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Finding Soul in Human Skulls



"Skull #28," 1991. © Lynn Stern

Lynn Stern's new book *Skull*, published this month by Thames & Hudson, presents more than 25 years of her work, all of it focused on skulls, human and animal, plainly seen or abstracted. In an essay in the book, Stern explains the beginning of her attraction. "Towards the end of 1989 I read an article by [Donald Kuspit](#) in which he noted that whenever a skull appears in a painting it knocks everything else out of the picture. The comment

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fascinated me; it remained planted in my mind.” The article in part inspired her first skull series, “Dispossession,” which combined Stern’s own face, “death-masklike,” with a human skull on a glowing backdrop. Stern went on to make eight series featuring skulls, creating increasingly abstract arrangements that use scrims and fabrics and diffuse natural light to explore form.

In “Dispossession,” made in the early 1990s, Stern was certain that she wanted to use real skulls, “because actual bone has a much more nuanced surface than plastic and transmits more light through fissures in the eye sockets and nasal passage.” The skull should be “filled with gesture, expressiveness and luminosity,” she writes, perhaps as a strategy to deny death “by infusing the skull with a soul.” Inspired by Kuspit and by Gerhard Richter’s [paintings](#) of Red Army Faction founder Ulrike Meinhoff after her death, the series is “not about death itself,” she writes, “but, rather, about my attempt to imagine it.” In her series “Spectator,” made between 2014 and 2015, a black circle shares the frame with a human skull, both partial obscured by a textural layer that suggests a veil. Stern writes, “It may sound counterintuitive, but concentrating on form allows me to explore emotion on an unconscious level.”

Along with Stern’s images, the book also includes an extended essay by Kuspit, the art historian, who places Stern’s work in the long history of artists depicting skulls, from El Greco to Damien Hirst. He writes, “At times, [the skull] becomes a ghostly shadow, a haunting hallucination, presence and absence in one, an enigmatic form rather than a solid substance. Slowly but surely, over the course of her eight series of skulls, the skull seems to dissolve, while retaining its features.”

