



LYNN STERN with Alex Chowaniec

New York-based photographer Lynn Stern's subversive images stare back. Her skulls, shot on black-and-white film, open up critical questions about death and dying in an ongoing exorcism that has lasted for over twenty-five years. I consider Stern equal parts sculptor and photographer. The visceral materiality of her work—material feels pushed, breathed, and molded onto its surfaces—is held in tension as one enters and exits spaces filled with darkness or emptied by infinite luminosity. On October 17, Lynn Stern's monograph, *Skull*, was released in New York and London by Thames & Hudson, with an accompanying essay by art historian Donald Kuspit. I sat down to speak with Stern about the power of the skull, how American culture seeks to deny death, and her hopes and fears of nothingness.



Lynn Stern, *Doppelganger #14-72a*, 2014, pigment-print, 21.5 × 28 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Alex Chowaniec (Rail): You have a whole language of skulls that has dominated your work for the last 25 years. In your earlier work, pre-skulls, there is this sense of the ominous—a feeling that something bad is going to happen—seeking to know or perhaps knowing. How does this all connect?

Lynn Stern: Well, actually, while I have been working on skulls for twenty-five years, I have been working on other things. I think what has always interested me is a sense of imminence, and I could spell that both ways. Imminence in the sense of something about to happen—mysterious, but not necessarily bad—but also immanence in the spiritual sense—of inward godliness or spirituality inherent in the physical world. And I think in the landscape, I looked for that sense of infinity. So it's a sense not just of death but of something beyond what I've always been looking for, and that's probably one reason why the light is so important to me. I've always made this distinction—there is a wonderful quote I read in relation to light—that there is a difference between light that falls on things and is the expression of worldliness and description—and inner light, or luminosity, which is the manifestation of life and energy. That's the kind of light that interests me. So there are connections, I think, throughout.

Rail: What was the trigger to begin working with the skulls—how did they come into your life?

Stern: It was a coincidence. I had read an article many years ago—it was probably the late '80s—by Donald Kuspit, in which he made the comment that when there's a skull in the picture, it knocks everything else out of the picture because it's so powerful. And that stuck with me. And then, just by coincidence, a few weeks later I saw a show of

Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* series, which included the three images called *Tote* ["Dead"] of Ulrike Meinhof, who was a member of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, who had hung herself in prison. They felt to me like those old nineteenth century soul portraits, and there's just something riveting—the show is very political; I didn't take any of that from it—I was fascinated by these three portraits. I wanted to explore the idea of the death mask—the face as the soul's portrait in the death mask—and the skull, and it wound up as the *Dispossession* series. That was about a two-year project. I hate to have anyone around when I'm photographing, so I knew the face would have to be mine. Also, it was my journey. But that was not conscious at the time, at all. And then I couldn't let go of it after that series.

Rail: Where do the skulls that you work with come from?

Stern: Ultimately, I'm not sure, but I've been told probably India. I don't particularly like to think about that. The Anatomical Chart Company, which I found online, is a place that sells all sorts of [human bones and models of] body parts to medical students. I would order them over the phone and have these ridiculous conversations, like, "I think I'd like an old skull because the bone thins as they get older and lets more light through," and they said, "Mm-hmm I have some nice geriatric skulls." Anybody listening in would have put me in an insane asylum. There's a variety—sometimes they cut off the top of the skull—it's called the calvarium—so that medical students can analyze the brain. So, I got one intact, and then I got one with a cut calvarium and a geriatric skull.

Rail: Speaking to the skull stories, how do you relate to them—perceive their gender or genderlessness?

Stern: I think they're all male, I have to say. I have no idea why. I just do.

Rail: You made a very conscious decision to work with the skull only and not the whole skeleton. How do you think about it as an empty vessel, the positive and negative space, something that is both cerebral and sensual?

Stern: Well, that's interesting actually, yes. While I've been working with skulls, I've also been working with vessels a lot—these circular forms or vases. Some of them—old Greek and Roman vases—have a kind of sacred and symbolic feeling to them. The skull is loaded with meaning and also clearly symbolic but very ambiguous, I think. I'm particularly interested in the openings—the eye sockets. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul in life, and I think even in the skull, they are just about the most evocative part of the skull. They are openings, they transmit light, but sometimes they are absolutely black. They make the skull feel alive in some way, or uncannily dead but still looking at you. There is just so much emotion potentially expressed through those openings. So I do think of them as a former container of not only the brain, but also the spirit, the soul, the psyche—whatever you want to call it—that makes us *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*. And it varies of course whether it's human or animal. When I worked with the animal skulls in particular, I was very conscious of the eye sockets and, in some of them, the very large nasal passage, which makes you feel that you are looking right through them almost.



Lynn Stern, (W)Holes #94-7a, 1994 – 2008, gelatin silver print, 24 × 20 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Do you dream about skulls?

Stern: No. I do have a recurring dream that I think is about death. It's a horrible dream; it's not about skulls. I'm wrapped up like a mummy, rotating, in an endless black void. That's all I remember. I say it's about death; I think it represents nothingness or infinity. I don't deal well with abstract concepts. I can't think about infinity, eternity—it practically puts me in a panic attack. I think that's what I think of death. Nothingness.

Rail: Do you feel that the capacity to explore these spaces or seek to know them is both a luxury and a curse?

Stern: I wish I could explore it more. I'm not religious. I wish I could be, as I get older, before I die. I've often been tempted by Buddhism. I have a close friend who is a Buddhist scholar, and we've talked about it. I can't make a commitment. I don't know why—something about it scares me. Maybe as I get older. Still, I could not see myself believing in any really theistic religion, but I do feel some need to connect to something beyond the mundane world. And I think that's probably expressed more in my work than anywhere else in my life.



Lynn Stern, Skull #28, 1991, gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: The way that you speak about moving fabric and constructing your images feels very sculptural. Like you are sculpting with both the fabric itself and the light.

Stern: Someone else said that—someone I've known for years, who used to be a private dealer, said, "I really think of these as sculptures." In a way they are. I have to build them. I've been wondering recently if any form could be made magical or extraordinary just because of the light, and I'm trying to explore this in new work with glass bottles and a scrim. The light makes something happen, or it just looks like a bottle behind a scrim.

Rail: Speaking of surface tension, sculpture, and photography, I think that the work exists in this hybrid space; it has a tense materiality to it. Some work looks as though it has been breathed on to the paper, other work like it's been pushed into the paper. You're working with all these different materials, carving with light.

Stern: I really want to convey something that is felt rather than seen, but it has to be seen in some way, or you can't capture it. In a way I'm saying, how little can be there? How ethereal can it be and still be an enticing image? That has always interested me, which is somewhat perverse, I guess.

Rail: It brings up the question of the abstract versus the representational, of moving a form—an image—almost into abstraction while still maintaining this rich and focused conceptual exploration of a represented subject. And these things can exist simultaneously.

Stern: Yes! Abstraction literally means "to draw away from," so the figure can still exist, but it's not realistic.

Rail: After having had the chance to sit with this beautiful tome, *Skull*—to move through it and read Donald Kuspit's essay—I wonder how you respond to his art historical contextualization of something that is very personal.

Stern: Actually, it embarrassed me. I said, “Donald you are writing about all these incredible artists who are much better than I am, and you’re saying that my skulls are superior in some way. People are really going to think this is crazy and offensive.” He said, “Well, I just mean in this one particular area.” But it did—it really embarrassed me. Donald has his own very psychological take; I’m very interested in it or we wouldn’t have been friends all these years.

Rail: I’m curious about the paradoxical element in focusing on death—specifically, in the act of making, is there the possibility for you to overcome that fear?

Stern: I hope so! I don’t know. I imagine after I did the *Dispossessions* and *Skulls* (they were pretty much at the same time, 1990–92), one reason I couldn’t let go was formal—I felt I could do more with the skulls—and another reason, though again, not articulated, was the exorcism hadn’t worked, so I’ll try again. I think I am trying to exorcise my fear. It hasn’t worked so far, but I’m a great believer in subconscious activity and intuition, and I do think about death, and I’m terrified of death, and as I get older I think of death more and more. But I don’t think about it while I’m working. I don’t even know whether I’m going to do more skulls. For the moment, I’ve said, “Okay, that’s it.”

Rail: But the exorcism continues...

Stern: Attempted, attempted. Another reason I’d like to turn, if I could, to Buddhism is that it might help, but I don’t know. I just hope I live to be very old to have worked it out.

Rail: I hope so, too.

Stern: Thank you.

Rail: In terms of contextualizing the work culturally, how do you feel that it mirrors culture? In what ways does American culture deny death or the images that you are unpacking?

Stern: Every way imaginable and thoroughly. We don’t want to deal with death at all. We don’t handle the body unless we happen to be in that business; we have no experience unless you’re someone who has been in war. We want to stay as far away from death as we can, and it’s become more and more apparent. I was shopping for gloves, and I turned around, and there was a wool cape with these funny skulls all over it. They’re all making a joke out of death because people really don’t want to focus on the real deal. We deny it. I grew up in this culture, so I’m sure if I had been in a culture where death is just a part of life, and when someone dies you wash the body and you really bid it farewell, maybe I would feel differently about it. But I’m very much a part of this culture that does not want to acknowledge death.

Rail: Is it possible for us as artists to be empowered to reclaim that imagery?

Stern: I think so. I think there are probably a lot of viewers who are simply not going to want to look unless it’s kitschified somehow—unless the edge is off it, but there are some hopefully who will and maybe some that will be drawn in by the aesthetics. I hope that my skulls are beautiful—that they are simply beautiful images. But I think, yes, we do have that power. And there are always some people who are going to look at them, really look at them. Do you think we have that power?

Rail: Yes, I do. And I think, in part, it is through our lived experience and dialogue with death on a personal level that we are able to transmute in our work and impart to others. We need to think about the ways in which our work can be shared and create opportunities for meaningful exchange. I would like to think that by having these conversations as artists, the more we engage with other communities, we open up the possibilities for that conversation to happen in health care, palliative care, and what end of life looks like, feels like, sounds like, when we go from days to hours, to minutes, to death. We don't speak enough about that.

Stern: Absolutely right.

Rail: One of the critical aspects that you bring to the conversation, the nothingness, is looking at it from both sides of the equation. Is it in this circular nature of life and death that we can apprehend what that nothingness is?

Stern: It's ambiguous, and I vacillate. There is the nothingness that I see in that black, detail-less, solid round, and then looking at just the perimeter of the circle, it's white, and it's open. The circle is such a wonderfully ambiguous symbol: it can be the abyss, the solid void; it can be a symbol of harmony, oneness, unity. So I'm afraid of one, hoping for the other, toggling between these opposites symbolically and emotionally.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and concision.

CONTRIBUTOR

Alex Chowaniec

ALEX CHOWANIEC is a painter, filmmaker, and new media artist based in Brooklyn.

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