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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## Lynn Stern: Scrimming the Invisible



*Lynn Stern, Passage #04-18, 2004-2011. Archival inkjet pigment print, 46 × 32 in. Courtesy of 532 Gallery.*

Lynn Stern: Toward the Invisible

532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel

October 10 - November 9, 2019

By CORI HUTCHINSON, November 2019

*"And, nothing himself, beholds*

*Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."*

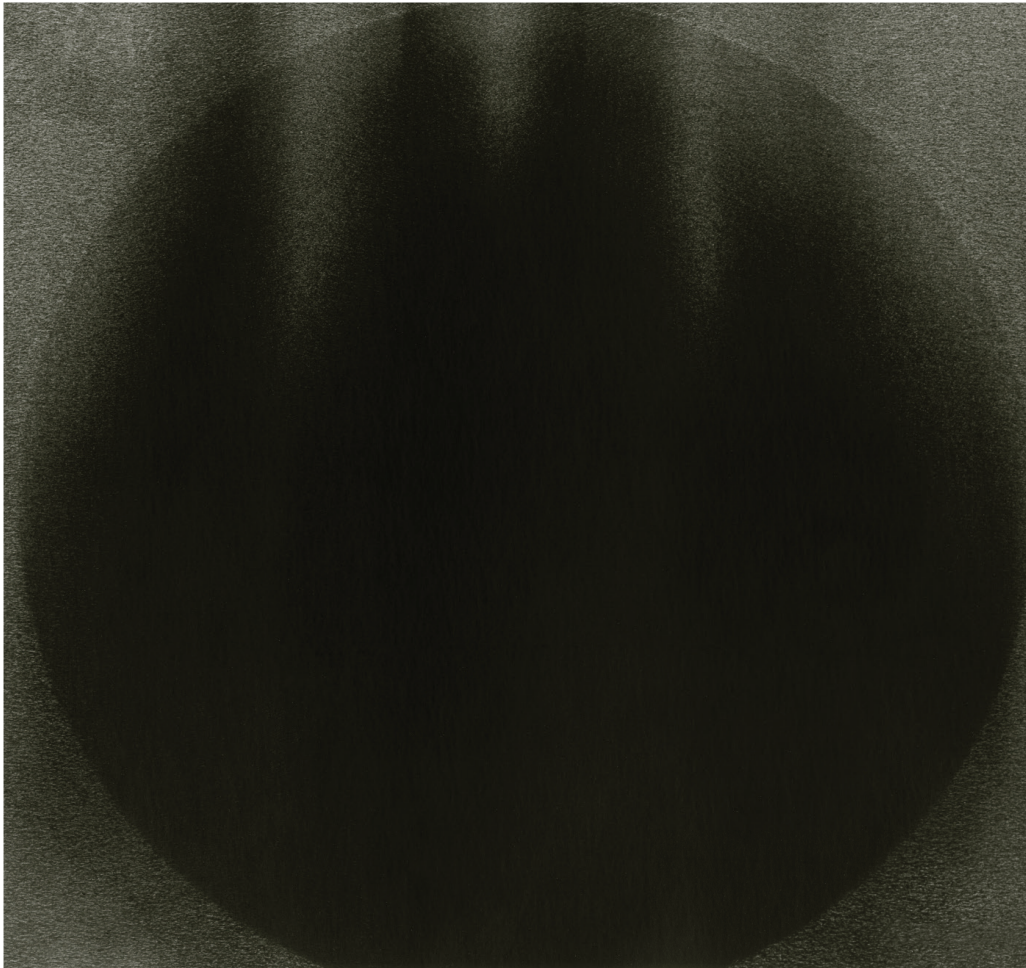
-- Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man"

Entering the chamber of 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel packed elegantly with Lynn Stern's work resembles what I imagine to be the experience of returning to a summer home where ghosts have played all winter, furniture all phantom and veiled by white cloth to deter the accumulation of dust in the off-season, swathed form more immediately evident than function -- at least in this threshold moment. *Toward the Invisible*, a spanning survey of prints and publications by and of Stern, catches the root light. Clustered by series, the exhibition includes prints from *Animus*, *Landscapes*, *Nudes*, *Hands*, *Flowers*, *Interior Light*, and Stern's most obsessive subject, *Skulls*. Produced from gelatin silver film, each piece emanates an intentional glow from within and for itself. In the case of *Spectator 14-70*, a metallic frame pursues this effect beyond the boundaries of the print. The edge of Stern's photographs is that they aspire not to reproduce what is seen by the eye or camera lens, but by the artist's fantasy of frame.



Lynn Stern, *Spectator #14-70*, 2014-2015. Archival inkjet pigment print, 32 × 34 1/2 in. Courtesy of 532 Gallery.

In the supplementary essay “WHAT’S *NOT* THERE” published in 2009, Stern echoes and amends photographer Edward Weston’s intention to “photograph a rock, have it look exactly like a rock, yet be more than a rock” to also “have it *feel* like a rock.” With this gesture, she moves to animate the subjects in her work through the ringlet OOO of object-oriented ontology. In *Skulls*, a sense of re-animation is particularly palpable and determined. The scrims adorning the skulls both modestly shield and perversely reveal their emptiness. A sense of relation is felt between and within the fissures in this series and Weston’s own *Onion Halved* (1930). And, unlike the viewfinder skulls of Georgia O’Keeffe which look outward as portals, Stern’s skulls return your gaze with intelligence.



Lynn Stern, *Meditation #14-99*, 2014-2019. Archival inkjet pigment print, 38 × 39 1/2 in. Courtesy of 532 Gallery.

Stern’s tendency toward the circle as socket and symbol of concavity, infinitude, singularity, and abyss is installed deeply in *Meditation #14-99*, which haunts like a harmoniously composed black metal album cover. *Full Circle #05-59c* and *Full Circle #06-50a*, in conversation, appear as stills in a shadow puppet play on the backdrop of a pleated window curtain. The *Ghost Circles* are parenthetical, rings crossed by creases, as with the imperfect ring of a coffee mug set down on a napkin. These circles are infused with memory, bolstering the medium as a “triumph over death,” as Donald Kuspit suggests in the catalog, actively struggling against continuity and the visible.



Lynn Stern, *Animus #41*, 1996-1998. Split-toned negative gelatin silver print, 20 × 24 in Courtesy of 532 Gallery.

Even more abstracted are the prints in the set of *Animus*, which proceed seemingly in the tradition of spirit photography. In each, a face of bone interacts with a sculptural object in the realm of light. Some fanged, some howling, some animal, the skulls emit a luminosity equal to that of their secondary subject. It is difficult to not see expressive souls here tracing through the scenes like sound or particle orbs, connecting objects once living with objects once dead, both changed forever by the photograph.

Stern's work is even spectral as it photographs light in both artificial and natural landscapes. *Landscapes*, in particular, is telling of her process, as she psychically sought out particular horizons rather than relying on pure encounter. There were, as she writes in the same 2009 essay, "many days during which [she] did not take a single photograph." The Death Valley Dunes of *Extended Landscape #82-3c* are a glorious setting for her complete project. In *Interior Light*, as with the topographies of exterior photographs, Stern uses the emptiness of interior spaces as vehicles to float luminosity.

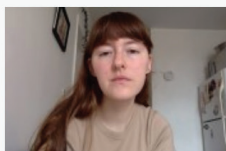
The *Flowers* series (*Unveilings #39b*, 59, 56a, and 77), although at first glance unseasonably fragile in the presence of relic neighbors, possesses a quiet and welcome grace. Petal by



Lynn Stern, *Extended Landscape #82-3c (Death Valley Dunes)*, 1982. Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 in. Courtesy of 532 Gallery.

petal, the translucent flowers are transformed into slices of overlapping light and shadow. Each pistil is reduced to a dark circle consistent with Stern's motifs and the stalk is similarly de-literalized. Not only does Stern utilize the material scrim in her work, but she *scrim*s with notions of subject and represented form, especially in this series.

As with the **Cottingley Fairy Hoax** of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography in this work is not "taken" literally. And, like the fairy-seeing cousins in that great incident, Lynn Stern aspires to capture what is witnessed in the mind, which is ultimately some combination of the experienced, remembered, and dreamed. The photos in this exhibition on the whole are at once darkly divine and delightfully nightmarish and felt, if not fully seen, intuitively in the core. WM



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