

ART511MAG



Lynn Stern working with the scrim in her studio in New York City.

Lynn Stern: "A Photographer with a Painter's Psyche"

BY MICHAEL MUROFF

Although photographer Lynn Stern does not use the medium of painting to create, Stern and her photography are very much in conversation with the painter's psyche—she thinks like a painter, and her photography captures much of the texture, details, contrast, and vibrancy of painting. Contrary to conventional definitions of photography, Stern does not believe that photography is a medium of documentation, but rather, a medium of light. Painters like Ad Reinhardt have been incredibly influential in the evolution of Stern's practice. Reinhardt, who was renowned for his "black" or "ultimate" paintings, believed in the philosophy of Art-as-Art, which fiercely defended the somewhat idiosyncratic abstract work that he and his colleagues produced. Reinhardt has served as a great inspiration for Stern, particularly in his view that "What is not there is more important than what is there." These seminal words have served as the *point de base* for Stern's creative vision and work. In Stern's series *Quickening* (2013) she masterfully captures this ethos of "What is not there is more important than what is there."

Quickening (2013) displays different geometric shapes that radiate an airy light that softly shrouds the shapes laid out in the picture. The light that works itself around the shapes, which is seemingly invisible, seems to be more important than the shapes themselves, hence Reinhardt's philosophy. Stern states, "In *Quickening*... the sense of movement tends to be between the objects rather than within them. This is due largely to the manipulation of the translucent scrim into gestural folds of light and shadow, resulting in a more dramatic quality of luminosity."

This philosophy can be further found in other works by Stern, particularly in *Animus* (1995–1998). Her masterful rendering of animal skulls aims to treat the skull as "a psychological force rather than a traditional symbol of death: to make it less literal. Toward this end, I distorted and abstracted it by combining different upper and lower parts of a single skull, or, more radically, combining parts of different animal - and occasionally animal and human - skulls. The skulls are juxtaposed with circular and vertical solid forms, and all are placed behind the translucent fabric rather than in front of it." (Stern)



Lynn Stern, Quickening 13-27 2017-2019 Archival Inkjet Pigment Print, 38 by 47 inches edition of 6 plus 2 artist proofs.



Animus #5a Split Toned Negative, Gelatin Silver Print 20 by 24 inches Edition of 7 variants.



Lynn Stern Force Field #21-121a 2021 Archival Inkjet Pigment Print 34 by 38 inches edition of 6 plus 2 artist proofs.



Lynn Stern, Passage 04-15a 2004-2011, Inkjet Pigment Print 46 by 32 inches, edition of 6 plus 2 artist proofs.

The kind of ethereal quality that this work emits is both stunning and graceful. Stern states, -"Both skulls and forms seem to emerge from, or merge with, the fabric. There is no clear narrative in this work: rather, the images have the feeling dreams." In the absence of any clear narrative or subject, the ethereal movements of fabric that dance across the surface of the image become the center of Stern's work.

As a kind of extension to *Quickening*, *Force Field* (2019) includes glass cubes in the prints. Stern states, "I placed them upside down to soften the upper edges, and loved the evanescent shadows this created in the denser glass of the base." She also "framed them more tightly than in *Quickening*, and the forms are more densely juxtaposed; the resulting feeling is of one unit, charged with light and energy." This juxtaposition adds more vibrancy to the prints and emits the feeling of duality between one shape in contrast to the next, between light and dark.

Stern's *Passage* series (2002 - 2004) delves further into the white tonal quality. Stern states, "The initial photographs possessed a greater sense of depth than the earlier work; either the entire image or forms within it pulled the eye back in space, a feeling I tried to sustain throughout the body of work." Stern's "Passage" works exhibit much more of a spatial, dimensional quality. The draping fabric obscures and bends the light that runs through the print, which creates a sense of disparateness. The drapes also exhibit a kind of regal quality—almost as if they are close-ups of Roman statues or tunics. The lack of clarity as to what or who the subject is—as is the case for most of her work—leaves the door open for interpretation.

The first instance in which Stern uses a scrim of translucent white fabric is in her series titled *Unveilings* (1985), which captures flowers set against a white scrim. Stern states: "The aim, however, was not to focus on the flowers against a static backdrop, but to create a dialogue between figure and ground. The fabric was pulled, pinned, taped and otherwise manipulated until its folds created a dynamic - what I call 'charged' - composition in light and shadow; one of several anemones was then selected based on whether it looked like it would work with the dynamics of that composition in terms of the curvature of the stem, the openness of the petals, their translucency or lack thereof, and so on."

The juxtaposition between the translucent petals and the white scrim indeed initiates a kind of dialogue between figure and ground. The light that gently filters through the petals gives the flower a dynamic appearance rather than a static one; her renderings remind you that the flowers are living but they, like most living things, are vulnerable.

In a less natural rendering, Stern also depicts architectural spaces in her series *Interior Light* (1978 - 1984). Regarding this work, Stern states, "The interior spaces in this series are not the actual subject of the images; rather, the architectural planes and forms are the vehicles by which the light is made palpable." The light, or that which is invisible, becomes the subject of Stern's work. She states, "The aim here was to create a sense of an internal vibration." This three-dimensional spatial movement creates a sense of great entropy. Stern's work is filled with a kind of experiment in light and movement—a contest between moving and static energies.

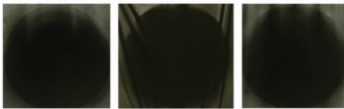
At the opposite end of the tonal spectrum, Stern has also rendered her abstract vision using a black scrim and dark forms, such as the circles in the *Meditation Triptychs* (2013-2016). Reinhardt's influence can be felt strongly in this series, as



*Lynn Stern, Unveilings #59 1985,
Gelatin Silver Print 8 by 10 inches
edition of 6 plus 2 artist proofs.*



*Interior Light White Shadows #2 1979,
Gelatin Silver Print 11 by 14 inches
Edition of 7. Plus 1 AP.*



*Meditation Triptych I, 2013-2016
archival inkjet pigment prints 32.5 by
91 inches edition of 6 plus 2 artist
proofs.*



*Lynn Stern working with the scrim in
her studio in New York City.*

the light that surrounds the center of the works becomes the epicenter that grounds her work. Almost harkening back to Baroque artist Caravaggio and his masterful contrast between light and dark that he uses in his paintings, Stern utilizes this same contrast in her unique work.

Stern states, "The intention was to make all the images feel contemplative and other-worldly, containing almost no incident whatsoever except for the emanation of light surrounding and impinging on the circles." Stern states, "Frequently, however, out of frustration at not being able to get an image with any life to it, I would start manipulating the black scrim, pinning, taping and weighing it down, until sometimes the slashing diagonal folds would create a charged sense of drama." "The dynamic, tension-filled image in the center, flanked by quietly radiant works right and left seemed to be metaphors for the difficulty of meditating; hence the title."

In a world so often characterized by disorder, it seems fitting that Stern's metaphorical photographs seem to capture the difficulty of mediating—of walking and balancing along a tightrope through an unpredictable and unsteady world. Her work is not always easily recognizable on its surface level, but upon a deeper examination and visual analysis it becomes clear that her work captures the essence of our unmediated world through light.

Stern's work also has great historical importance, and examples of her work can be found in the permanent collections of some of the most important museums in the US, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, the Brooklyn Museum of Art in Brooklyn, NY, and the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, CT among others.

Her work is represented by Nailya Alexander Gallery in New York City and The Erin Cluley Gallery in Dallas Texas. One of her works is currently being featured in a group show at The Erin Cluley Gallery entitled "Summer 2023" which runs from July 15 - August 19, 2023.

For more information and updates about Lynn's work you can follow her work on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/lynnsternphotographs/>, or see more of her work at <http://lynnsternphotographs.com>

For interest in individual available works you can contact one of her galleries by going to the links below. Erin Cluley Gallery, Dallas, Texas, <https://www.erincluley.com/lynn-stern-1>, Nailya Alexander Gallery, New York, NY, <https://www.nailyaalexandergallery.com/artists/lynn-stern>