

# METRO PICTURES

Yin Zhang, Lisa. "Louise Lawler," *TheGuide.Art* (September 23, 2021).

## THEGUIDE.ART



Louise Lawler, *Untitled (Reflection)*, 2021. Dye sublimation print on museum box 48 x 69 5/8 inches.

"LIGHTS OFF, AFTER HOURS, IN THE DARK"—it sounds like the slogan of a horror movie, but in fact it's a description of the hidden lives of vaunted objects. Louise Lawler's new exhibition at Metro Pictures contains photographs the artist shot at MoMA's "Judd" while the museum was closed. Her long exposures, lit by the crepuscular haloes of exit signs, skylights, and hallways, are a lyrical elegy for lockdown.

"Judd" was only open to the public for a few weeks before The Museum of Modern Art temporarily closed in March 2020. (The museum's massive expansion was completed less than half a year earlier.) When the museum reopened with new, now-familiar restrictions—scheduled admission, mandatory masks, hand-sanitizing stations—Judd's sculptures took on a new resonance. Who could look at the slick, stainless-steel boxes and not think of contagion on their surfaces? Six feet was Judd's favored dimension.

Louise Lawler, the doyenne of institutional critique, mediates the ways in which viewers, objects, and gallery spaces interact. The artist has long documented works as they circulate out of view—including photos of private collections illustrating Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993) and photos of public collections included in her own 2017 MoMA retrospective. Here, she finds a fertile intersection between the museum space, the artist, and the compressed time of the exhibition.

Judd famously rejected the representational space of a painting or image in favor of real space: he created objects you had to walk around. Yet in Lawler's photographs, it's difficult to pick out shadow from object, work from wall. In *Untitled (Skylight)* (2021), what looks like a series of boxes levitating under a pale green light resolves, on second glance, into a work and its shadow. In fact, the image depicts two separate works.

At the same time, Lawler draws out aspects of MoMA's physical space that Judd would have overridden: the exit sign's beacon, which shines like a siren in *Untitled (Brass and Blue)* (2021), would become lost against the fire-hydrant red of Judd's early work seen in daytime. The fact that he transitioned to multicolored works in the final years of his life—a major tenet of MoMA's exhibition—succumbs to the darkness of Lawler's photographs. Hulking forms are dimly noted, bright colors sapped.

Out of Lawler's insistently nondescriptive photographs, multiple lines of inquiry can be drawn. It may be a way to deconstruct Judd, a patriarch of contemporary American art, and the structures of power that support him. Moreover, it is a critique of the resources, real estate, and humanpower devoted to a nearly visitorless exhibition at a time when a city of millions was ravaged outside. It is a meditation on the philosophical status of art when nobody is around to behold it.