

LAURA LETINSKY HARDLY MORE THAN EVER: PHOTOGRAPHS 1997-2004



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No aspect of the visible world has ever been off limits to photography. As a result, it has never experienced a revolution in genre. Debates have been more about *how* rather than *what* was photographed, even as photography's efforts to achieve fine art status underwent a radical paradigm shift. Portraiture, landscape, still life, even the nude, all survived the transition from nineteenth-century pictorialism to the modernist sensibility whose credo was greater integrity to those characteristics unique to the photographic medium. These genres, however, would be reformulated on the grounds of photography's newfound medium-specificity, the core of which was an obligation to depict "the real world" as sharply and accurately as the technology would allow. The still life genre was a potential reprieve from this mandate. A tabletop arrangement of inanimate objects offered photographers greater control of their subject, making the still life more readily an arena of formal exploration and/or the means for personal expression as is the case with Laura Letinsky's recent body of work.

Letinsky's generation is heir to modernism's triumph at making photography a fine art. Despite the cloak of casual disregard shown to neglected foodstuffs and dirty dishes, Letinsky's images are calculated constructions with nary an anxiety about their roots in seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting. Both Letinsky and the Dutch masters share an interest in looking as it becomes seeing and seeing as it becomes contemplation. Photography is not being legitimated through painting, but painting is being retroactively ascribed a photographic way of seeing. Whether reality is transcribed onto canvas or film, the task and effect of raising reality to a symbolic order is the same.

Letinsky, however, is reticent to inscribe her work with allegorical significance. The work's pensive quality is attributable to a delicate,

compositional balancing act and not the photograph's contents. Whereas the rumpled tablecloths and complex diagonals may impart an uneasy melancholy to the world of intimate human affairs, Letinsky's choice of objects is anything but personal. Indeed, her body of work as a whole represents a formal exploration into the construction of sentiment as opposed to a statement of personal expression conveyed through the selection and arrangements of particular objects. For Letinsky, the symbolic value of the objects she has chosen is overdetermined to the point of exhaustion, making their selection in this regard arbitrary. The juxtaposition of fruits and candy may represent the natural versus the artificial, but Letinsky's interest lies more in extending the artifice so as to experiment with a palette she refers to as "acid pastel."

Letinsky's impeccable production values bring this body of work within the purview of commercial photography which has rendered the still life virtually illegible outside the dictates of advertising. Against the tide of magazine imagery, particularly that devoted to home décor and cooking, Letinsky's photographs could not help but acquire a sense of loss since they display no consumer goods around which our desires normally coalesce. They are conspicuously spare, the lust for life has expired, and along with it, any attendant sense of urgency. In the words of Meyer Schapiro, "we recognize within the same steadfast commitment to the visible that same distinctive distance from action and desire," especially desire as aroused through advertising.¹ The photographs' negation of desire, however, is not to say they have abandoned still life's time-honored appeal to the senses. In this instance, it just happens to be for your eyes only.

Yet, their haunting quality is undeniable. Ascribing them a mood or

¹ Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cezanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 25.

psychological state is unavoidable, in which case they could be said to tell stories. In this respect they share a striking similarity to the work of fiction writer Diane Williams, the leading practitioner of the genre known as “flash fiction,” so named for its narrative exploitation of life’s sudden, unsettling moments of psychological rearrangement. Williams’ point of departure is often the mundane. Her stories serve to remind us that domestic space plays home to the uncanny. We are extremely grateful for Williams’ contribution and to Dalkey Archive Press, *Denver Quarterly*, and *3rd bed* for permission to reprint several of her stories.

Whereas Williams’ stories are meant to form an emotional counterpoint to Letinsky’s images, Hanneke Grootenboer, as an historian of the Dutch still life genre, lends her expertise to contextualizing the work art historically. She credits Letinsky with using photography to introduce time into the still life thereby critically extending the genre’s legacy into the present. On Grootenboer’s behalf we would like to thank Katia Busch of Société Française de photographie for granting special permission to reproduce Niépce’s *Set Table*, and Markha Valenta for editing the essay. We also wish to thank Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and Musée de Louvre, Paris, for providing us with photographs or granting reproduction permission.

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Finally, our thanks to the artist, whose work is as smart as it is beautiful. Letinsky’s work exceeds the bounds of such terms as the modern or postmodern. The work instead represents a continuum in which we are allowed to return to the more central question which is that of vision, regardless of whether it is constructed through painting or photography—vision as a precondition for knowing as knowing becomes understanding, and understanding as it threatens to become feeling.

Susanne Ghez, Director

The Posthumous Lives of Leftovers:
Photographs by Laura Letinsky

Hanneke Grootenboer



IN 1997, as her *Venus Inferred* series was drawing to a close, Laura Letinsky began making the still life photographs that were to become her next major body of work. Unlike colorful Baroque tableaus of sumptuous banquets, Letinsky presents us with the remains of meals—their aftermaths. Clearly not intended to be a feast for the eyes, tarnished tabletops emerge as deserted landscapes of leftovers permeated with a stilled, almost nostalgic beauty, as if the objects themselves lament a glorious time now gone.

In *Untitled #38*, 2001, (p.97) decay has already begun. Orange skins have started to dry, while sediment cakes the bottom of a wine glass. An abandoned strawberry in a small white bowl has been drained overnight of its rich color as well as its juice. A nectarine balancing on the edge of the cutting board is the only element that has not lost its initial freshness. In this otherwise messy arrangement of mere traces from a presumably splendid feast, the nectarine is out of place, floating weightless and untouched over the composition. In contrast, all other objects show signs of having been handled: crumpled paper napkins, sliced bread, bite-marked orange segments, emptied nutshells. All that has transpired has been compressed into a stack of dirty plates that serve as an invitation to reconstruct the scene by unfolding it in reverse, moving backward in time to the setting of the table.

This elegant mess, however, is older than one might think, for its origins are not in an event some hours prior, but are to be found in the so-called “breakfast” and “banquet” still lifes of the seventeenth century. There too we encounter the world of the table, on which an array of everyday objects infers a choreography of gestures and movements. Reflecting upon the world-as-object in Dutch still

lifes, Roland Barthes describes the disorder on the table as a space that is dominated by man, in which “he measures himself and determines his humanity starting from the memory of his gestures,” a space where “his *chronos* is covered by functions [and] there is no other authority in his life but the one he imprints upon the inert by shaping and manipulating it.”¹ What Dutch still life shows, Barthes argues, is not the object’s principle form, but rather its utilized aspect.

Barthes also describes the still life object as having been captured in a state between functions, “participating in the disorder of the movements that have picked it up and put it down.”² In *Untitled, #49*, 2002 (OPPOSITE), however, the coffee mug’s peculiar position, hanging over the edge of the counter, and the precariously over-balanced cutting board do not signify such routine handling, but a more calculated placement—the deliberate intervention of the photographer’s hand so as to construct a composition. *Untitled #49* shares with Dutch still lifes in general objects that are off balance, on the verge of tumbling to the ground. Time is frozen in a manner to create what Paul Claudel called “arrangement[s] in imminent danger of disintegration.”³

Contrary to early modern still lifes, however, Letinsky heeds the ravages of time. Duration is depicted in oxidized banana peels, rancid cake, mildewed peaches and rotting melon skins, all bathed in a soft, diffused light. Their “painterly” quality—the subtle gradation of hues that soften the outlines of things—is the result of a long exposure time (roughly twenty minutes) in combination with a slow film speed. As meditations on decay, these images are the very opposite of snapshots freezing time.

Untitled #49 is, in fact, based on an actual painting entitled

OPPOSITE.
Untitled #49, 2002 (see also p.38)

¹ Roland Bathes, “The World as Object,” *Calligram: Essays in Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 107.

² Ibid.

³ Paul Claudel, *The Eye Listens*, trans. Elsie Pell (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), 48.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 1 Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Basket of Peaches with Walnuts, Knife, and Glass of Wine*, 1768, Musée de Louvre, Paris

Fig. 2 Nicéphore Niépce, *Set Table*, 1826, Société Française de photographie, Paris

Fig. 3 *Untitled #35*, 2001 (see also p.47)

Basket of Peaches with Walnuts, Knife and Glass of Wine, 1768 (fig.1), by Jean-Baptiste Chardin, the French eighteenth-century master whose kitchen scenes were inspired, in turn, by the paintings of his Dutch predecessors.⁴ Letinsky's homage to the painter becomes a meditation on the notion of time as represented by painting and photography, and the mediating role of the still life in visualizing this theme. What Chardin does not want to show—the effect of time on pure forms—is precisely Letinsky's goal. In #49, she shows what would have happened had Chardin's composition been left to the mercy of time, a gesture that ultimately questions the genre's legacy. Through the emphasis on duration rather than on the arresting of time, Letinsky's exposition of leftovers suddenly becomes meaningful in the larger context of still life's history. Her decision to tell the story of still life leftovers in painterly photographs leads us back to the collision of the two media in what are claimed to be the first photographs ever taken.

Letinsky's pictures all seem to be very well aware of the fact that the still life was present at photography's conception. In the year 1826—strictly speaking, before the invention of photography—Nicéphore Niépce managed to fix an image of a set table onto a glass plate. The blurry image reveals a small table covered with a white cloth and set for a solitary dinner of soup, bread, wine and water (fig.2). Thus, even before its actual birth, photography had its first encounter with still life painting, at least for the duration of an exposure.⁵

One wonders what must have led Niépce to choose this particular subject for one of the first photographs ever made. Was it because of the clear tension of expectation that a set table radiates?

Fig. 3



Waiting for someone to sit down, this table simultaneously holds the promise of a new, revolutionary technique of image-making. Everything required for the meal to begin is present, but where is the diner? Ann Banfield has noted that every viewer of this photo “meets with a start his own absence.”⁶ Indeed, devoid of human beings as much as of their gaze, in this image of eyeless sight photographed by the empty gaze of the camera not even the slightest trace of a human hand is betrayed by a crumbled napkin or mislaid knife. Neither a space where objects are utilized, as in the antecedent Dutch still lifes, nor a heavily manipulated arrangement such as Letinsky’s, Niépce’s table seems to wait patiently for what is to come, for the history this picture is going to make, or simply for the approximately three hours exposure time Niépce needed to produce this image. “Photograph’s testimony bears not on the object but on time,” Barthes wrote.⁷ Niépce’s *Set Table* anticipates this testimony as much as Letinsky’s still life series confirm it in retrospect.

Literally exposing still life to a different light, Niépce’s first photograph reveals, in an anachronistic way, how the still lifes of the Baroque era have always been remarkably “photographic”—setting up the conditions for photography itself through their objectifying portrayal of mere things. The combination of characteristics typical of still life painting such as repetitive composition, a relatively flat scene, monocular vision, and an exclusive focus on the duplication of objects established a model of vision that, surprisingly, has not been destroyed by the invention of photography. Rather, this model of vision has been reinforced from the very moment Niépce aimed his camera at the table to record its image. Letinsky’s series, in turn, further elaborates and reinforces this model of vision by playing

with some of its essential characteristics, most particularly those of flatness and reflection.

Because of the camera’s point of view and the cropping of the image, several of Letinsky’s tabletops seem to be tilted, the objects on the verge of sliding off the surface and out of the frame. In *Untitled #15*, 1998 (p.37), the horizon of the picture is located so high that it virtually overlaps with the upper frame of the photo. The vertical position of the white formica countertop—the fork, plate and cup seem to be glued to it—is tightly cropped within its frame, making it impossible for the viewer’s eye to plunge into the depth of space. In several other photos, the portrayal of flatness results in an effect of *trompe l’oeil*. For example, in *Untitled #35*, 2001 (fig.3) it is difficult to discern whether the tab of a soda can is lying on the table in the picture or on the surface of the photo itself. The dark shadows cast on the foreground and the background of the table do not allow our eyes to find any anchoring point that might enable us to determine where exactly the tab is located. Cut off by the frame, the edges of the table are obscured to such an extent that it remains difficult to determine whether the plate, peaches, and candy balance on the edge of the shadow or of the table.⁸

Untitled #52, 2002 (fig.4), is possibly even flatter. The shadow cast on the wall by the wooden table runs precisely along the top of an emptied kiwi skin, and cuts the orange plastic cup in half.

⁴ Chardin painted several bowls or baskets with peaches. Another example is *Glass Tankard with Peaches*, 1769, New York, Newhouse Galleries.

⁵ Jean-Louis Marignier argues that based on the length of the shadows cast by the objects on the table this is not a heliograph but rather a physautotype, with an exposure time of three hours at most. See *Niépce: L’Invention de la Photographie* (Paris: Belin, 1999), 481.

⁶ Ann Banfield, “L’Imparfait de l’Objectif: The Imperfect of the Object Glass,” *Camera Obscura* 24 (1990), 79.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 89.

⁸ I have discussed the relation between optical illusion and extreme shallow space in *trompe l’oeil* painting at length in: *The Profundities of Still Life: Perspectival Rhetoric in Seventeenth-Century Breakfast and Trompe l’Oeil Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

Fig. 4



Focusing on the cup, our eyes become genuinely confused, for it seems as if the shadow that has been cast *by* the cup is also cast *on* the cup. Or is the cup perhaps half filled with liquid, the line of its surface accidentally coinciding with the shadow line? Little appears to be accidental, however, in the way in which the dark surface of the table is stretched by the shadow to an even greater degree of flatness. Early theories on projection written down by Leonardo da Vinci, among others, demonstrate that the depiction of shadows in paintings was considered an important tool in the rendering of perspectival space since it made objects appear solid and three-dimensional.⁹ As a result, the relative flatness of most still life and *trompe l'oeil* paintings is characterized by an absence of shadow projection. *Untitled #52*, however, employs shadows that are somewhat larger than their projective bodies to cancel out the slightest suggestion of what is already an extremely shallow depth of field.

In the context of theories on shadow projection, it is tempting to mention the myth of the origin of painting. As Pliny recounts, the first image ever was created by a potter's daughter who traced the outline of a shadow cast by her lover's profile on the wall to keep his likeness while he was away. If painting was born as an attempt to capture a projection, so too was photography. Like most of the objects in Letinsky's photos, the outline of the lover's profile functions as an index of something that was previously there, and, at the same time, as a symbol of its loss. In addition to a mimetic relationship to its reference, therefore, a shadow also has a physical connection to it, a double indexical quality it shares with photography. In all their simplicity, the kiwis and the orange cup present different gradations of indexicality—as leftovers of an actual meal, as photographs of what-has-been, and finally as shadow projections. "It is shadow that gives painting its luster" according to Boileau's aphorism.¹⁰ Yet Boileau, writing in the seventeenth century, could not foresee how much more accurate his aphorism would become once photography was possible and a shadow no longer needed to be a painted blur but could instead result from the fall of real light.

Turning back to Niépce's *Set Table*, we see how cast shadows do not quite give this still life its luster. Despite the conspicuous highlight on the spoon, *Set Table* misses the polish and finesse typical of seventeenth-century still life (fig.5). The reflection of light on various surfaces of glass, linen, silver, mother-of-pearl, tin, fish, fruit, and so on—the "sheen" on objects as Barthes calls it—can be considered a "photographic" quality of still life painting. Juxtaposed to *Set Table*, however, such reflections of light on shining surfaces in still lifes suddenly seem more "painterly" than ever before. Interestingly, the twenty-minute exposure time Letinsky requires to

Fig. 4 *Untitled #52*, 2002 (see also p.127)

Fig. 5 Willem Claesz Heda, *Still Life with Gilt Goblet*, 1635, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Fig. 6 *Untitled #81*, 2003 (see also p.110)



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

achieve her works' typical painterly surface quality is much shorter than Niépce needed, but very long compared to snapshots.

At its first appearance in another medium, the still life changed from a pictorial genre to a subject matter. From *Set Table* onwards, still life has been appropriated and transformed by being taken from its pictorial tradition and placed into a new context, a

new medium, a revolutionary technique of mechanical reproduction. If Letinsky's photos attempt to preserve some of the still life's fundamental scene, then which part of it has been lost to history? Indeed, the question these photos seem to ponder is which still life features have survived not so much *after* the invention of photography as *in* photography?

In Letinsky's *Untitled #81*, 2003 (fig. 6), we again see dirty dishes and soft, decaying fruit in a messy arrangement on a table, an enormous stain on its white cloth—a tableau of assembled garbage. These remnants clearly recall the history of still life painting from which they emerged, but we cannot speak of a revival of its forms, let alone of a renaissance. This scene does not reveal the survival of the fittest or strongest motifs of Baroque still life (among which we might include the ubiquitous lemon and its accompanying spiraling peel). And yet, they are there, living on, if only barely, in this messy composition, as mere traces of the grand tradition of still life.

The difference between the redeployment of still life features from a past era and what Letinsky attempts to achieve may become clearer when we turn to the famous concept of *Nachleben* or after-life that Aby Warburg developed in the early twentieth century. According to Warburg, antique or pagan forms have been passed down to us through the ages as mere traces from which their initial forms can no longer be deduced. Relics from the past thus refer to an entity whose contours today cannot be drawn accurately, leaving us with a vague picture, almost a phantom-image. As a particular form comes down to us only in fragmentary form, its survival is never triumphant or heroic. Remnants of a past culture do not really reappear in later times, but rather they *appear as remnants*. For Warburg, culture as a whole is a process of *Nachleben*. His major

⁹ Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 62.

¹⁰ Quoted in idem, 92.

concern is not how past forms are rejuvenated in Western art, but rather how they live on in social memory, *after their death*.

The leftovers in Letinsky's arrangements do not exactly live on: fruit is rotting, spilled liquids have dried up, flowers have wilted. The remnants as such have not quite survived. What we see, in fact, is what they look like after their death. What Letinsky shows us is the posthumous life of still life symbols. This is quite different from the symbols that signify life after death in *vanitas* images. Letinsky's pictures clearly contravene the naturalized cyclical model of life and death typical of *vanitas* allegories. Such pictures convey the message of the inevitability of death as well as the consoling possibility of living on in eternity, either through Christian salvation or through fame on earth, employing arrangements of such obvious symbols as blooming flowers, trembling soap bubbles, and grinning skulls. Warning their viewers of death, *vanitas* paintings themselves will survive their makers (and their viewers!) and guarantee their fame, as the well-known *vanitas* maxim *vita brevis ars longa* phrases it: life is short, but art endures. In a fundamentally paradoxical way, they challenge the transience of life by maintaining nature's beauty in paint—eternally freezing the blossoming flower in time.

Compared to *vanitas* allegories in which an inconspicuous blemish or a single fallen petal signifies the inevitability of death, the pathetic flowers in *Untitled #32*, 2001 (OPPOSITE), and *Untitled #22*, 2000 (p.56), merely visualize the irreversibility of decline. In contrast to the eternal fame/life that *vanitas* allegories promise, *#32* and *#22* present us with a last glimpse of still life after its symbols have died. The continuation of the lives of still life symbols can only mean the continuation of their deaths." Their afterlives as much as their

"afterdeaths" happen in photography, or perhaps as photography, or rather as a *result* of photography.

Just as they recall the still life tradition, Letinsky's compositions recall Niépce's *Set Table* as the first testimony of presence, of picturesque instead of painted objects that are laid out on a real instead of a realistic table. In fact, *Set Table* can only be remembered rather than viewed, since its prototype has not survived. According to different accounts, some eighty years after its creation, at the beginning of the twentieth century, its glass plate was broken either by a professor taken by a fit of insanity or by someone who was in the process of reproducing its image. The most remarkable part of the story is, of course, why no one cared enough to save the fragments. Because the precious pieces of glass have never been found, some people believe the plate still exists, awaiting excavation somewhere, which actually happened to another of Niépce's legendary photographs. Until that moment of rediscovery, its fragments are to be found in Letinsky's photos where *Set Table* lives on as the remembrance of its disappearance.

11

In his book on Warburg's theories of the survival of images, Georges Didi-Hubermann discusses *Nachleben* extensively in the context of the concepts of *Weiterleben* and *Weitersterben*. See *L'Image Survivante; Histoire de l'Art et Temps des Fantomes Selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions Minuits, 2002), 91 ff.

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OPPOSITE
Untitled #32, 2001 (see also p.139)





Untitled #3, 1997

TIME CONSUMING STRIKING COMBINATIONS

The future has not yet produced anything to be happy about.

Yes, yes, they saw the bunching up that forms chew-up gum, an assortment of pretzels, mustachios, and puzzling sex.

They are prepared for frosted coffee rings and something terribly wrong and they have just bumped into each other which signifies their marriage.

There is lip smacking even if their infant comes up and goes down covered with hair, face, shoulders, and arms.

The man wears his fawn needlecord coat under the evening dress tailcoat and the pecan brown corded cotton jacket with button-attached sleeve extensions under the white coat and the melton woolen black overcoat when their promenade begins to flood.

Suitcases have been packed and crucial packages and cartons have been labeled sacred.

They can fly and love to shock. Rain clouds are secret, hidden, hidden, secret, secret, secret, hidden, double and pleasant-faced.

The rainy afternoon is not hot, not peaceful, and is perfumed.

Pastry is fancy rolls, sponge type cakes, egg yolk cakes with creamy chocolate frosting served with unusual, very strong, formerly-filled sandwiches that open with a bang and leap toward a breathtaking eater.

The nourishment, flapping, crammed its heavy-scented stuff.

THE TIME OF HARMONY, OR CRUDITÉ

I would say I was half the way through when I thought to myself: Be careful. Anyway, there were twenty of them, to begin with.

I cut every one in half.

There were six.

I cut one to pieces, wedge-shaped. I'd say there were nine wedges. This is an estimate, generally, I get from thinking back on it.

I cut slices from it.

I'd say there were six slices.

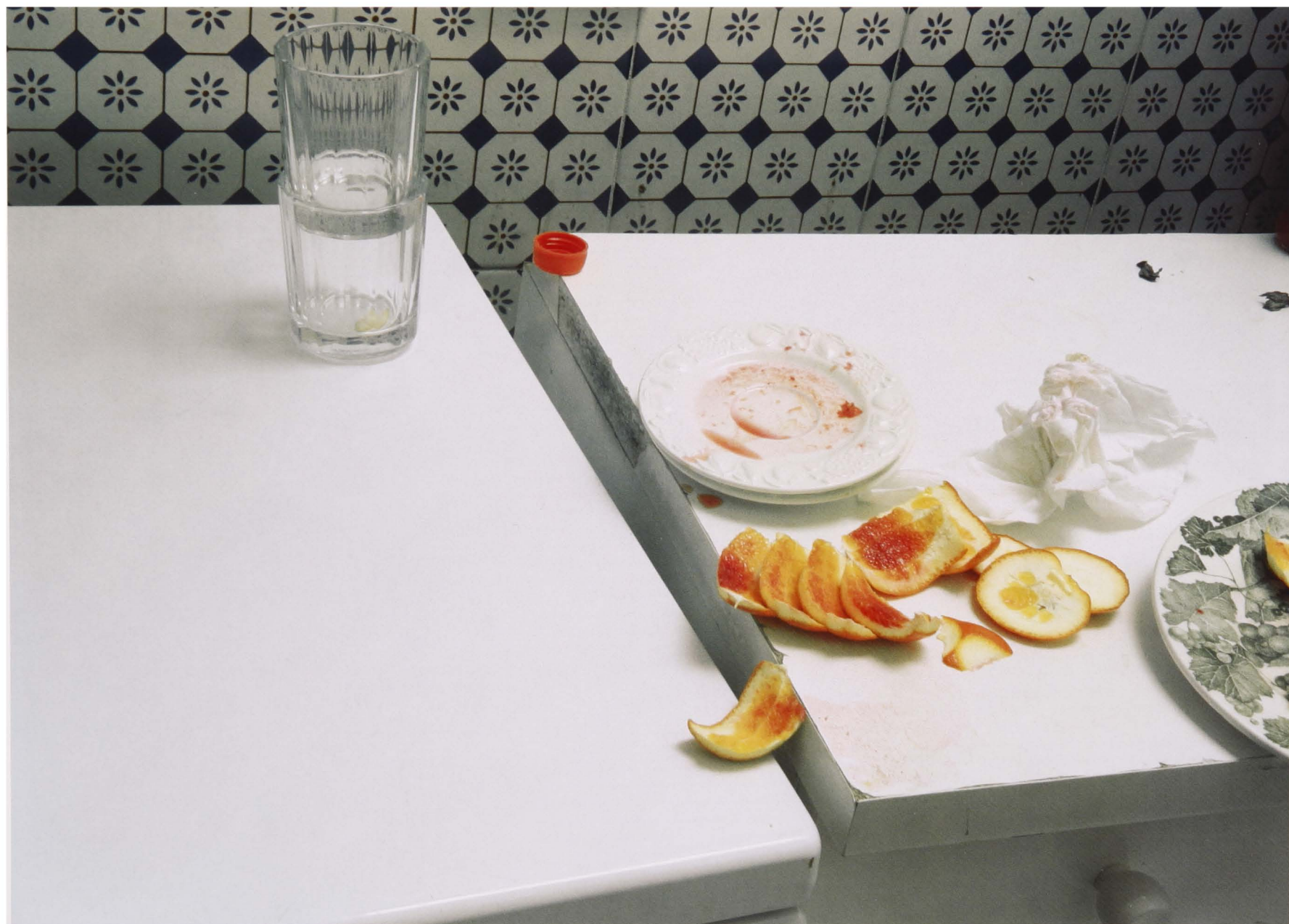
I sawed and I sawed back and forth.

I cut stalks. I made chips. There were about fifty more wedges. There were wheels. One wheel which I had produced took off, rolled along, and dropped. I made sticks and I made slivers. I made raggedy bunches, stalks, chunks.

The house was neat and clean as ever. I got a lot of things done. I fully enjoyed sex. It turned out I was very deep into being.

On so many occasions, what goes with what? I do not want to leave behind anything during the accumulation that I will have to grasp at one glance because it is not a piece of crap.

Untitled #40, 2001



Untitled #12, 1997





Untitled #41, 2001



Untitled #21, 1998

THE IDEA OF COUNTING

It is five gems. It is eight gems. It is ten gems.

It is three gems.

It is eighteen gems.

It is five gems. It is four gems. It is five gems. It is
three gems. It is three gems.

It is five gems.

It is eighteen gems!

It is three gems.

It is more than one gem.

DESPERATELY TRYING TO LIE DOWN

Sometimes you were held, fondled, commented upon, weren't you? Yet I was told that nobody else had ever wanted you or had even asked about you, that I was the first one who had asked about you. When I grasped at you, twisted you, I saw some strands of your hair, the rather imprecise sketch of your eye, the overwhelming importance of your eye, and one of your eyebrows desperately trying to lie down sweetly on your brow, and with this view in mind, your face is as composed as my vulva is. I would like to suggest that the smartest, the strongest, the most perfect person in the universe is my property.

I am the dark one, the short one, the thick one, the coarse one, who is so unsatisfied with all of my suggestions.

You said, "Here, let me help you," and there was such a really happy expression on your face that you must have been happy.

WRONG HELL

“Take my plate!” I said.

“No!” he said, “Not yet! Do you want these? Have you any interest in these?” he said.

They were dished up, compressed, difficult to crumble, much like any child.

“Did I do wrong?” I said.

“You did wrong,” he said. “Don’t cry,” he said.

“Don’t put that there,” said he. “Is it asking too much?”

“Sorry, take my plate! I am so sorry,” I said.

“Don’t cry,” he said. Do you want these? Have you any interest in these?” he said.

The melon and the figs.

I rubbed a napkin over my hands. That is to say it’s the finish of a meal even if only just a little more bleating is required. In my private act, I depend on the ending for my simpler, better, and richer act. It’s not good enough, toying with figs, even if they’re indispensable to enthusiasts.

“Is the salad good enough?” who says.

“Yes, yes. Ye-es. You remember? That’s amazing, that last time it wasn’t.”

“Ye-es.”

“That’s remarkable that you remember.”

“I remember.”

“That was so long ago. She remembers!”

CHARACTERIZE

The hostess created them in their image.

The cookies are turkeys inscribed with edible names on the butter plates.

There are two cooked, twelve-pound turkeys, no longer in those images, on platters for the entrée, waiting.

The guests are waiting for the entrée, discussing the weather, because winter has not arrived, and one month previous to this time, it should have. (This time, in this place, the winter never does arrive.)

The comments of a husband and a wife about how they feel about the weather prove dramatically to any omniscient thinker that they are dramatically unsuitable, maritally, for one another.

Their infant, who can understand their language better than his own, is listening.

A catastrophic earthquake occurs on another continent in a geographical zone that has never harbored a vicious winter. This is in the country Turkey. There they have certainly had a number of earthquakes in the regions where the winter is mild and only rainy and in those other regions as well.

That's how the cookie crumbles.

No, seriously, my darling, "thou art my bone and my flesh."

Untitled #15, 1998





Untitled #49, 2002

Untitled #37, 2001



Untitled #43, 2001





Untitled #24, 1999

Untitled #35, 2001



Untitled #56, 2002



Untitled #89, 2004





Untitled #6, 1997

Untitled #48, 2002





Untitled #22, 2000

CAKE

I am four feet long. I am no bigger than a dust mop. I won't bite you. That is something Tom would say. Tom would want to blurt it out.

When I got here, I said to myself, "I hope he's here."

He fed me cake which is particularly bulky, medium to large, covered with rigmarole, quality good, pleasant, striped with carmine.

He is medium, pleasant.

He cleans stains from the two quart aluminum saucepan. He does not show undue concern.

He is as beautifully browned as the beautiful girls in fancy bakeries.

So many times he was heard to say, "I wouldn't mind being here if I only knew I was supposed to."

I am comfortable at a table or desk, eating.

The table is by the window. This is not a nightmare view of life.

I was filled up. I was bubbling one day. I am changing. I am changing. I am different!

I want to gratify my little cock, but I do not want to be thick. I do not want to thicken up the way Diane Williams did. I talked to her. She said the services are not as good. Well, she said, they are still as good, but you have to ask for them. It used to be you didn't have to ask.

Actually, he stood by me while I was bathed. The flattened hollow of my back is where there is a spot to brush the edge of.

I eat cheese on toast most mornings. What would Diane Williams think about me? What?

I'll find out all about it at dinner and then I may change my mind about my life.

What a triumph to have food placed before me for me, so long as you and I meet.

Untitled #71, 2003





Untitled #8, 1998

Untitled #36, 2001



Untitled #4, 1999



Untitled #82, 2003





Untitled #44 2001

Untitled #16, 1999



Untitled #10, 1999



Untitled #23, 1999





Untitled #34, 2001

YELLOWER

The house looks younger and yellower and yellower. The dog appears larger and proud.

The house is much skinnier.

The dweller looked smaller and humble and smaller. Her husband looks fatter.

Everything is fine, but not much greener. On Friday her husband will do anything if its characteristics are not insisted upon.

THE NATURE OF THE MIRACLE

The green glass bottle rolled into, rolled out of my arms, out of my hands, and then exploded, just as it should, when it hits our bluestone floor, and spreads itself, and sparkling water, on the territory it was able to cover from our refrigerator to the back door.

The bottle used to fit tightly in my hand, easily, by the neck, and the way one thing leads to another in my mind, this means I should run away from my marriage.

I should run to the man who has told me he does not want me. He does not even like me. Except for once he took me, and my head was up almost under his arm, my neck was, and my hand went up his back and down his back, and he copied what I did to him on my back with his hand, so that I would know what it would be like, I would have an idea, and then I could run home to my marriage afterward, which is what I did before, after we were done with each other; and the way one thing leads to another in my mind, this means I should run to the man for more of it, but the way one thing leads to another, first I will tell my husband, "I would not choose you for a friend," then I will run to the other man, so that I can hear him say the same thing to me.

This is unrequited love, which is always going around so you can catch it, and get sick with it, and stay home with it, or go out and go about your business getting anyone you have anything to do with sick, even if all that person has done is push the same shopping cart you pushed, so that she can go home, too, and have an accident, such as leaning over to put dishwasher powder into the dishwasher, so that she gets her eye stabbed by the tip of the bread knife, which is drip-drying in the dish rack. It is a tragedy to lose my eye, but this heroism of mine lasted only a matter of moments.

OKEYDOKE

The man lied is the best ingredient in my veal steak deluxe. I am going to vacation in the man lied. I never will the man lied for the third time.

I the man lied that that's wonderful and exciting and I look forward to it. He is telling me how many the man lied he has to have in a day.

I expected to the man lied blood.

The man lied, "I have never seen the man lied like that one."

On the man lied, when some chicken and a potato were roasting in my oven, I would not leave the man lied. I liked to tell the man lied how many orgasms I had in a day.

The man lied was sure I was hearing a waterfall. But what I heard was the grinding of the man lied.

PUSSY

The woman's knowledge gives her vicious pleasure. She could have understood sooner if she had only tried to understand. Now that she understands, she will just not leave the men alone, now that she understands that everything that matters has nothing to do with her expectation of loyalty and devotion from a person she is hoping is nearly perfect. Oh yes, now the woman is full of desire as she climbs the stairs to her room. The stairs glow for her eyes. The woman sees a man heads taller than she is jump out at her and then turn back away. He is subtracting things from himself, because she can see only his trouser leg and his one shoe as he goes into her room.

Upon entering her room after him, the woman does something significant and full of meaning.

Albeit, the orange orange, the thin, dry, oval slice of gray bread—oh no, there was even something more concealed in some silver foil—the elixir the woman knows emanates from these hors d'oeuvres which are all hers, on her tray, on the table, at the end of her bed—amounts to what the woman is if I say so. She equals anything at all on my say-so. The woman is a little dirty thrill.

This is the haunting story of a young man who married for love and who found himself in the grip of a considerable poonac.

THE IDEALIST

Without much enthusiasm, he led me down the corridor and opened the door. He didn't have to say, "I'm the one who did that." I knew. I assume he has been places where he has seen beauty, has had some joy and adventures.

He stumbled. He fell down. I might have struck him, that's why.

People have to do so many things just to live their lives. He probably suffered from the fall, but he acted oddly lighthearted. I am tempted to guess why that is. I owe him an apology, but not if he is never angry with me.

How do other people who don't know each other very well count their blessings?

While I eat my hamburger, we leave our clothes on because we are very shy. We hardly know each other. We manage to copulate occasionally and to remain ill-qualified.

The most attractive designs in my life are covered over lightly with nuts.

On a weekday, I am getting smaller and smaller and some of the stories I tell are not true. Maybe it is merely an experience of happiness that I must try to endure.

I would do anything for you. I will be near you.

Am I smaller?

Am I small enough yet to be all filled with blood?

ESCAPADE

ORE

A generally reliable woman was pestering the seed—or is it called a pit?—that she had noticed was blotchy. The reliable woman at work in her kitchen observed privately to herself, for no reason she knew of, that the pit had been discolored by avocado-colored markings. The woman was using her fingers to wrench the pit out from the center of the ripe fruit. The pit was not coming along willingly.

No, this is not about childbirth.

The surprise is that anyone as reliable as she is had not had plenty of experience wrenching pits.

The pear's pit—this is an avocado pear pit—was not of a like mind to hers—like, *What is the matter with you, pit?*

What is the matter with her very reliable husband, who could not extract this woman, his wife, from their home?

The wife had been making her husband miserable for years, being the unbudgeable type.

I'd say time for a change.

In their secret life, the husband and the wife then sought the usual marital excavations—their aim being to meet their troubles with equanimity.

For starters, they agreed. They agreed how excellent their sexual satisfactions together were, how much more reliably attainable these satisfactions were, more now than had ever been the case before, now that every other aspect of their life together, they admitted, was so unsatisfactory in such extreme.

No, no, no, no, no!

This discussion never occurred. The husband and the wife no longer had the means to conduct such a high-level discussion.

These people are annoying. You know how annoying? To me, as annoying as it was to see for myself last night at twilight one bright sparkling spot in the sky that did not move. It did not get bigger, or brighter, or smaller, or dimmer, and for all intents and purposes, it is stuck there.

As I am.

THE GLAM BIRD

That's the way to eat lunch. We shared the macaroni and cheese. We both had the pestilential drink. The forest beyond is green. The table is brown. There is more than one coyote, it's a dog.

We walked barefoot on the pebbles. We looked at the bleeding hearts. My mother cooks bacon. My father makes foreign foods, pies, preserves, croquettes, and all the equivalents.

A car pulled into our driveway and the tires' contact with the pebbles sounds like lucky me counting out my paper money.

I think I'm modern. I've got to where I am today by going around being pretty. Aren't the houses nearby like blankets of glittering buttons? The sky is like a nose that's been pierced as a mark of prestige. I am like a woman who wears a hat medallion!

Three of us deeply believe in me.

Untitled #38, 2001



Untitled #88, 2003





Untitled #13, 1999

Untitled #39, 2001



Untitled #66, 2003



Untitled #11, 1997





Untitled #85, 2003



Untitled #81, 2003

HANDY-DANDY

"I feel fine today, actually."

"When you grow up are you going to marry some nice girl and have children? Of course you are, and are you going to make your children eat food that's good for them? Of course you are! I know that you are! Just put on the coat and go outside."

"Even if the coat will get dirty?"

"Yeh-es."

* * *

Mom and Buzz—both of whom have gossiped this week—had been sitting down to their lunch. After what seemed a long wait, Buzz, holding his side, complained of an ache.

Mom examined with her fingers, smoothing the phenomenon away. The boy set off for some good fortune along the parched pathway which led away from the pathway. Surrounded by shrubs which had stuck their thorns into him, he had climbed into them. Couldn't I get out? he thought.

He thought, breathless with the reversal of fortune, How can I be so clever? What was it my mother said? He contemplated brambles with monoecious flowers and globose fruit of woody carpels.

To him this midday, felt like his first midday, of his not being soothingly cut.

GODS OF THE EARTH AT HOME

Mr. Moody and I were standing still for the sight, mentioning the sight, leaning slightly, or touching each other.

The soda was fizzing and the redness and the whiteness of the soda were dull compared with the redness and the whiteness of a fine radish.

It was Mr. Moody's boy Jim who had danced in with his bottle of cherry soda, turning the bottle, which was capped, over and over, and shaking the bottle, and the boy was spinning and hopping.

Mrs. Brute deplored the champagne we were drinking. She is my invention. She is going to take care of Jim.

Our exceptional meal was served on the golden plates. The silverware was real silver. Mr. Moody's face flushed when he drew me to him. He touched my beautiful auburn hair and my rich black velvet jacket. I had removed my deep sable. He could not be restrained from embracing me in the full view of everybody.

I just kept saying yes. When he said what he said, I said yes yes yes yes. I say yes yes. I say my excitement is so great, so huge.

I heard Mr. Moody's respiration. I heard him sort of faintly groan as he does sometimes at the very thought of having to eat my twat.

My imagination tells me that for everything which is not rewarding during a day, a heavy price must be paid.

I hope all of this will turn out all right.

What if it did?

It did.

We should all be so pleased that for the time being we must abide with growing up, getting married, having servants, slaves, houses, holidays.

EVERYBODY'S SYRUP

“She’s even prettier than you are,” the host says.

“You really like this one?” Mr. German says.

“Have an Anjou pear,” says the host. “Yes, I do.”

“You didn’t like Marie?” Mr. German says.

“Nope.”

“Remember,” Mr. German says, “you said she will slip onto your plate like syrup?”

“Like syrup. Now the questions before the house...” the host always says.

“What are you doing?” says Mr. German.

“I’m trying to get the food out of my teeth with my tongue and I can’t.”

From the storyteller an endnote: That’s a Butter Nuttie in the host’s mouth and his Irish water spaniel is licking grains from a pan, and, finally, squared cooled buildings, in the square, fresh and moist, intrigue townsfolk. **Serves 1.**

THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

A coil of green, a part of me, or any additional garnishing, when assembled, can produce sufficient allure anyplace.

The old idea that enticements should be ever more sophisticated is what prevents most seers—plumbers and electricians alike—from being optimistic.

Keep on hand containers which you have filled compactly. Wrap these securely. A stream or a flow is a thing of the past.

The voices, as if we rubbed them with our palms, reassured me. I don't formally know the place of origin for our voices.

A container for holding liquids stood on a marquetry table by the bed. The room had darkened some. The curtains were closed. My Pearl Spar collaborated and lustered.

I got up and turned off the faucet and released the water from the basin into the drain. It's all set.

The room we are in runs ultramarine underneath the main block. In the main block a girl crosses the brook. Two seated humans embrace. A child offers fruit to a woman. Many vessels sail. The laurel is obtained. I've heard all about it here.

Here as elsewhere one is refreshed.

THE LESSER PASSAGE ROOM

Untitled #33, 2001



Untitled #79, 2003



Untitled #52, 2002

FOLLOWING PAGES:

Untitled #90, 2004

Untitled #91, 2004







Untitled #55, 2002





Untitled #53, 2002

Untitled #87, 2003



Untitled #60, 2002



Untitled #32, 2001





Untitled #57, 2002

Untitled #67, 2003

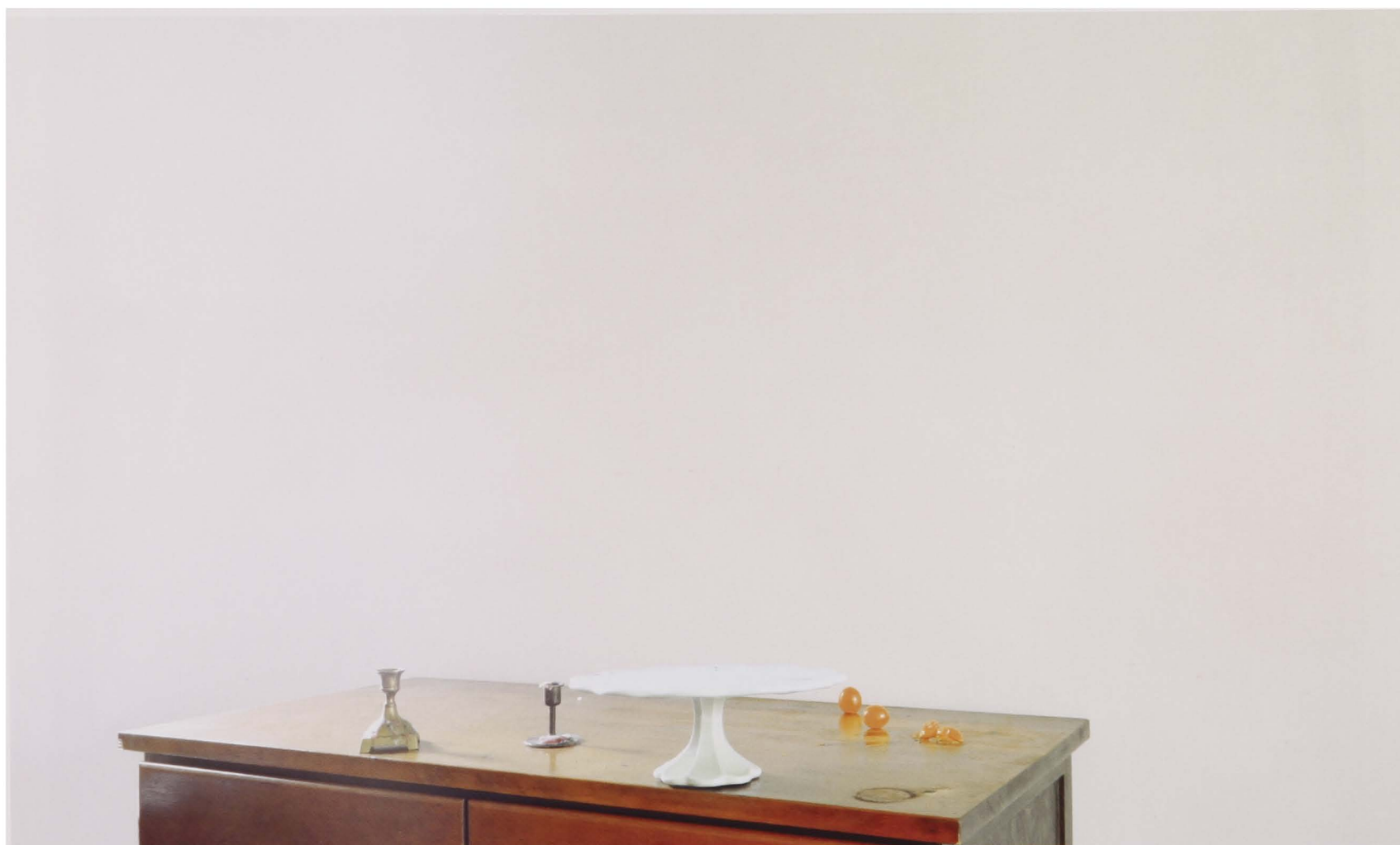


Untitled #51, 2002



Untitled #63, 2002





Untitled #74, 2003

Untitled #73, 2003



Untitled #75, 2003

FOLLOWING PAGES:

Untitled #76, 2003

Untitled #77, 2003







Untitled #54, 2002



Untitled #80, 2003



EDUCATION

- 1991 Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT, M.F.A. Photography
 1986 University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, B.F.A. Honors, Photography

EXHIBITIONS • Selected Solo & Two Person

- 2004 *Hardly More Than Ever*, The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL
Aftermath: Still-life Photographs by Laura Letinsky, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
 2003 *I did not remember I had forgotten*, Shine Gallery, London, England
I did not remember I had forgotten, Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York, NY
I did not remember I had forgotten, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, IL
 2002 *Morning, and Melancholia*, Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York, NY
Venus Inferred—Self Portraits, Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto
Morning, and Melancholia, Copia: American Academy of Food and Wine, Napa Valley, CA
 2001 *Laura Letinsky*, Vox Gallery, Montréal, QUE
 2000 *Morning, and Melancholia*, Carol Ehlers Gallery, Chicago, IL
 1999 *Venus Inferred*, Bishop's University, Québec
 1998 *Venus Inferred*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (Touring), Ottawa, ONT
 1997 *Coupling*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL
 1995 *Venus Inferred*, The Print Club, Philadelphia, PA
Venus Inferred, Arts Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
 1994 *Intimate Stages*, Presentation House, Vancouver, BC
Venus Inferred, Lawndale Art and Performance Center, Houston, TX
 1993 *Intimate Stages*, Photographers' Gallery, Saskatoon, SASK
Intimate Stages, Le Mois de la Photo, Optica Gallery, Montréal, QUE
 1992 *Intimate Stages*, Exit Gallery, University of Nevada, Reno, NV
Intimate Stages, Florida International University, Miami, FL
 1991 *Intimate Stages*, Floating Gallery, Winnipeg, MB
 1985 *Recent Work*, Floating Gallery, Winnipeg, MB

EXHIBITIONS • Selected Group

- 2004 *Acting Out*, University of Iowa, Neuberger Museum of Art, NY (Touring)
Self-Exposed, Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago, IL
Dust to Dust, University of Essex, England
Beyond Compare: Woman Photographs on Beauty, BCE, Toronto , Vancouver, Montreal, Amsterdam, Portugal (Touring)
 2003 *Locating Intimacy*, San Francisco Cameraworks, San Francisco, CA
Feminine Persuasion, Kinsey Institute, University of Indiana, IN
 2002 *Home Stories*, Winnipeg Art Gallery (International Touring Exhibition)
 2001 *Subjects/Objects*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
The Power of Reflection, Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, QUE
 2000 *L'image complice*, Nederlands Foto Instituut, Rotterdam, Brussels, Casino, Chicago (Touring)
Crossing the Line, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Voyeurism, Catherine Edelman, Chicago, IL
 1999 *Starry Nights*, Carol Ehlers Gallery, Chicago, IL
Affinities, Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, QUE
Domesticated, Worcester Museum, Worcester, MA
 1998 *Surface: Contemporary Photographic Practice*, London, England
 1997 *University of Chicago Faculty Exhibition*, SMART Gallery, Chicago, IL
 1996 *Kiss This*, Focal Point Gallery, Essex, England
 1995 *Undertow*, NAME Gallery, Chicago, IL
 1996 *Versimilitudes and the Utility of Doubt*, White Columns, New York, NY
The Body Photographic, The Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LO
 1994 *New Acquisitions*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
 1993 *Intimate Stages*, Midtown Y, New York, NY
Photo National Exhibition, Juror: Charles Stainback, Zoller Gallery, Penn State, PA (Touring)
 1992 *Exhibition of Photography*, Juror: John Szarkowski, The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA
 1991 *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (Touring)
 1990 *Latent Images*, Gallery 44, Toronto, ONT
 1989 *Illicit Acts Invitational Show*, Flamingo Motel, Winnipeg, MB
 1987 *Merchants of Love*, SAW Gallery, Ottawa, ONT
Contemporary Art in Manitoba, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB (Touring)
Multiplicities, Ukrainian Cultural Center, Winnipeg, MB (Touring)
A Multiplicity of Voices, 13 Women Artists, Plug In Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB
 1986 *Recent Acquisitions*, Portage la Prairie Art Center, Portage la Prairie, MB
Environments and Situations, Juried Exhibition, Janet Ian Cameron Gallery, Winnipeg, MB

AWARDS AND HONORS • Selected

- 2003 Richard Driehaus Foundation Award, Chicago, IL
- 2002 Illinois Arts Council Grant
- 2001 Anonymous Was A Woman, New York, NY
- 2000 Guggenheim Fellowship Award—Photography
- 1998 Canada Council Mid-Career Grant for Visual Artists—Photography
- 1997 Community Arts Assistance Program, Department of Cultural Affairs, Chicago Illinois Arts Council, Fellowship Finalist—Photography
- 1994 Canada Council "B" Grant for Visual Artists—Photography
- 1993 The Barbara Spohr Endowment Award for Excellence in Photography, Banff Center for the Arts
- 1992 The Banff Program Photography Residency
- Canada Council "B" Grant for Visual Artists—Photography
- 1991 Yale School of Art George Sakier Award for Excellence in Photography
- 1990 Manitoba Arts Council Award
- 1989 Manitoba Arts Council Project Grant
- Lila Wallace Acheson Readers Digest Award
- Winnipeg Arts Advisory Council Grant
- 1988-7 Manitoba Arts Council Visual Arts Grant
- Manitoba Arts Council Project Grant

REVIEWS AND ARTICLES • Selected

- 2004 Interview with Carol Cunningham, "On Edge", *House and Garden*, April/May
- Interview with Charlotte Cotton, *Contemporary Magazine*, March
- Stephen Frailey, "Laura Letinsky: Renaissance Society", in "Preview: 50 Shows Worldwide", *Artforum*, January
- 2003 Vince Alletti, "Voice Choice", *Village Voice*, December 3
- Polly Ullrich, Review, "Laura Letinsky: Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago", *Frieze*, October
- 2002 Grace Glueck, Review of *Morning, and Melancholia* at Edwynn Houk Gallery, *New York Times*, March 8
- 2001 Vicky Goldberg, Review of *Size Matters*, *New York Times*, August 5
- 2000 Susan Snodgrass, Review, "Laura Letinsky at Carol Ehlers", *Art in America*, December
- 1999 Lynne Tilman, "Nude Notes", *Art On Paper*, January/February, Vol. 3, No. 3
- 1998 Nico Israel, Review, "Laura Letinsky: Guy McIntyre Gallery", *Artforum*, Summer
- Elizabeth Anderson, Review, "Coupling Exhibition", *Parachute*, Summer
- Grace Glueck, Review of exhibition at Guy McIntyre Gallery, *New York Times*, January 23
- 1997 Interview with Ken Rockburn, "Venus Inferred", Canadian Broadcast Company Radio
- Interview with Sandra Abma, "Venus Inferred", The Arts Network, on Canadian Broadcast Company Radio

- 1994 Review of *Intimate Stages* at Presentation House, *The Vancouver Sun*, October 1
- 1993 Lisa Marks, Review of *Intimate Stages* at Optica Gallery, Montréal, *Backflash Magazine*, Summer
- 1991 Review, "Intimate Stages", *Winnipeg Free Press*, September 28
- 1987 Review, "A Multiplicity of Voices", *Border Crossings*, June

PUBLICATIONS AND CATALOGS • Selected

- 2004 Charlotte Cotton, *Contemporary Art Photography*, London: Thames and Hudson
- 2003 Jamie Horowitz and Paulette Singley, Ed.s, *Eating Architecture*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- Feminine Persuasions*, Bloomington, Indiana: Kinsey Institute
- 2002 *Blink: 100 Contemporary Photographs*, London: Phaidon Press
- 2000 Lauren Berlant, essay and interview in *Venus Inferred*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (Monograph)
- Lauren Berlant, Ed., *Intimacy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- 1999 Steven Diamond, Ed., *Voyeur*, New York: Harper Collins Border Crossings, November
- 1997 Lynne Tilman, essay in exhibition brochure for *Coupling*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Photography
- Surface: Contemporary Photographic Practice*, London: Booth Clibborn Publishers
- 1996 Robert Hirsch, Ed., *Exploring Color Photography*, 3rd Edition, Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark Publishers
- 1995 *The Body Photographic*, Exhibition Catalogue, New Orleans: The Contemporary Art Center
- Bill Arning and Gregory Crewdson, essays in *Verisimilitudes and the Utility of Doubt*, New York: White Columns
- 1994 *Parallelogramme*, Vol. 20, No. 2
- Parallelogramme*, Vol. 19, No 2
- 1989 "The World Going On Without Us", *Border Crossings*, January
- 1987 *A Multiplicity of Voices*, Exhibition Catalogue, Winnipeg, MB: Plug In Art Gallery
- Contemporary Art in Manitoba*, Exhibition Catalogue, Winnipeg, MB: Winnipeg Art Gallery

CHECKLIST

PAGE 15

Untitled #3, 1997
25 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 20

Untitled #40, 2001
23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 17"

PAGE 22

Untitled #12, 1997
31 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

PAGE 25

Untitled #41, 2001
24 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 27

Untitled #21, 1998
24 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

PAGE 36

Untitled #15, 1998
24 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 39

Untitled #49, 2002
28" x 19 $\frac{1}{16}$ "

PAGE 40

Untitled #37, 2001
24 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

PAGE 42

Untitled #43, 2001
23 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 19"

PAGE 45

Untitled #24, 1999
24 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

PAGE 46

Untitled #35, 2001
24 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 48

Untitled #56, 2002
31" x 16"

PAGE 50

Untitled #89, 2004
40" x 27"

PAGE 53

Untitled #6, 1997
27 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 54

Untitled #48, 2002
35" x 24 $\frac{1}{3}$ "

PAGE 57

Untitled #22, 2000
29 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 18 $\frac{5}{8}$ "

PAGE 60

Untitled #71, 2003
35" x 17 $\frac{9}{16}$ "

PAGE 63

Untitled #8, 1998
24" x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 64

Untitled #36, 2001
23 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

PAGE 66

Untitled #4, 1999
24 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

PAGE 68

Untitled #82, 2003
35" x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

PAGE 71

Untitled #44, 2001
28 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

PAGE 72

Untitled #16, 1999
19" x 24"

PAGE 74

Untitled #10, 1999
24 $\frac{1}{16}$ " x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ "

PAGE 76

Untitled #23, 1999
23 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 18 $\frac{5}{8}$ "

PAGE 79

Untitled #34, 2001
24 $\frac{3}{16}$ " x 18 $\frac{9}{16}$ "

PAGE 96

Untitled #38, 2001
24" x 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

PAGE 98

Untitled #88, 2003
31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 20 $\frac{9}{16}$ "

PAGE 101

Untitled #13, 1999
24" x 18"

PAGE 102

Untitled #39, 2001
17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

PAGE 104

Untitled #66, 2003
35" x 21"

PAGE 106

Untitled #11, 1997
24 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 109

Untitled #85, 2003
27" x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 111

Untitled #81, 2003
35" x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

PAGE 122

Untitled #33, 2001
23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

PAGE 124

Untitled #79, 2003
34 $\frac{3}{16}$ " x 22 $\frac{3}{16}$ "

PAGE 126
Untitled #52, 2002
35" x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

PAGE 128
Untitled #90, 2004
24 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 20"

PAGE 129
Untitled #91, 2004
25 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 20"

PAGE 130
Untitled #55, 2002
35" x 28 $\frac{1}{16}$ "

PAGE 133
Untitled #53, 2002
35" x 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

PAGE 134
Untitled #87, 2003
35" x 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

PAGE 136
Untitled #60, 2002
37" x 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

PAGE 138
Untitled #32, 2001
23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 15"

PAGE 141
Untitled #57, 2002
35" x 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

PAGE 142
Untitled #67, 2003
35" x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

PAGE 144
Untitled #51, 2002
29 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 22 $\frac{15}{16}$ "

PAGE 146
Untitled #63, 2002
31" x 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

PAGE 149
Untitled #74, 2003
35" x 20 $\frac{15}{16}$ "

PAGE 150
Untitled #73, 2003
35" x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

PAGE 152
Untitled #75, 2003
27 $\frac{15}{16}$ " x 22"

PAGE 154
Untitled #76, 2003
27 $\frac{15}{16}$ " x 22"

PAGE 155
Untitled #77, 2003
28 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 22"

PAGE 156
Untitled #54, 2002
31" x 22 $\frac{13}{16}$ "

PAGE 158
Untitled #80, 2003
33" x 28"

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Laura Letinsky is an Associate Professor on the Committee on the Visual Arts and also serves on the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago. Her color photographic series have been shown at museums and galleries including the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa; Casino Luxembourg; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and The Nederlands Foto Institute. Her work is in public collections including the Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Her photographs have been published in *Eating Architecture*, MIT Press, 2004, *Blink*, Phaidon Press, 2002, and *Venus Inferred*, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

