

Noah Becker's

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Photographer Lynn Stern and the Reverberation of Light



Lynn Stern, Beyond Bones #06-64, 2006-2010, pigment print, 34 x 35 inches

By NOAH BECKER June, 2020

My first encounter with the photographs of Lynn Stern was through Donald Kuspit. After this, I was invited to participate in a filmed panel talk about Stern's work at New York City's 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel. On the panel, I discussed the painterly quality of Stern's photos and the tonal range of her compositions - the way she uses light.

Abstraction occurs in Stern's work, but her works featuring skulls I found most interesting. Stern's more abstract works portray a pure light and a pure gesture, free of narrative or specific symbolism. Stern sub-

merges her subjects (even her morbid subjects), in a heavenly glow. She arranges a specific environment (calculated towards her expressive vision), and then prints a photograph with painstaking subtlety.

She also has an appreciation for some of my favorite photographers, and a technical mastery of photography on the level of the great masters of the craft. Stern mentions the influence of Edward Weston, as well as other legendary photographers such as Paul Caponigro.

Over the past number of months, I had a chance to do the following conversation Lynn Stern for Whitehot Magazine.

Noah Becker: How did you get started as a photographer?

Lynn Stern: I started late - I never even had a camera as a kid. My first husband was Robert Stern, the architect. In those days he had an in-house photographer, Ed Stoecklein, who photographed all Stern and Hagmann's completed projects; at that time, I worked for Bob as his archivist, and part of my job was to help Ed set up the interior shots.

NB: Oh, interesting...

Lynn Stern: I found that I really liked composing through the lens. So, I started taking courses at ICP, the International Center for Photography. That was in 1977. And then I got hooked very quickly. But ICP was a terrible fit, because ICP used to stand for the Institute for Concerned Photography; it had a photo journalistic bent, which from the start was really not mine. But anyway, that's how I got started.

NB: So, you were showing your work immediately, or did it take time to actually start showing your work in galleries?

LS: No, it really took a while. I was at ICP for a year or so, probably two. I started looking at a lot of work, particularly Edward Weston, whose work I loved - it was absolutely gorgeous. Then I would look at my prints, and they looked like shit. When I told that to my instructor, he said, "Just say what you want to say and don't worry about how they look."

NB: What was your reaction to what he said?

LS: "How can I say what I want to say when they don't look the way I want them to look?" was my reply. Soon afterward I took Joseph Saltzer's "Zone System" course, and that opened up a lot of doors, technically; I could finally get my photographs to look the way I wanted. Then I studied privately with Joe for about a year and continued photographing - but it took a long time to start showing in galleries.

NB: And was your work always similar to how it is now with still life elements, or were you starting with outdoor scenes? What were some of the earlier pieces that you would consider to be finished works?

LS: I started with two series, one of interiors and one of landscapes. Instinctively, I was always interested in a certain quality of light. When I was at ICP, everybody was doing street photography, so I thought I'd better do street photography, too. So, I went down to the Lower East Side and found some kids playing, and I started photographing them. They asked me back to their apartment, which had absolutely beautiful north light, and I took a bunch of portraits.

NB: Was that one interaction or did you photograph them over a longer period of time?

LS: Yes, I went back, and the third time they had moved. Their new apartment had terrible light, and I didn't take any photographs. My instructor at ICP said, "Well, are you photographing the kids or the light?" I was too shy and unsure of myself to say what was the truth - I'm actually photographing the light.

NB: Yes, I've mentioned how powerful the light is in your work. Could you talk about your first series?

LS: My first series was called Interior Light, and it was really about a kind of reverberation of light; it showed empty interior spaces, using the walls as vehicles for the light.



Lynn Stern, Interior Light #2 1979, gelatin silver print 11 x 14 inches

LS: I also did a large series of landscapes on and off between 1979 and 1984, called Extended Landscapes. I would rent a car and go to the Southwest, the Midwest, the Plains and so on. Those were my earliest bodies of work.



Lynn Stern, Extended Landscape #82-11a, 1982, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches

NB: So, what happened after that? How did the series emerge from your travels?

LS: What happened was that it became terribly frustrating because I would often spend days driving around and not being able to get what I wanted. Finally, I thought "Maybe I can make it happen in the studio." So, I moved into the studio in 1985 and have pretty much been working there ever since. I was still working on some landscapes in 1987, the Central Park landscape series called "Forebodings", but I've been in the studio since then.

NB: So, it's developed since then? Perhaps moving into more abstraction?

LS: Yes, I guess since then my work has become increasingly abstract. I've been working with scrims of translucent cloth since 1985, first a white one, and then a black scrim as well. Sometimes I place objects against the scrim, and often somewhat blurred behind it, to create what I call 'de-literalized' images; and sometimes I just use the scrim itself to create pure abstractions. That vein has continued really since about 1985/87.



Lynn Stern, Veiled Still Life #51a, negative 2002, pigment print 2010, 34 x 39 inches

NB: I'm assuming you're not working digitally; you're working in a traditional wet photography way...

LS: Yes, I love the dark room, and I'm a very meticulous printer. If you just use a regular camera meter, it will expose for tone five gray. But I have to expose the film a certain way and develop it a certain way to get the look I want. In my recent work with the white scrim, the shadows are very light, so I expose them at much higher light levels than is usual.

NB: How does it appear to the eye?

LS: It appears to the eye as though there's more contrast between the shadows and the whitest areas than there actually is. In fact, when I put a spot meter on the scrim, there's a third of a stop difference between the shadows – the folds of the white scrim – and the highlights, which is practically nothing. To get those light values to separate is tricky. I increase the development to boost the contrast, but not too much, because then it feels like sunlight. And I don't want that feeling. I want it to be a very soft light that seems to emanate from within the forms rather than fall on them. I've learned to do it over the years, but it does take a very particular way of exposing the film, developing the film and printing the images. For the last ten years or so, it's been impossible to find the photographic papers I need – they've been discontinued because so many photographers are now working digitally – so I've been working with a digital printer to make archival pigment prints from high resolution scans of my 8" x 10" 'model' gelatin silver prints.



Passage #04-18, 2004-2011, pigment print 46 x 32 inches

NB: So, abstraction and photography, and photography relative to abstraction, what are some of your thoughts on that in relation to your work?

LS: Well, it's something I've been thinking about a lot recently. First of all, there are a number of people who think that abstract photography is a contradiction in terms – that photography is, by definition, a medium of representation, of detail, of clarity, of description, and so on...

NB: But you don't think that's true...

LS: No, I don't think that's true. I think photography is defined by light striking a light-sensitive surface – it's a medium of light, not representation, and you can use light any way you want. It CAN be repre-

sentational or documentary, but it certainly doesn't have to be. It's as appropriate to the medium to create abstractions as anything else. Interestingly, when you look at the early practitioners of abstract photography at the beginning of the 20th century, many of them, such as Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, were both painters and photographers. If you think of photography as a medium of light, it's a wonderful vehicle for creating abstract form, and I've been doing that more and more.

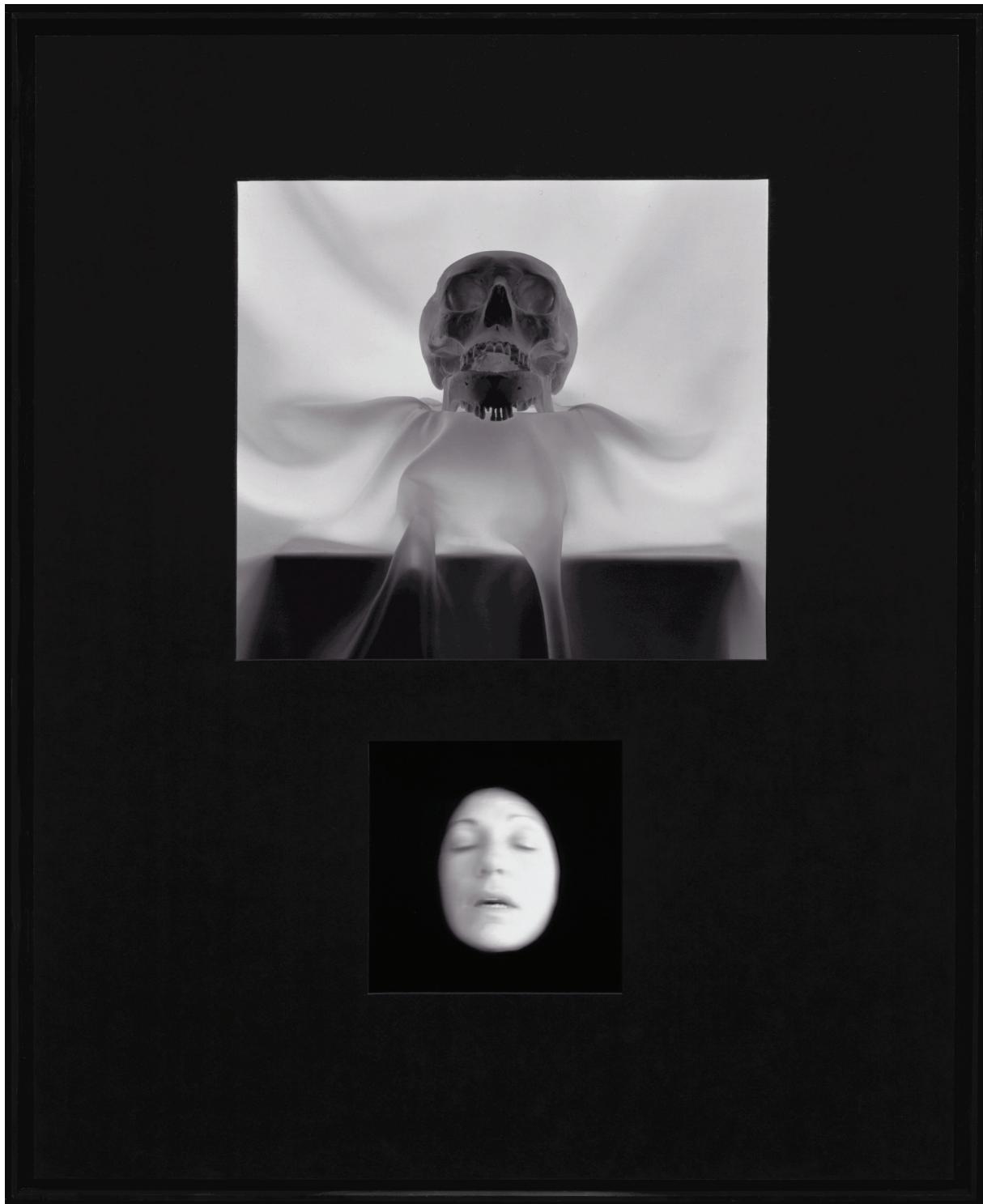
NB: Great. And then another question I had was the work you've done with skulls. You've spent 25 years working with skulls - what does it mean for you to work with skulls?



Lynn Stern, Animus #41 1996-1998, split-toned negative gelatin silver print 24 x 20 inches, ed. of 7 variants

LS: I've always been terrified of death, ever since I was a kid, but it never occurred to me to do anything with that in my work until two things happened in the late 80s. I read an article by Donald Kuspit in which he said "The skull is such a powerful icon that when it appears in a painting, it knocks everything else out of the picture." That struck me as really interesting. Coincidentally, around the same time, I saw

a show of Gerhard Richter's "October 1977," a group of photographs of the Baader-Meinhof gang. There were three photographs of Ulrike Meinhof, who had hung herself in prison, lying flat on the floor with the mark on her neck. Her face was in profile and was a ghostly white, and it became increasingly blurred in the three images. I somehow got the idea that I wanted to use a skull and a face that looked like a death mask in the same work; that was the genesis of the "Dispossession" series.



Lynn Stern, Dispossession #8, 1990-1992, framed composite gelatin silver prints 47 x 38

NB: So, after studying Gerhard Richter's work, you've developed your new work. It seems you move between light and dark themes and images with you work. Let's talk about the new work and how it relates?

LS: Yes, I like toggling back and forth between very dark works, literally the dark end of the tonal scale, and very high-key work. I don't know, honestly, how that relates to my new work, except that I think the extreme ends of the tonal scale are the most intense, and – I don't know how to say this without sounding pretentious – I'm interested in ultimates and intangibles. Whether it's pure abstractions or the skulls, I feel I'm trying to photograph something that's invisible, but intensely felt.



Lynn Stern, Whiteness #35, negative 1987, pigment print 2010, 34 x 41 inches

NB: The Quickenings and Mystic Light series. What is the process that you go through regarding these new series?

LS: The process? Well, "Mystic Light" is based on a very beautiful pencil drawing I saw by a Japanese artist named Tomoharu Murakami. It consisted of an extremely simple vertical rectangle on a slight base. The rectangle is a very light gray, and the slightly darkened edges fade to the off-white of the paper. It's virtually impossible to describe and almost impossible to see, honestly, unless you have the right light, but it has this incredible shimmer.

NB: Perhaps you wanted to create that shimmer?

LS: Yes, exactly - I wanted to create that shimmer. And I wondered if any pure form could be made magical by the quality of the light. That was the genesis of "Mystic Light."



Mystic Light #19-32a, 2019, 32 x 36 inches, pigment print

LS: Then, as I continued photographing, some images went in a slightly different direction —there was more movement between the objects — and those became the “Quickening” series. The process is one of taking differently sized and proportioned glass vases and bottles and just shifting and shifting and shifting them around behind the scrim until something happens — hopefully — in the light. It’s a slow and sometimes frustrating process.



Lynn Stern, Quickening #18-07b, 2018-2019, 38 x 40 inches, pigment print

NB: I see. And what is the challenge of working in quarantine for you since the COVID-19 endemic? What are some of the negatives? What are some of the positives?

LS: One positive, which I'm sure everyone cites, is that it does give you more time to think. I went back and looked at some work that I plan to take up again, that I hadn't worked on for maybe eight or ten months, and found that I didn't like half of the prints. It took a bit of reflection, but then I think I figured out why. More significantly, my husband and I have been sheltering in place in a house we have in upstate New York. It's small and was intended as a weekend house; I have no studio or dark room, so I can't work here.

NB: How are you using the time?

LS: I used the first three weeks or so we were up here to write an article about my thoughts on abstraction, which I put on my website. Then we stocked up on food, went back to New York, didn't set foot outside, and I printed for about three weeks. And then we came back upstate. I think we're probably going to keep doing that for a while. It's harder – the interrupted time makes it harder to concentrate – but I find that once I get into the work, I go into another zone, and it's not really very different from any other time. But, even with the interrupted time and my bifurcated life at the moment, I'm keenly aware of how lucky I am to be able to get out of the city and to work safely, if less efficiently.

NB: So, it's some good and some bad.

LS: Yeah. The reflection. Yeah, I guess that's true.

NB: The time to reflect is good, but you would also like to have facilities to make prints.

LS: Right. I'll tell you, though, even the time to reflect isn't always good. There are times when I think, "Why am I doing this work when there are all these horrendous things going on in the country, maybe I should just quit it all and become an activist, or do something directly useful." It's a difficult time for a lot of people. I go into a zone when I'm working, but even then, every few hours, life intrudes and it's very jolting. **WM**

Lynn Stern lives and works in New York. You can see more of her work at:
<http://lynnssternphotographs.com>

Lynn Stern is represented by the following galleries:

New York:

Nailya Alexander Gallery

532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel

Dallas

Erin Cluley Gallery

Lynn Stern's Archive is located at The Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona