

Laura Letinsky, *Somewhere, Somewhere*, Oakville Galleries, January 28-March 26, 2006

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Laura Letinsky
Somewhere, Somewhere
Oakville Galleries
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Even an anonymous hotel room speaks volumes of its transient guest after only a few hours. A place inhabited by the same person for a certain duration draws a portrait that resembles this person based on objects (present or absent) and the habits that they imply.¹

Several months ago, I moved from an apartment, where I had been living for some years, into a house. In the process of transferring belongings from one domestic space to another, I became aware all over again – it had been a few years, mercifully, since my previous relocation – how much domestic spaces are reflections of the people who inhabit them. In these spaces, filled with things arranged in certain ways, a picture emerges of an inhabitant through his or her taste and belongings. My apartment had become not just the place where I lived, but a picture of me, evidence of what Michel de Certeau calls the “life narrative” of the occupied space.² Emptied of my furniture, books, and art, however, my apartment became an apartment, a space where I had once spent some time; though it retained its own character, in the way that interior architectural spaces can be said to possess such human traits as character, it clearly needed the occupation of another person to make it into a living space once again.

Even with the excitement of moving into my own house, I had worried that I would miss my apartment, to which I had become particularly attached in my years of living there. To my surprise, I didn’t miss it at all, not even for a day. I was so quickly and fully occupied with the possibilities presented by my new framework for living that the past slipped into its pastness with astonishing ease. And so perhaps it is through this lens of the recently relocated (a voluntary relocation, which no doubt affects my reading) that I regard the serially untitled photographs of Laura Letinsky’s exhibition *Somewhere, Somewhere* not so much as melancholic rememberings of places where I was once as representations of possibility yet to be fulfilled.

In this body of work, Letinsky has photographed dwellings after their occupants have departed, and the interior spaces still exhibit, in places, the detritus that denotes recent habitation. In one photograph, a potted plant sits alone in a patch of sunlight; in another, a light fixture has been removed, as evidenced by capped wires hanging from the ceiling, and electrical outlets are variously exposed. The odd tissue or bit of tape litters the floor. And yet, to my eyes, anyway, these photographs are less about wistful departures than they are markers of transience and the potential for habitation.

The “somewhere” that Letinsky evokes in her title for this series speaks to a place as yet unlocated, the mythical somewhere referred to in Stephen Sondheim’s famous ballad of the same name from *West Side Story*, in which lovers imagine a mythical “place for us . . . a new way of living.” There is a quality to these images that suggests these empty places more as blank slates than as full of the narratives of life that would be indicated by fuller occupation.

The directness with which these photographs are presented is evocative of recent practices in which objects are brought under the scrutiny of the lens as portraits – reminiscent, in particular, of the work of Candida Höfer and her contemporaries, other students of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Here, interior spaces are left to speak for themselves without Letinsky’s offering the contextualizing information of location, or any imposition of her own aesthetic devices. The sense of portraiture is of interest in that these spaces are required to stand on their own, to speak for themselves, without having been “gussied up” for the camera by their occupants. The “fluffing” that is so often done by real-estate agents to make a home look more readily



Untitled #103, from the series *Somewhere, Somewhere*
colour print, 2005. Courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery

habitable is nowhere in evidence, and so we are left to assess the nature or viability of a space based only on its skeleton.

But for all the possibilities of these spaces-between-habitation, there is something rather bland about this particular selection of images. With the exception of one image of a room painted dark red (*Untitled #111*), shown in the “homiest” of the viewing spaces in Oakville Galleries’ Gairloch Gardens site – a space that was itself once a home and still appears as such, with large picture windows, a fireplace, and the thresholds between rooms that are familiar in older domiciles – the photographs in this exhibition seem almost endlessly the same: pale walls, sometimes patched, unilluminated light fixtures, doors opened to yet more emptiness, but with little to differentiate the spaces from one another. Smaller than life size, many of the images are nonetheless large enough to reference not only the spaces that they represent but the house/gallery space in which they are sited, blurring the indexing of these spaces as particular locations. As portraits, these photographs give away almost nothing.

Somewhere, Somewhere carries forward the interest that Letinsky has evinced in previous series in the still life, which could be suggested as a theme not only of her *Morning and Melancholia* photographs of tables of dishes, fruit, and other traces of food – literal still lives – but also of *Venus Inferred*, in which she photographed couples before and after sex. The still life in art-historical tradition in part speaks to the artist’s skill in rendering naturalistic images – at which Letinsky excels – but it also serves as a reminder that humans, like all other living things, are mortal, that we can be stilled in art but not in time. So, too, does this series of emptied spaces seem to hover, frozen, somewhere between living and expired. While one could read these spaces as a *vanitas* admonition not to become too attached to places, to the things with which we fill our spaces, the places in these photographs are already emptied, vacated of signification. Unfilled, they are vacuums, timeless, empty enough that they barely evoke desire in a viewer to inhabit them. While inhabited spaces speak of their inhabitants, these vacated spaces speak of their vacancy; the opportunity may exist to make these rooms feel again like home, but in these photographs, the interregnum becomes the permanent state of being, and desire is suspended.

Jessica Wyman

1. Michel de Certeau, Luce Girard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 145.

2. Ibid.

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