

Artist's Statement for New Website, 2018

There is a particular quality of light – indirect, natural light – which looks uniquely beautiful when rendered in the gelatin silver black and white process. It becomes an ambient glow that seems to emanate from within and to be part of space itself. This quality of light characterizes and connects all my series regardless of the subject matter, from the radiant glow of the Extended Landscapes and Interior Light series to the diffused luminosity of the translucent scrims used in my studio work.

Although I am a photographer, I think like a painter in that my concerns are largely formal: my aim is to create tension, plasticity, texture, and, especially, spatial ambiguity in which figure (or abstract form) and ground seem to merge with or emerge from one another. Above all, I want the image to feel ‘charged.’

Additionally, I have been strongly influenced by abstract expressionist painting – not as a style, but as an approach to creating images. To abstract is “to pull away from” – in other words, to make something less literal, less physically descriptive, and more inward looking. As a lens-based photographer I am unable to create an image directly from my head as a painter can, but I can still “pull away” from the real world by blurring, veiling, cropping, partially obscuring, and otherwise de-literalizing what is in front of my lens. What drives all of my work is a desire to make visible a quality that is invisible—beyond the ‘thing-itself.’ There is still a subject in front of the lens. It still matters. But, as Ad Reinhardt said, “What is not there is more important than what is there.”

Narrative Bio

Lynn Stern was born and raised in New York, where she continues to live. She grew up surrounded by abstract expressionist art that her father started collecting in the late 1940s, continuing through the fifties. Stern was not conscious of the work’s effect on her at the time, but in later years she realized that living with this art had affected her in two very different ways: it was probably responsible her love of abstraction, and it also intimidated her to the extent that she never even considered becoming a painter.

Shortly after graduating cum laude from Smith College, Stern began working as an archivist for the architect Robert A.M. Stern; this entailed accompanying his in-house photographer as a ‘stylist,’ removing and adding elements for the interior shots. Beguiled by composing through the camera lens, she began photographing in 1977, studying first at the International Center of Photography and then privately with Joseph Saltzer.

Stern works with black and white film and indirect, natural light; since 1985 she has been doing studio work, using a scrim of translucent white or black fabric, either alone to create abstractions, or combined with symbolic objects. She thinks of the backlit scrim as her ‘medium’; it creates a glow of diffuse light that is a constant in all of her work, although the subject matter may vary from series to series.

The Lynn Stern Archive is located at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

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