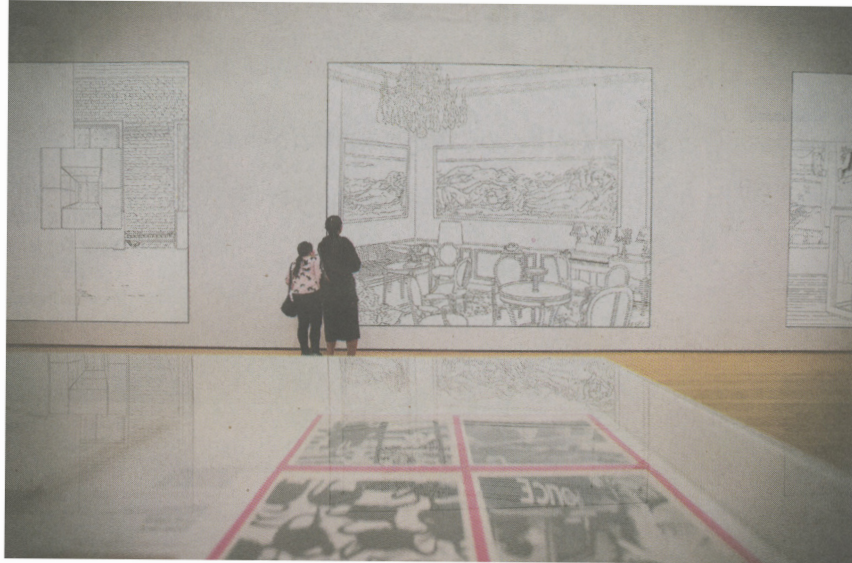


METRO PICTURES

Smith, Roberta. "Stealth Aesthetic, Muted Aura," *The New York Times* (May 12, 2017): C13, C16.

The New York Times



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, "Salon Hodler (traced)," center, from Louise Lawler's show at the Modern. Left, Ms. Lawler's "Triangle (adjusted to fit)," left, and "Pollyanna (adjusted to fit, distorted for the times)," at the exhibition.

ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW

Stealth Aesthetic, Muted Aura

A Pictures Generation artist's work, gorgeous and spare.

LOUISE LAWLER IS ONE OF the great light-heavyweights of the 1980s Pictures Generation, an artist of stealth, wit and elegant understatement, adept at playing the art world against itself. Her uncanny photographs of artworks in their natural habitats, and her carefully worded aphorisms can bruise, but ever so gently. Her love of ephemerality — her works have appeared on cocktail napkins — flies in the face of traditional museums' commitment to preserving treasured objects. Even so, there is

plenty to look at in "Louise Lawler: Why Pictures Now," the artist's gorgeous, startlingly spare retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

For years Ms. Lawler has been one of art's better kept secrets, admired both by theory buffs and by those unthreatened by aesthetic pleasure. Her low profile is no accident. She seems to have nurtured an innate shyness into an effective Dickinsonian persona. It deliberately mutes her presence as an individual artist, as do her frequent collaborations — with, among others, artists like Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum and Lawrence Weiner.

As reflected in this show, Ms. Lawler has

Louise Lawler: Why Pictures Now
Museum of Modern Art

made few art objects — usually quite small and in concert with Mr. McCollum. Moreover, none of her artworks are unique; everything is editioned, whether limited or not. She underscores this by listing all the owners of her photographs, produced in editions of around five, on their labels.

In terms of contemporary art, the Modern can be at its best when it allows artists to play with the very format of the art exhibition. Recent successes include the

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handsome if mind-twisting survey of (and by) Christopher Williams, another Pictures artist, in 2014, and the chaotic hoard of art and artifacts that Kai Althoff jammed into a white-on-white, arklite setting last fall.

Ms. Lawler and Roxana Marcoci, the exhibition's curator, have devised something quite different: an open, airy survey with lots of room for roaming, some chairs for sitting and two conjoined, markedly different halves focusing on Ms. Lawler's activities with pictures and then words. The first half is dominated by photographs in various shapes and guises, including mural-size images. The second, which seems almost empty at first, contains two large vitrines of ephemera that show off Ms. Lawler's gifts for graphic design and for language, with displays of everything from matchbook covers and napkins to exhibition announcements and art books that she photo-edited.

Born in Bronxville, N.Y., in 1947, Ms. Lawler earned a B.F.A. from Cornell University in 1969, then moved immediately to New York. She emerged with other Pictures artists — among them Richard Prince, Ms. Levine and Barbara Kruger — in the early 1980s, building on Conceptual Art's breakthroughs. Some of her confreres were intent on exposing the complex roles of photography in everyday life, especially in advertising and movies. Ms. Lawler and others fixated instead on dissecting and exposing, often through photography, the power dynamics of art-world institutions, business practices and devotional tendencies. Targets included museum display, the fetishizing of art objects and the myth and marketing of artists as (mostly male) geniuses.

Since the mid-1980s, Ms. Lawler has taken the art world as she has found it, although in some fairly rarefied circumstances, making it the unwitting collaborator and image bank for her quietly subversive appropriation. Perhaps most passively, Ms. Lawler has hijacked other cultural events as her work, as when she invited guests to a performance of "Swan Lake" by New York City Ballet, while noting that tickets must be purchased at the box office. She also announced a one-night exhibition at Metro Pictures, her gallery, on Feb. 15, 2003,

a day of widespread protests against the Iraq War — with a card that stated "No Drinks for Those Who Do Not Support the Anti-War Demonstration."

Ms. Lawler is best known for sly, arresting color photographs that capture valuable, mostly blue-chip artworks, in museum storage rooms or exhibitions, though more often somewhere in between. They're also seen in collectors' color-coordinated homes and at auction houses, where they must again prove their worth.

These photographs are tender; they catch the art at odd, vulnerable moments — moments of unflattering intimacy. Works are seen up close, from sharp angles and rarely whole. They lean against walls, are held by art handlers, sit disassembled on storage crates. One small photograph gives us part of a white "Net" painting by Yayoi Kusama clearly at an auction; it's impinged on by the unmistakable shadow of an early Alexander Calder statue.

Ms. Lawler's images have multiple lives, exposing the ceaseless flexibility of photographs. Constantly recycled, they go from framed and portable to paperweights to the wall-covering murals of her "adjusted to fit" series. In the show's first half, four "adjusted" photos cover immense, staggered walls, looming like ocean liners sliding out of their docks. Their monumentality thrills but also chides the art world for its embrace of spectacle and the overblown.

In one, "Triangle (adjusted to fit)," we get a worm's-eye view of a museum's gleaming Minimalist works; in another woozy wall-size scene, a big Murakami inflatable seems about to bite into some Warhols. It is titled "Pollyanna (adjusted to fit, distorted for the times)," which, like its fun-house distortions, seems right for an era of "fake news."

Ms. Lawler's images also circulate among posters, exhibition announcements and postcards. (It's not surprising that she was involved with all aspects of this show — the aforementioned, along with catalog design and marketing.) An especially extreme transformation occurs in her new "traced" series, which converts the photographs to large, black vinyl outlines that adhere to white walls. Eight of these ghostly drawing-like works come into focus on the walls of the ephemera gallery. Drained of color,

these iterations give each part of the image equal weight, which confuses, for example, the artworks and their reflections in "Triangle (adjusted to fit)," making them strange and new.

Swimming among the show's images are words and wordplay that can have a few layers. One of Ms. Lawler's better-known photographs shows Jasper Johns's creamy "White Flag" (1955) hanging above a bed with an equally creamy monogrammed satin spread. The image is sensibly titled "Monogram," all the more fittingly since "Monogram" is also the title of one of Robert Rauschenberg's combines from the 1950s, when he and Mr. Johns were lovers.

Elsewhere, detail-obsessed labels hold their own surprises. They can present us with the exhibition histories of the works in a photograph and end sardonically in "This will mean more to some of you than others" in red type. Some communications are less enigmatic, like the phrase "No Drones," which forms the repeating pattern inside security envelopes Ms. Lawler designed and also the catalog's endpapers.

The show's subtitle, "Why Pictures Now," recycles a phrase the artist has used repeatedly since 1981. It sounds like a question but lacks the proper punctuation, suggesting a promise to explain or demonstrate the importance of pictures, which this show capably fulfills. A possible answer to the non-question is another ambiguous Lawler phrase previously used as an exhibition title and on matchbooks: "A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything."

It is hard to know if these words proclaim the power, or the worthlessness, of pictures. Probably both. Either way, behind Ms. Lawler's shape-shifting works lies a poetic intelligence, a political sharpness and an understanding of the artwork as a form of value, but also as a source and an object of love.