Louise Lawler: Monochrome
July 17–October 19, 1997

Fig. 1. Sappho and Patriarch. Is It the Work, the Location, or the Stereotype That Is the Institution?, 1984. Cibachrome, 39 ¼ x 27 ½ in. (101 x 70 cm). Lent courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.
LOUISE LAWLER HAS BEEN well known since the early 1980s for her photographs of artworks shot in museum storage rooms, auction houses, and galleries and in the homes of private collectors. Her work, which is generally regarded as operating from within the context of intellectual cultural critique, challenges the ways in which we perceive objects and the degree to which value accrues to them as a function of the settings in which they are placed.

While the photographs in this exhibition remain true to the notion of critique by bringing the viewer’s attention to the role of objects in their settings, the exhibition also focuses on another, little-discussed aspect of Lawler’s works: their sheer formal beauty. In particular, it emphasizes the extent to which Lawler’s photographs, regardless of their subject matter, are often also explorations in monochrome—studies in modulations of single colors such as green, brown, blue, or white.

*Monogram*, 1984/87, a photograph of a valuable painting by Jasper Johns hanging over a bed in a private home in New York, and *Vacuum Cleaner*, 1988, of a mass-produced functional object in the center of an empty exhibition space in Dijon, France, are studies in tones of white. *Green*, 1986, a photograph of plaster casts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in storage and awaiting conservation at the Queens Museum of Art, and *Êtes Vous Heureuse*, 1987, of a live parrot, a painting, and other objects in an unidentified interior setting, are meditations on the color blue. The vivid blue color of another photograph of plaster casts, *Sappho and Patriarch . . .* 1984 (fig. 1), itself emerged as a theme in a solo exhibition that Lawler titled “Blue Cibachromes and Two Fixed Intervals” (Friedrich Petzel/Nina Borgmann Gallery, 1994). Although the photographs in the show were of unlike objects—used furniture piled in dealers’ storerooms (one in Germany, one in the United States), molds for Jean Arp sculptures wrapped in storage in the Hamburg Kunsthalle, and lace displayed in a vitrine at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston—all of them were blue.

Lawler exploited the social connotations of a particular color by giving the title *Beige* to a washed-out photograph of the work of three artists (Brice Marden, Larry Bell, and Craig Kauffman, representatives of an established formalist aesthetic) installed at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1987. She overtly played with color in a different way the same year in *Shadow Summer*, her photograph of the shadows cast on the wall by a late version of Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 ready-made *Air de Paris* (Paris Air) in the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. She printed the photograph both in black and white (fig. 2) and in a series of fourteen differently colored but otherwise identical monochromatic prints (four are now in the collection of the Moderna Museet). The photographs in this series are the only examples in which Lawler purposely manipulated

![Fig. 2. Shadow Summer, 1987, black-and-white photograph. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.](image-url)
color rather than capitalize on the random effects of technical errors in production.

The deliberate use of monochrome belongs more to the history of painting than to photography (one takes color snapshots to heighten and enhance a sense of contrasts between multicolor images) and is especially entwined with the history of modernism, the rejection of representation, and the desire to produce a work of art that is purely about itself and thus, to a certain extent, also associated with expressions of spirituality. In the twentieth century the use of monochrome has been associated with the work of the Russian Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich, and the American painters Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt, who were aligned with Abstract Expressionism, and with contemporary artists such as Robert Ryman, one of whose reductivist paintings is the subject of Lawler’s photograph Monochrome, 1992/97.

In Lawler’s photographs, however, the emphatic if subtle use of monochromatic color functions strategically as one of several devices to perplex the viewer, to make us stop and question what it is, exactly, that we are looking at. In Lawler’s photographs, we are never quite certain what the subject is. She confounds our expectations of where the central focus should be with what Trevor Fairbrother called her “inexorable record” of incongruous details (Connections: Louise Lawler, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1990), odd angles, unexpected crops, and an occasional ironic title. American artist James McNeill Whistler proposed that his painting Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl, 1862 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), be read purely for its formal values—the tonal harmonies of the range of whites—and that the viewer disregard the frisson of suggested subject matter in the image of a girl in virginal white standing atop a rug made of a bear’s skin with its growling mouth at the viewers’ eye level. Paradoxically, in Lawler’s Monogram, also a study in whites, the title suggests that the monogram on the bedspread—not the painting by Jasper Johns that hangs above the bed—is the subject of note in the photograph. (A detail of the same painting, shown with its accompanying label from Christie’s auction house, appears in a later photograph by Lawler, Board of Directors, 1989.)

While Lawler’s camera has embraced subjects as apparently disparate as a display in a French museum devoted to mushrooms (Musée du Champignons, 1987), a parrot sitting on its perch (Êtes Vous Heureuse, 1987), and a wall in a bedroom, all of her photographs chronicle a human impulse to collect, classify, and own. Lawler records activities that give “value” to objects as diverse as plants, animals, furniture, and paintings, simply by the fact of their being desired. Conversely, her photographs also document the devaluation of once-treasured objects to mere commodities by their relegation to storage or sale. Lawler’s photographs of works of art are often poignant in this regard.

Lawler returned to the subject of Duchamp’s Paris Air in 1994. The original object is a Parisian chemist’s glass vial, which Duchamp, at the end of 1919, had emptied of its medicinal contents and thus “filled” with fifty cubic centimeters of Paris air, and which he brought to his friends Walter and Louise Arensberg when he returned to the United States in January 1920. The original Paris Air is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Lawler photographed it in color, suspended by a string in its protective
vitrine (see *White Wall*, 1994/96, fig. 4). *Paris Air* is one of the objects Duchamp replicated in miniature for his multiple versions of *Boîte-en-valise* (Box in Valise), which he began in 1941. He made another version in 1963 (the one now in the Moderna Museet that Lawler photographed in *Shadow Summer*) and another, in an edition of eight, in 1964. Lawler's photographs of the mysterious, almost indecipherable, forms of the shadows cast by a bottle filled with air, as well as her photograph of this otherwise ordinary item protected, labeled, and displayed in a museum setting, further extend the puzzling situation of how, apparently arbitrarily, we become fascinated with certain objects.

Plaster casts of classical sculptures are another recurring subject in Lawler's photographs. She has photographed casts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Wadsworth Atheneum (*Sappho and Patriarch . . .*) and the Norwich Free Academy (*Woman [Statue] from Above*, 1985) in Connecticut, and recently in the Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke (Museum for Casts of Classical Art), Munich (*She Wasn't Always a Statue*, 1996/97, fig. 3). Like Duchamp's *Paris Air*, these sculptures exist in multiple and therefore confront our concept of the importance of the original and unique. Lawler has photographed them in black and white (fig. 3) and in color, as she did with *Paris Air*. However, unlike Duchamp's ready-made (an ordinary object raised to the level of art), the casts, once the centerpieces of many European and American art museum collections, later fell into disregard and neglect precisely because, despite the great skill and craft that often went into their manufacture, they were not original or unique works of art. Lawler's photographs of the figures from unexpected perspectives and in groupings in storage or random display are discorncing. They upset our assumptions about the ways we had previously seen and imagined objects of timeless, classic beauty.

Focusing on the use of color in Lawler's photographs in an attempt to sidestep their subject matter thus brings us back to contemplating her subjects. If the intention of Lawler's work is to call into question the idea that aesthetic value (beauty) intrinsically resides in an art object, it is also ironic that she achieves this via the production of other beautiful objects—photographs characterized by compelling off-center geometries, affecting hints at narrative, and saturated Cibachrome hues. Regarding monochrome, Lawler wrote (note to the author, 1997): "It is the same as black-and-white in that it unifies or equalizes what is in the picture [and] unfocuses attention from the normal hierarchy of seeing." It is in this disruption of the normal hierarchy that Louise Lawler's monochrome photographs act out their subversive beauty. As Lawler shifts the location of the frame, the photograph

![Fig. 3. She Wasn't Always a Statue (C), 1996/97, black-and-white photograph. Image 18 x 18 1/2 in. (45.8 x 47 cm); mat 32 x 29 1/4 in. (81 x 75.1 cm). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.](image-url)
itself is perceived as a work of art (see Meinhardt, Hugo-Erfruth-Preis, 27) and our attention shifts from contemplation of the color (why blue?) to contemplation of the subject (why a plaster cast?) and back again.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator
BIOGRAPHY


Note: Although Lawler's work has been included in numerous one-person and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe, only selected solo exhibitions are listed below. An asterisk (*) indicates that an exhibition was accompanied by a publication; many of the publications provide extensive bibliographies and exhibition histories.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1986 Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, Saint-Étienne, France.*

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buskirk, Martha. "Louise Lawler (interview)." October 70 (fall 1994): 104-8.
Fraser, Andrea. "In and Out of Place." Art in America 73 (June 1985): 122-29.


CHECKLIST

All photographs are Cibachrome prints and, unless otherwise indicated, are lent courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters. Two years separated by a solidus (/) indicate the dates of shooting and printing.

Sappho and Patriarch. Is It the Work, the Location, or the Stereotype That Is the Institution?, 1984, 39 1/8 x 27 1/8 (101 x 70)
Woman (Statue) from Above, 1985, 39 x 48 (99 x 122).
Collection of C. James Lawler
Green, 1986, 41 1/8 x 55 1/8 (105.4 x 141)
Êtes Vous Heureux, 1987, 26 1/8 x 39 (66.7 x 99)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, 1987, 26 1/8 x 39 (66.7 x 99)
Musée du Champignons, 1987, 26 x 39 1/8 (66 x 100.3)
Shadow Summer, 1987, 26 x 33 1/4 (66 x 85.7).
Collection of Penelope S. Ludwig
Shadow Summer, 1987, 26 x 33 1/4 (66 x 85.7)
Monogram, 1984/87, 39 1/8 x 28 (100.3 x 71.1)
Vacuum Cleaner, 1988, 26 x 39 (66 x 99)
Banque, 1993/94, 24 x 24 1/8 (61 x 62)
Fet First, 1994/96, 47 1/2 x 59 1/8 (120.6 x 151.8)
White Wall, 1994/96, 47 1/2 x 59 1/8 (120.6 x 151.8)
Monochrome, 1992/97, 28 1/8 x 23 1/8 (58.7 x 60.3)

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 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Washington, D.C.

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