

LOS ANGELES

Barbara Kasten

GALLERY LUISOTTI

The history of abstract photography begins with the inception of the medium itself. The first recorded photograph, taken in 1825 by Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce (he called photography “sun-writing”), depicts a view outside his window. But exposing an image back then demanded a full day’s sunlight, and that grainy picture is most notable for the weird, impossible angles of its shadows. Technology necessitated that early photographs such as Niépce’s capture a palimpsest of accumulated seconds (or hours)—that is, function as images of abstracted time—and yet, overwhelmingly, the medium, ever since the invention of the daguerreotype, has primarily been used to capture singular, “decisive” moments. Like Alvin Langdon Coburn and László Moholy-Nagy before her, Barbara Kasten is among the few photographers whose images have consistently used abstraction to ask how, or even whether, a photograph can become untethered from narrative.

A self-sufficient art image in is the essence of modernism, and in Kasten’s small but satisfying survey of early works from the 1970s and early ’80s, modernism is a clear touchstone: the dissolutions and clashes of Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, the angular dynamism of Constructivism, the traces of Abstract Expressionism, each evident in the spread of twelve photographs and photograms included in this show.

Among Kasten’s pet techniques was the use of a large-format camera to precisely control the focus (and un-focus) of patches of spaces within the same shot. In her own words, she was a photographer behaving like a painter.

Perhaps the most revealing series in this regard is Kasten’s “Photogenic Paintings,” 1975–76, a set of photograms the artist made by marking paper with the light-sensitive liquid solution that creates

Barbara Kasten,
Construct PC/1-A,
1981, Polaroid
photograph, 24 x 20”.



cyanotype. The allusion to painting, therefore, is both in the title and in the pudding: Shades of Frankenthaler, Twombly, and Still are pervasive in these surprisingly gestural pieces that cross the painterly histrionics of AbEx with the blue horticultural prints of early cyanotype master Anna Atkins. Yet no matter which process Kasten used, exactly *what* she was shooting is always tough to determine. Her hypnotic photos refuse to congeal as logical pictures of the world.

This exhibition (which was directly followed by a show of Kasten’s most recent work) pointed the way to the artist’s great, if garish, series of “Constructs.” Made between 1979 and 1985, these are variously sized Polaroids of miniature, architecturally dynamic constructions made by Kasten in her studio using wire, mesh screens, mirrors, and other props. In the best of the Constructs, concrete object relations are almost impossible to discern and the viewer is prisoner to a trippy vortex of two-dimensional space. Yet no matter how complexly composed, these images nevertheless depict real sites—albeit ones that existed only briefly. One of the clearest precursors to the Constructs is Kasten’s “Amalgam” series, 1979, which now appears as so many pared-down prototypes of the work that would follow, without the flamboyant use of color or labyrinthine complexity. These strange, gorgeous works—for instance, *Amalgam Untitled 25*—may depict nothing but coy arrangements of hardware and mirrors, but the beguiling uncanniness of these nether-dimensions is simultaneously exhilarating and dreadful. *Photogenic Painting Untitled 75/23*, 1975 (probably the most purely concrete photographic work in the show), is a close-range view of what appears to be burlap. The picture requires a good long stare before one can determine whether its fold exists in the photographed material or the actual rag paper on which the image is printed. Clues such as this in a Kasten composition serve variously to enhance or deflate the experiential quality of her literally puzzling work. At her best, Kasten makes simplicity and complexity overlap and merge. This is the sensation David Lynch has become so effective at conjuring—that of reality and its doppelgänger becoming indistinguishable.

—Nick Stillman