

METRO PICTURES

Micchelli, Thomas. "Louise Lawler's Quiet Melancholy," *Hyperallergic.com* (January 26, 2019).

HYPERALLERGIC

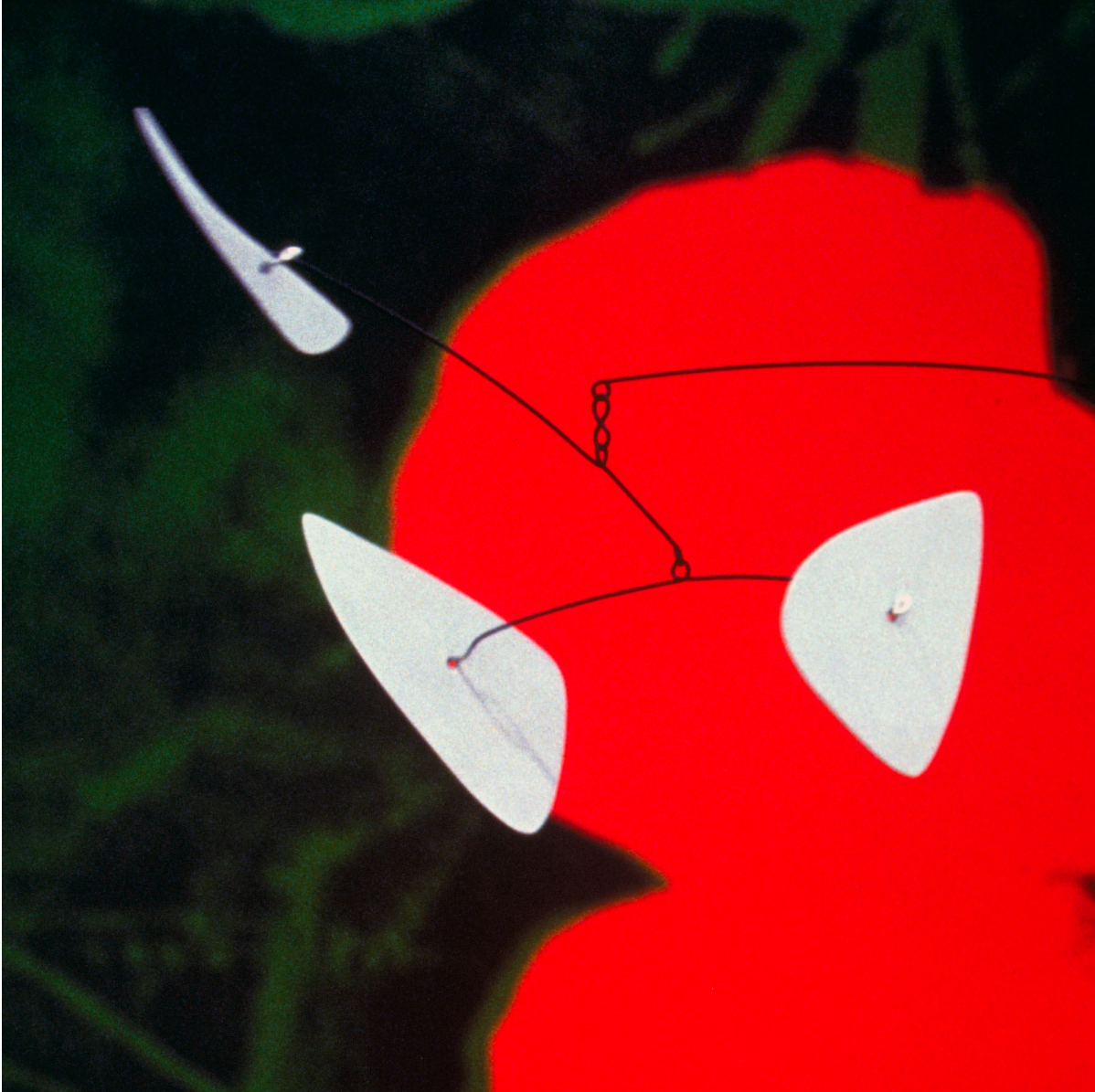


Louise Lawler, "CS #204" (1990)

The Vertical Gallery of the Sammlung Verbund is just that — a stacked exhibition space comprising stairs and lobbies at the headquarters of Verbund AG, Austria's leading electricity company.

This elegant if unlikely venue has hosted a string of solo exhibitions from Verbund's holdings (*Sammlung* is German for "collection") featuring the work of Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, Fred Sandback, and Renate Bertlmann, among others, and is now presenting *SHE'S HERE: Louise Lawler* — a play on the title "He's Here" (2001/2010), one of her more enigmatic photographs.

The exhibition showcases the 27 pieces owned by Verbund — the largest institutional concentration of Lawler's work — which also forms the basis for one of the collection's two curatorial rubrics, "perception of spaces and sites," as stated in the press release. (Other artists grouped under this heading include Sandback, Olafur Eliasson, and Lawrence Weiner.)



Louise Lawler, "He's Here" (2001/2010)

The other category, which cites Sherman as its point of departure, is the Feminist avant-garde of the 1970s, which made a splash with a major traveling exhibition that continues to wend its way to museums around the world, including New York City's International Center of Photography, where it will open in September. (I reviewed its incarnation at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien in 2017.)

To be one of the two foundational artists of the collection may seem like an odd fit for the most self-effacing member of the Pictures Generation, and even here she has taken pains to avoid the spotlight.

According to Gabriele Schor, Director of Sammlung Verbund, in a conversation we had at the gallery, it was Lawler's intention that her name appear not as the title of the exhibition catalogue, but in small type in the subtitle (*SELECTED AND RELATED: Works by Louise Lawler acquired by the SAMMLUNG VERBUND Collection, Vienna & Others*).



Louise Lawler, "It Could Be Black and White" (1994/1996)

It was also her intention (consistent with her practice's focus on the provenance) that the catalogue's title page be immediately followed by a listing of photographs acquired by Verbund, including the date of purchase and name of seller, a form of documentation usually relegated to the back of the book, if included at all.

The title *SELECTED AND RELATED* refers to another of Lawler's decisions, which was to turn the catalogue into a record of works, both in and out of the exhibition, that overlap in theme or imagery. By expanding the show's context, Lawler ensures that we understand the extent to which her individual pieces are to be viewed within a continuum, and that no single work constitutes a definitive statement.

Throughout her career, Lawler has photographed the same scene or artwork multiple times with only slight shifts in perspective. She has even applied separate titles to the same image when she changes its scale, as in the two identical photos, "YES" (6 1/6 by 5 5/8 inches) and "Looking Forward" (16 3/8 by 14 1/2 inches, both 1993/2005), featuring artworks by Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha in Leo Castelli's apartment.

Lawler's foregrounding of the provenance of her own work in a corporate collection can be seen as the ultimate conceptual roll-up of her lifelong involvement with the ownership and societal function of art. She has photographed artworks in museums, in office lobbies (including Verbund's), and in private homes, most famously in the New York and Connecticut residences of Emily and Burton Tremaine.



Louise Lawler, "Cities" (2004/2005)

The photos of the Tremaine Collection, which were done in color and black-and-white, became the book *The Tremaine Pictures, 1984-2007* (2007), published on the occasion of an exhibition at BFAS Blondeau Fine Art Services, Geneva. The book includes 20 pages of news clips, catalogue excerpts, emails, and so forth under the title "Excerpts from Some Historical Documents about Louise Lawler, Emily and Burton Tremaine and The Tremaine Collection." (The section also sports the subtitle: *You're Going to Love the Thermostat Next to the Miro.*)

In an essay for *The Tremaine Pictures*, art historian Stephen Melville writes:

Lawler's work has from the beginning been closely associated with a larger project of institutional critique that can itself be described to a high degree as interested in institutions as walls—as barriers or fortifications or channelings of flows (of power, of capital, of desire and shapes of human being). [...] Many of the more recent photographs make this view of Lawler more difficult to sustain: the critical bite one easily (perhaps too easily) feels in photographs of art privately collected or at auction, seems more elusive in an image of a work removed from its packing and awaiting installation.



Louise Lawler, "Bulbs" (2005/2006)

In light of this exhibition, Lawler's critique seems harder to pin down than ever, perhaps due to shifting times as much as curatorial selection.

The first photograph acquired by the collection (as noted in the catalogue, from the artist's New York gallery, Metro Pictures, on December 22, 2004) is the elegiac "*Abbau*" (2002/2003). Depicting two picture hangers nailed to a wall, under the glow of a spotlight that seems intended to literalize Walter Benjamin's aura, the work's quiet resonances of longing and absence radiate throughout the exhibition.

(The title, which is German for "dismantling," was not translated for the benefit of an Austrian audience, but is original to the work. The photograph's setting is an exhibition of paintings by Gerhard Richter, making the use of a German title yet another indicator, if one were needed, of Lawler's meticulous approach.)

The melancholy infusing *SHE'S HERE* is not something I expected, having formed a mental image of Lawler's work as distanced and ironic, more in keeping with the Pictures Generation ethos than it actually was. But a sense of loss is everywhere — in "Lost at Sea (Lamp)" (1996/1997), a photo of a bedside light (Lawler's own) with a Lawrence Weiner drawing taped unceremoniously above; in "Cities" (2004/2005), with its Gordon Matta-Clark sculpture constructed from a sawed-up tenement standing before a wall of Thomas Struth's black-and-white cityscapes; in "Bulbs" (2005/2006), where de-installed strings of light bulbs by Félix González-Torres are laid out on two tables covered with movers' blankets.

The soft, luxuriant beauty of Lawler's photographs, which made them seem a touch decadent when compared with the astringent worldview of her peers, now delivers an undeniable jolt of feeling — or, perhaps, we now feel free enough to accept their emotional baggage. Even a coolly composed photo like "Not Cindy" (2002/2008) loses some of its detachment as the art-world in-joke of its title (the hairdo of the woman sitting at a desk bears a resemblance to Cindy Sherman's) fades with the passage of time. What we now witness is the poignancy of a woman alone at work in front of an Ed Ruscha painting, whose moiré pattern is overlaid with the words "WE HUMANS."



Louise Lawler, "Not Cindy" (2002/2008)

And with the same passage of time, the institutional critique that the Pictures Generation inherited from Conceptual Art has spread into the wider world with the emergence of groups such as Occupy Museums and Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), and in the calls for more diversity in museum collections, exhibitions, staffing, and administrations. In some cases, cultural ethics have become public policy, as seen in governmental repatriation efforts and the reclamation of art looted by the Nazis.

As the institutional debate swirling around the art world blows past the innuendoes of the 1980s and takes to the streets, it forces our perception of decidedly non-polemical works like Lawler's to seek meaning elsewhere.

If Lawler's works were read primarily as art about art, they now feel more like *l'art pour l'art*, or art for art's sake. It is useful that *SHE'S HERE* focuses almost exclusively on her photographs, offering not a single example of her objects or ephemera (matchbooks, paperweights, pseudo-invitations to cultural events, etc.), which permits a direct engagement with the singular beauty of the images. The one exception is the *traced* series, Lawler's collaboration with the artist and illustrator Jon Buller, examples of which are mounted on the staircase landings between floors. These reductions of the photographic image into graphic lines and isolated shots color move Lawler's work closer to the realm of painting and drawing, and ever farther from her Conceptual and performative roots.

The movement toward painting holds especially true for her *adjusted to fit* set of works, in which photographs are digitally stretched to fill an entire section of a wall, sometimes beyond the point of recognizability. In "Formica (adjusted to fit, distorted for the times, slippery slope 4)" (2011/2012/2015/2018), the resulting image is a complete abstraction that breaks down visual information into spirals and graphs reminiscent of sound waves.



Louise Lawler, "Soup Can" (2005/2006)

The *adjusted to fit* abstractions lay bare the classical elegance undergirding Lawler's compositions, accentuating the importance of horizontal and vertical alignments and the disorienting effects of diagonals and curves. In "Wall Pillow" (2010/2012), depicting the verso of a work by Gerhard Richter, the irregular, high-contrast black shapes on the white backing are strikingly pure and simply arranged, lending the image a graphic crispness, while a piece like "CS #204" (1990), which frames a self-portrait by Cindy Sherman between two other artworks, one of which is wrapped in plastic, possesses a painterly lyricism rendered deeply troubling by the jackknifing of Sherman's left arm.

The satire implicit in the photos she made of the Tremaine residences (underscored by the phrase "You're Going to Love the Thermostat Next to the Miro") and, to a lesser extent, Leo Castelli's apartment, may still brim beneath the surface, but now that the protagonists are gone, the beauty engendered by Lawler's consummate formal rigor has overtaken whatever philosophical premises or social conditions had originally informed the pictures.

A photograph of Andy Warhol's portrait of Joseph Beuys, hanging on a paneled wall beside a framed Japanese screen ("It Could Be Black and White," 1994/1996), or of Ed Ruscha's "Dreams" and Roy Lichtenstein's "Ball of Twine" paired above a bed, nightstand, and lamp, with a messy tangle of wires on the floor, conveys not only the electricity of living with art, but also the warmth and comfort we can derive from weaving it into our daily lives.

Perhaps this perspective is driven by our current crisis of faith in institutions and culture, but Lawler's photos of artworks in private homes and museums, and, to a certain extent, in auction houses and art fairs, come off not as inventories of commodities, as the Pictures Generation would have it, but as statements of purpose in the face of a collapsing social compact. At this precipitous moment, it may not seem too far-fetched to believe that a painting of a Campbell's soup can hanging above an electrical outlet could very well be humanism's last redoubt.