to see the photograph as a moment, in a lifetime of experiences. The image fixed, the associations are key to navigating our way through a work, as panel and picture, become the landscape for

a modern take on minimalism's original motives as Hewitt understand them.

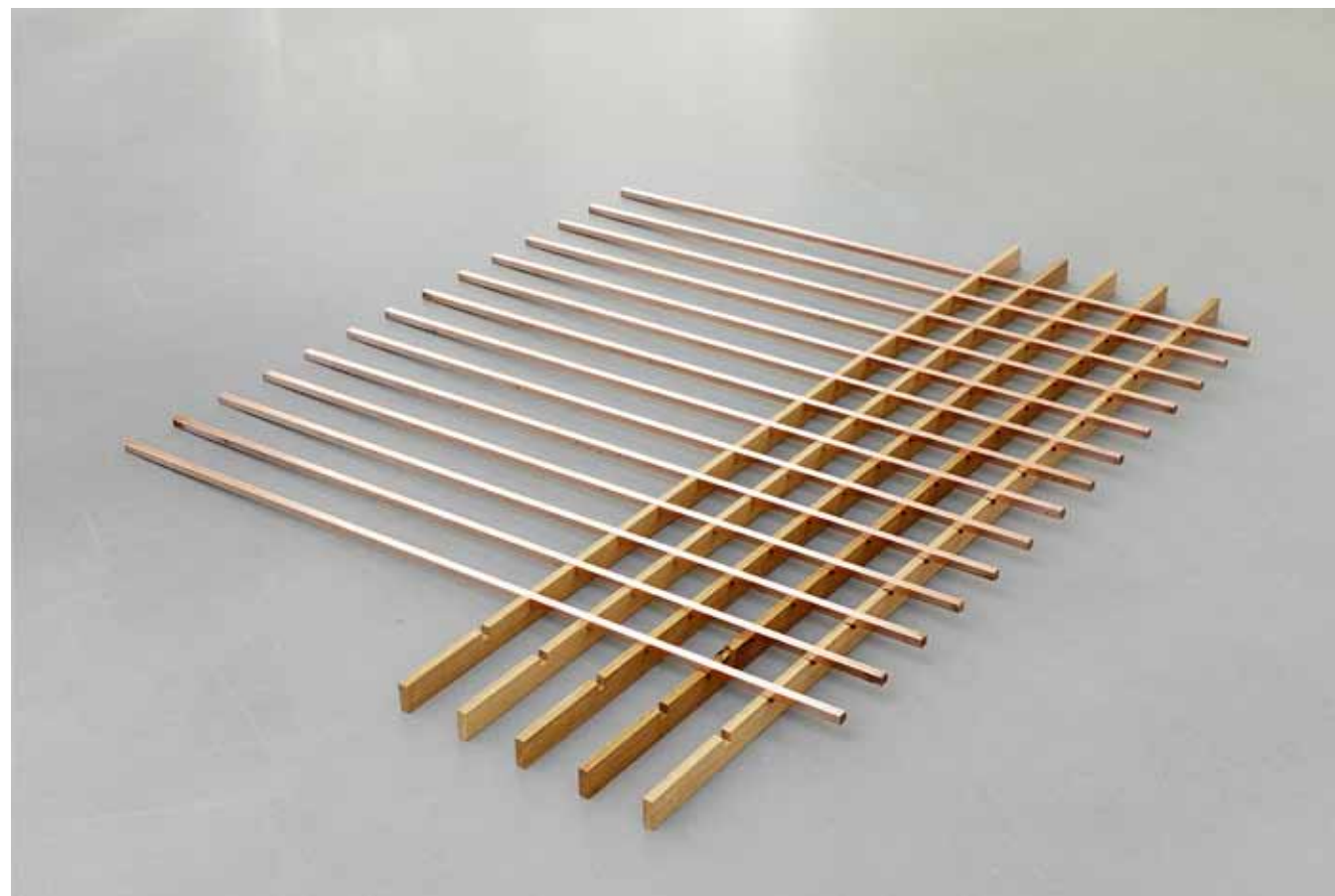
Interview

Rajesh Punj: *I want to begin by understanding your relationship to photography, as you see it?*

Leslie Hewitt: Yes. I will share what I feel like I have discovered about photography, because I love art obviously. I am attracted to aesthetic things. But where it became more interesting with photography or the medium, was certain questions that images left me with.

Because photography cuts across, so you have amateur, I don't like to use the term, but vernacular photography, and you have commercial photography. So it is this language that conceptual photography is cutting through all of these spheres, all of these aspects of life. And I have always had a very central (sense) that I wanted from it. I think I said this when we were standing in front of the image of the clouds and the crumpled piece of paper. I was bringing up something more personal, like that of my family. In that my parents were born to older parents, so their parents were in their forties, my dad's dad was actually fifty when he was born, so when I was a young child there were many deaths, and people were leaving, and you are too young to fully understand, but I was always questioning the role of the picture as a memoria. Because I didn't like it, I didn't like to

> Leslie Hewitt
Untitled, 2018, Copper, wood
 152,4 x 121,9 x 3,8 cm | 60 x 48 x 1 ½ in
 © Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist



look at an image of my grandmother, who I saw, and that I had a relationship with, it didn't feel the same. It felt like a copy, but not even a fill in copy. So I am expressing something more personal. But I think it creates a window into larger questions about how we insert meaning into an image? Where does it lie, and can it retain it? Does it disappear?

RP: *Is that to do with the deficiencies of photography, or of your own personal expectations of it as a medium?*

LH: That is a bigger question, a philosophical question. That is a question for (Walter) Benjamin, and all of the other theorists. But I agree with that, I am drawn to that too. To some of those early questions, especially when the technology of photography developed, what was its purpose? Its not art, because its reproductive and its not original, it does not have its place. But it (photography) has also done something else - it is accurately reflective of how we are as a society.

RP: *But not accurate to the individual, if we think about what you said before.*

LH: It is an art form that mirrors its place in the larger human narrative, we could say, and of course there is always painting, but where we are now technological it is inevitable that photography is a predominate part of our modern experience. Will it last, I don't know? Will our memories last in this memory chip

we don't know how to program. If it is corrupted does it just disappear? So we are in a way leaving less of an impression now (and I am speaking about photography in a very general), which leads to my interest in the idea of what is and isn't present in an image, to do with its origin as a medium. Of whether an image can ever record what is immaterial? As a consequence there is a whole genre of 'ghost photography'. And with the real, one of the most photographed wars was the civil war. There is a lot in America, so many images were taken, that amount to a huge archive of that particular war. So (the camera, the photograph) is so connected to tragedy, to human progress, but also to extreme violence. You can't arrest that from the medium either. It is difficult, and I am interested in being part of the conversation grappling with what it means in the time that I am in.

RP: *It is interesting when I think of photography and how it has been discussed historically and contemporaneously, there has always been mention of it being closer to the truth. Possibly social media and television have surpassed its significance, as the more immediate mechanisms for recording our presence. Maybe that is something, the technological truth.*

LH: That is a hard word, you are (really trying to motivate something bigger).

RP: *Photography has always been explained as a 'truth' medium.*



^ Leslie Hewitt
Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Green Mesh), 2017
 Digital chromogenic print, silver gelatin print, 104,1 x 231,1 cm, 41 x 91 in, © Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist



LH: I think it is true (to question that) because I think it poses a huge burden on (the medium).

RP: *In the beginning they hailed the camera as a machine for capturing the truth. Akin to what we see, the photograph was explained as evidence of what we had seen.*

LH: Yes of course, but sometimes the truth, and we know from the history of photography, some of it is pseudo-scientific, to judge the size of someone's head, the size of someone's nose, photographing what would be considered degenerates. But an image cannot peer into someone's mind, maybe a MRI or CT scan, but not a photograph in this way, so I think it is a troubled history for photography, because it is a tool.

RP: *Yet photography is part of the apparatus you employ for your work.*

LH: When you use a photograph so you are naturally engaging with the history of the medium.

RP: *Yes of course.*

LH: But my form I hope disrupts reading it as we would normal images. So for instance, if you only want to see it as a document you will be disappointed. Because it is a document of a very particular theme that the image doesn't necessarily reveal. It only reveals the final act, like the composite. But it isn't in anyway a document that delivers direct objective

truth. And I am strategically applying a very omniscient perspective. This very scientific view that is about having a very panoptic, by which you can see everything, but everything is moving in its own way; thus the image and the work defies definition. And what I mean by that is that the material is a piece of paper, somehow because of the way it is photographed and of how light is resting on it, and what it is next to, the photograph almost feels like it is something more than that, or other than that. But you still have the grounding, so you can't go too far toward a poetic register, because you are still grounded by the document. Not clinically more objectively.

So I like having the work touch different aspects of photographic registers, because the document is one, the narrative is another, the diarist (these perspectives or ways of writing if you will with photography). So with this work it was really important to incorporate hints of different positions, to create a question. Or to try to invite a critical engagement with our perception, and that's not saying I want you to have a critical engagement with this work, but more so that is naturally invites it. The more you linger with this the more you will have questions.

RP: *When you spoke earlier I was intrigued to ask of the images that you employ, is it something about the human presence, and we can include the landscape in that, that inspires a greater level of emotion in us all? Is the human presence in an image, that which*

It is an art form that mirrors its place in the larger human narrative, we could say, and of course there is always painting, but where we are now technological it is inevitable that photography is a predominate part of our modern experience.

makes a photograph become a document, rather than something entirely decorative?

LH: Yes and no. I think your question focuses more on the modes of representation that include the human figure I would say. But my impression is that too, of things we often don't pay attention to, but all of the DNA of all of the people that touch that book, that is probably there too, so there are other impressions of human presence, that are not so obvious, and that I am very much interested in. And so there is that, and then is the more distant reproduced moment, through my re-photography, or my photograph of the photograph. There is also this other thing. One of my favourite moments in the series, the work that is in front of the desk, there is a big fingerprint on the snapshot. No one sees it but it is there. But I love it because that is what we want. That is what we want as humans, when you literally leave a mark. It's your impression.

RP: *It is interesting how you see additional dimensions to photography. Ordinarily we are inclined to think of the precision of a certain kind of photography, particularly museum photography. Of it being entirely correct - the idea that it must be a clean image in order it can register as the truth. But for all your precision, you appear to want to scrutinise the environment around an image, seeing the photograph as two forms, that of the image as a 'truth' defining document, and also of it as object, that we come into contact with it by way of a fingerprint, at the moment the image becomes a*

^ Leslie Hewitt
Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Brown and Red are Equals), 2018, Digital chromogenic print, silver gelatin print
95,9 x 141,6 x 5,1 cm | 37 ¾ x 55 ¾ x 2 in
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist

< Leslie Hewitt
Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Nightshade), 2018
Digital chromogenic print, silver gelatin print
95,9 x 123,8 x 5,1 cm | 37 ¾ x 48 ¾ x 2 in
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist



physical form, that includes its own creases and cuts.

LH: Completely.

RP: And then in relation to that, as we already talked about at lunch, what interests me is the dynamic of everything on display. Of the associated parts, or the works that are attached to the image, and how it as a whole functions as a 'sculpture', or an 'object'? That said, of how you define them as individual works?

LH: I don't necessarily see them as individual parts. I think what is true with the 'Reefs on Real Time' series, is that juxtaposition defines their new relationship. So even though the snapshot exists as a completely independent material, a book, the page, or the floor, through photography you capture the relationship, and the relationship has new meaning. So by creating these diptychs, though they repeat, what's important is the relationship. That they are next to each other at the moment, and in this instance permanently. Because they are a collection, they have a relationship, a coupling. And I was speaking with you before, this is the first time with black and white, not my first time ever because I fell in love with colour, so I work primarily with colour.

As a consequence, and as a way to want push myself, to move outside of what was familiar, as it was becoming too much of the same with colour. With this series, when I first started it, I didn't know it would continue to be honest. I started it as an exploration, and then I thought something is interesting with this, and so I kept going and created a system of working. And I think we spoke about this as well, that now

but sometimes the truth, and we know from the history of photography, some of it is pseudo-scientific, to judge the size of someone's head, the size of someone's nose, photographing what would be considered degenerates.

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because we mostly experience the image on the screen it is hard to discern depth, it is hard to discern multiple things. I also thought that now that we do certain actions like caption screen grabs, all of these things as modes of appropriation, that we do without any consequence, so you have the first generation of artists utilising appropriation, you don't have to bear the legality of it, the struggle. Now we just do it because we can, and I think I was trying to push myself to not fall so easily into working that way.

So I thought let me try this, maybe it will slow down the reading of the work, the question of the work, and when I started to make the prints it took me some time because I haven't worked with black and white film for a while. For which you have to think about contrast, you have to get a different film, all of those technical things, but once I found a rhythm, a way in which I could create what I wanted in the print, I realised I still missed the colour register.

RP: I want to understand, colour and black and white, is there a sense that we receive more from a colour, than a black and white image?

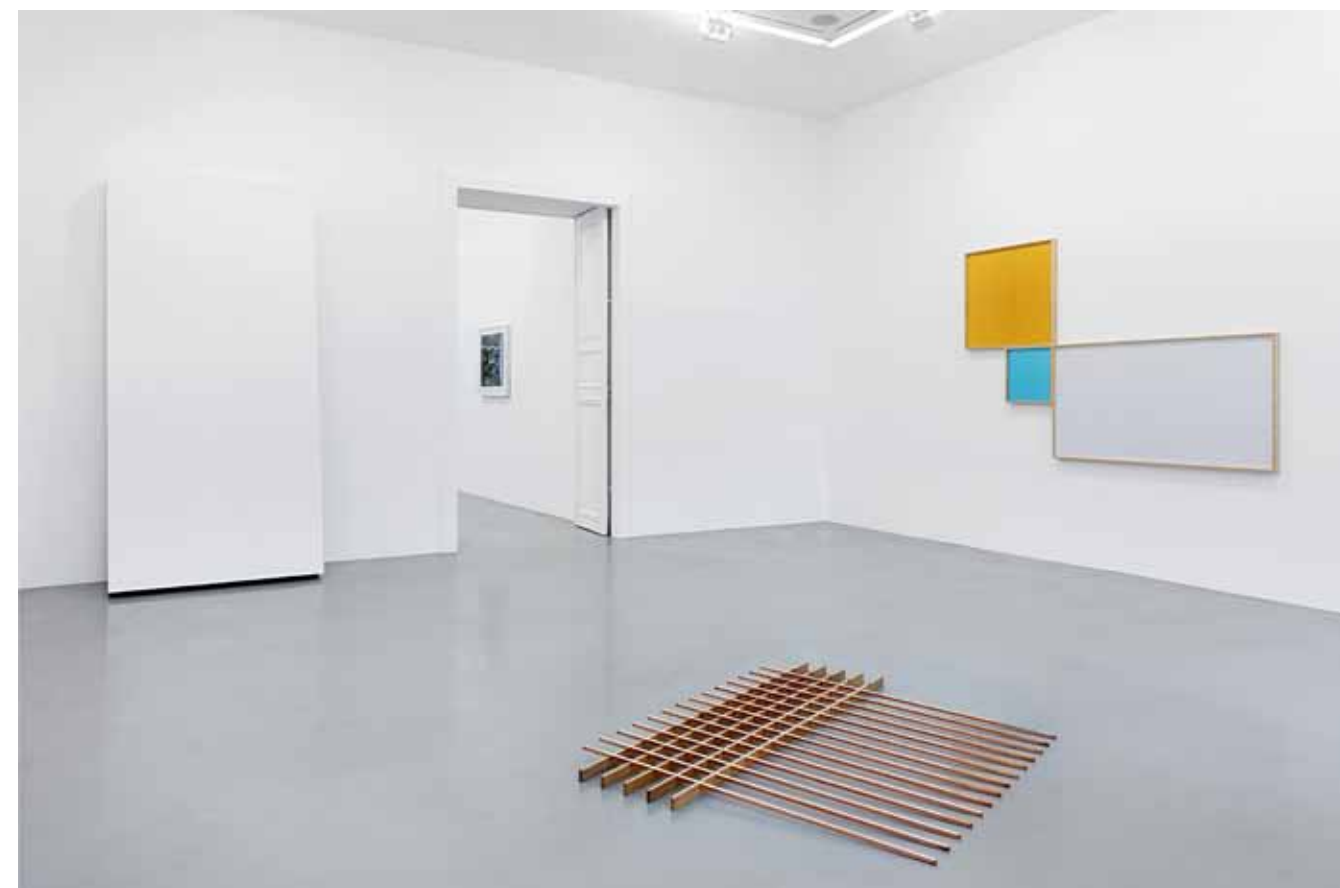
LH: I don't see them in opposition to one another, I mean obviously black and white has a longer history, colour is a different paper, its plastic and requires a different chemical process to deliver it. Black and white is silver gelatine, resting on a different paper, so fundamentally 'yes' they are different. But I don't know if we receive them differently, I haven't really

thought it in that way. But I do think optically our ability to perceive the image is changing, because of the screen I am sure. I want to take a class (separately) to study optics a little more, whilst I am actively seeking to understand it. To take a course more in the medical component, to understand optometry, and I want to see from that perspective.

How colour is taught and understood. I think it is fascinating. I think that colour is crucial to our way of perceiving the world that we see because it is light, and photography is based on light - of the light's encryption. That's a more precise way of saying it, than drawing. It is a partner completely.

RP: I am interested, and you have touched on it already, of understanding the colour element in your work, and of how the colour picture and panel are intended to complement one another?

LH: The reality, because I have been working on this series for a long time, of the colour versions of Riffs on Real Time sometimes I am placing things next to each other because the prominent colour requires it. In the early works I realise I wasn't only pairing by association with the subject, of what is produced, but also by colours. So a really blue book, created a really strange relationship with the red in the photograph, comes as a consequence of my intuitively making colour relationships. Which is what I missed in the necromantic. I was almost seeing through the materiality, not only of what the object was, but





seeing it for its colour register, of what it was and what is appeared to be, and of how it looks different in one situation, as opposed to being placed next to something else. And that I must admit comes from my education too. I studied colour theory under Irwin Ruben, who was a painter who worked with Joseph Albers. So the interaction of colour (Ruben) was very strict with his teaching of it. But of course he put his own spin on it, and I can remember at the time he was obsessed with the German collagist Kurt Schwitters.

RP: *You have clearly been taught by all the right people.*

LH: I am sure you went to all the best art schools as well.

RP: *So you talked of Schwitters at Art School?*

LH: We discussed (Kurt) Schwitters a lot, and collage, and of (Marcel) Duchamp - all of that. So materially (Ruben) taught colour through collage, not through painting. Even though of course we had to physically apply his ideas, as a segment of the degree program. But Joseph Albers is known for dislodging colour from its close relationship to painting, meaning its concentrated representation. So really being able to discover that colour is light. It is perception, and it is changed by what it is next to.

RP: *All of that proved critical to you.*

LH: Yes. I would leave class staring at everything like a child, 'white isn't white, that's blue, there is a little yellow in the corner'. So it opened up (many possibilities).

RP: *Could you see how that might be applied to branding and commercials?*

LH: It is much bigger than that, because it's about our eyes. I mean every living creature that has eyes sees a different spectrum. Just like hearing, we don't hear the same sounds as a dog or a cat. We don't see the same as a fish. We have all developed out of evolution and necessity, because it is also based off of survival. So we have advanced with different ways of seeing and hearing the same world. Which is quite amazing.

RP: *It is, and very strange at the same time, because your visual perception of colour space is in some ways different to mine.*

LH: Yes but we are both humans, and we both see the same spectrum of colours, unless of course you are colour blind.

RP: *With your mentioning (Kurt) Schwitters, I think of his remarkable 'Merzbau' constructions, and I want to understand if Schwitters, as taught to you by your painter professor, is an influence with your own constructs, that are clearly more two dimensional, but have the possibility of becoming more. Do you envisage building outward and upward into a more installation like form?*

But my form I hope disrupts reading it as we would normal images. So for instance, if you only want to see it as a document you will be disappointed. Because it is a document of a very particular theme that the image doesn't necessarily reveal. It only reveals the final act, like the composite. But it isn't in anyway a document that delivers direct objective truth. . And what I mean by that is that the material is a piece of paper, somehow because of the way it is photographed and of how light is resting on it, and what it is next to, the photograph almost feels like it is something more than that.

LH: It is the nature of collage I think.

RP: *So you can see the works going further, dimensionally and spatially.*

LH: Yes, but I can't see it going beyond what you can embody. I wouldn't make something that you walk through. It needs to still be able to have perspective that comes with it, because with my work I am interested in a level of intimacy. Some works are large in scale, but they are still made to human scale, so I don't envisage going too much bigger.

RP: *So scale for you is about intimacy, and not about enveloping an audience.*

LH: Yes.

RP: *Coming away from the wall, to the floor, Untitled 2018, copper, wood, still involved a controlled scale.*

LH: I have worked larger, but I always want to return to a human scale. I like to be able to see it and understand it (in one entire action of the eyes). There are something's like architecture whereby we can't see and be in this building simultaneously. We can be in the building, and then we can be outside of it and understand it. I like both happening. That you can have a corporeal relationship with it, but that you can also see it, that you can have the picture or image of it. It is in your field (of vision).

RP: *Can you talk more of your sculptural works, and of how they relate to the space they occupy?*

LH: Yes, they are always site-specific. There are two in the exhibition, and when I made them they are always made for the space. Unfortunately I wasn't able to visit the space before coming, but normally I walk through a space, and I am very much cognitive of the architecture of when you walk through a door, and into a space, 'how high is the door?' All of the things that we don't think about consciously, but that effect our movement.

RP: *Obviously you are thinking of materials at the same time.*

LH: Yes of course, they have to mirror the space, the environment definitely. So I come up with a formula for the dimensions. I call it the 'proscenium', which is more of a theatre term, walking from the stairs into the gallery, or from the gallery out through the window. I immediately get a sense of the height and thickness of a space, and then I have a ratio that fits into the context of the space. That isn't too big, that isn't too small. That feels kind of a culmination of your experience of moving through different openings.

RP: *Which invites the question of whether space was perceived differently historically, with artists having made works, two and three dimensional, that occupied space very definitely, as if the environment was only intended for those artworks. Your works, and your use of space, appears less masculine in that sense, more sensitive and sensible to the space that exists already. Regarding that who are your influences?*

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(September 6 - 22, 2018)
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & the artist



LH: There are so many.

RP: (Donald) Judd possibly.

LH: Judd was a little austere, the material. I think I appreciate a little more touch to my work. Saying that I do enough the presence of his objects, and of how determined he was. You can install the shelves any other way, but if they are not to the dimensions he stipulated, they are not the work. Judd was very particular.

RP: Is that then too extreme, less art more machinery.

HL: No, no. It's not too extreme, I really respected that part (of the work). I think for me I would also include other artists who are not always introduced to the minimal realm. Eva Hesse, her drawings, Adrian Piper, I also like thinking of her alongside minimalism; especially her early works, her early drawings and grids. Sol LeWitt obviously, which suggests I am bringing up a logic, not only the experience of the work as I see it. Carl Andre, though a problematic figure, because of Ana Mendieta. But my encounter with his work was incredibly humbling. Because the artist used very original materials, and all of them in their raw state, which I always thought was generous. So maybe I am peculiar, and maybe the audience believe a work has to have this high-end finish. I don't think that.

RP: It is obviously to do with arrangement, of whatever materials are to hand.

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HL: That, and it is spatial. I really believe this, which is why I need to study more, the neurological understanding of the human brain. Not that I want to be a scientist in anyway, but I feel like it is so impactful. And architects really understand this too. John Hejduk was an influence, he was really a poet and an architect, and taught at architect school that was in close proximity to me, to a generation of new architects. Many of them went onto study philosophy, because Hejduk was so interested in buildings, he was more so interested in space, in conceptions of space and time. Marking time. Those are questions that are not always accomplished in the construction of million dollar buildings, but can be found in other ways.

RP: I see time and the consideration of it, as something abstract and on-going philosophically.

LH: I recently heard this really great interview with the English architect David Adjaye, about architecture, that I believe was before the unveiling of this new museum, on the mall in Washington DC. The African American History Museum, and he (David Adjaye) was talking about how a building was in a different 'time stamp' to you or me. And he suggested how he is making something that will be there (for much longer than we will be alive). And maybe he was bringing it into his own narrative, of travelling and moving throughout the world; of

having a relationship to looking at structures. When you have the benefit of being in a city that has a very long history. Then you see structures that were there before your lifetime. So I found that very fascinating. I am not proposing that my work operates in that way, but I am interested in that definitely.

RP: There is obviously the architectural that interests you as well. But as we said at the beginning what I appreciate of your work is your understanding and consideration for space, and of how the works occupy the gallery space. And what interests me more are volumes of space, and of how art objects sit within space, and how the work is another area, challenging, or enhanced existing space; and subsequently of how object and space co-exist.

LH: That makes me think of minimalism again, and it is hard not to think about minimalism without thinking about the body. Because that is the most important interlocker with the minimalist object, and we don't talk about it as much now, but also dance, and dancers, are very much relevant. Yvonne Rainer, all of these ideas were interlacing so that everyday movements of the body, the scale of the body, are involved. Those things in an interesting way are for me encoded in minimalist logic. We do not necessarily always talk about it, because we are looking at the object, but the work is designed in relation to the body.

