

# METRO PICTURES

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ART

## IMPRESSIVE PROPORTIONS LOUISE LAWLER PHOTOGRAPHS GREAT ART—THEN TREATS IT LIKE TAFFY.

BY RACHEL WOLFF

**D**ON'T EXACTLY think I am a photographer," says Louise Lawler. So how to explain that she has ten photos, some blown up to wall size and carrying six-figure price tags, in a show opening May 6 at Metro Pictures? "I'm just trying to point things out," she says. "I never feel like I am answering anything."

Maybe not, but her pictures speak very loudly. Lawler specializes in taking nuanced photographs of other artists' work. Specifically, she shoots art in its context, after it leaves the studio, silently commenting on the way it's lived with, exhibited, handled, stored, consigned, reproduced, repackaged, sidelined, or ignored. She will, for example, show us a brawny Jackson Pollock hanging in someone's dining room, its visual habitat intruded upon (and its colors echoed) by a fussy porcelain soup tureen perched on a sideboard below it. Or she'll photograph remarkable pieces in auction-house showrooms looking like chattel as they wait to be sold.

For this new show, she's gone one step further, having her pictures printed on adhesive sheet vinyl that is then stretched and distorted in proportion to the gallery walls it sheathes. An amorphous Jean Arp plaster statue paired with an equally nebulous painting by Francis Bacon in a collector's home, a Degas dancer's tulle skirt in a Dresden museum, a Koons and a Warhol heading to the auction block—all end up pulled like taffy and fitted to their allotted spaces. Lawler says

that this particular series is somewhat customizable. "If anyone purchases one, it still gets stretched to one picture per wall, but the size is up to them—which is weird. But it is acknowledging something about how the use of the work lies with the owner."

The exhibition (her tenth solo show at the gallery in nearly 30 years) is called "Fitting at Metro Pictures," and it's hard not to read it as a cheeky-clever illustration of the ways in which art is affected by its setting. But Lawler—who has traditionally been very hesitant to be interviewed or photographed—shies away from affirming any specific readings of her art. It's somewhat hard to classify as well (if she's not a photographer, what is she?), though she's often discussed in tandem with other "Pictures Generation" artists like Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine, for whom the camera serves primarily as a means to an end. She says she's more interested in choosing settings and juxtapositions than in the individual artworks. The people displaying these pieces "really thought about it; they painted the walls and installed a Lichtenstein next to African art. They're making these different kinds of relationships in a very attentive mode. I am showing their work as well."

Though she doesn't go for the easy gocha, some of Lawler's art has quietly mocked those people. In person, though, she is sweet, chatty, and affable. When we

LOUISE  
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THROUGH  
JUNE 11.

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speaking, she recounts some of her early days (tepidly shooting in auction houses and galleries that weren't so keen on her being there; getting dragged out of Tiffany & Co. "by the scruff of my neck" for trying to photograph its baubles in situ) as well as more recent coups, like shooting Yves Saint Laurent's art collection in the late designer's home before it was dispersed at Christie's in 2009. "It was quite amazing," she says. "My camera didn't work, and it was a disaster, kind of. But I got some pictures that were sort of quirky. It was touching because they kept [Saint Laurent's house] intact long after he died—you know, just full of flowers."

Lawler grew up in Bronxville, earned a B.F.A. at Cornell, and moved to Manhattan in 1969, where she soon took a job at the Castelli Gallery. (There, she met Janelle Reiring, who would go on to co-found Metro Pictures with Helene Winer in 1980.) At the time, she was making paintings, artist's books, prints, and photographs of her own. But when she landed her first official gallery exhibition, in 1978 at Artists Space, she didn't exhibit any of that work. Instead, she borrowed a small 1883 portrait of a horse from Aqueduct Race Track—it had been hang-

ing over a Xerox machine in the offices—and mounted it on an empty wall at the gallery. To highlight her appropriation, she installed two spotlights: one above the picture and another pointed out the window, at the building next door, hinting to sidewalk passersby that there was something of note going on upstairs. "I was interested in borrowing something that had a different context, a different meaning," Lawler says. "I thought that an old painting would be one of the strangest things to see at Artists Space," which by then was an established champion of postmodern art.

Four years later, for her first solo exhibition at a then-fledgling Metro Pictures, she went for something even wittier: a small suite of artworks pulled from the gallery's stockroom. The pieces were to be sold together, as a single work called *Arranged by Louise Lawler*, and it was priced at the literal sum of its parts, plus an extra 10 percent commission for Lawler. (It didn't sell.)



Art-about-art is tricky territory, often criticized for its tendency to be heavy-handed, navel-gazing, irrelevant. But Lawler's work seems to come from its own vantage point, one full of genuine curiosity.

*Lawler prints her photos on adhesive vinyl sheets, then stretches each one to the proportions of the gallery wall on which it's being shown. After a piece is sold, it's restretched to fit the buyer's own wall. These two versions of Lawler's Marie were fitted to New York's page layout by the artist herself. (The sculpture in the photo is by Edgar Degas.)*

Her critique is gentle, spirited, funny, and earnestly investigative—plus there's the bonus that much of the work stands up quite well aesthetically all on its own.

Lawler admits that she doesn't shoot as often as she could. Instead, she constantly mines her archives, trying to find new potential, new crops, new relationships that could be coaxed out of source images and past work. "I don't know what I'm doing all the time, and, in fact, some of it wouldn't happen if I weren't having the shows," she says. "That is kind of the weird thing—that being put in the position is what produces the work." She's extremely considered: During our conversation, she wonders aloud at least twice if she should have made the "stretches" for the new show all the same size. (As of now, they vary, though each is strictly proportionate to its gallery wall.) Yet she has a determined vision. "I think there is a lot of distortion involved in how art exists in the world," she says. "So I'm distorting it myself." ■