

METRO PICTURES

Kay, Hannah Sage. "Louise Lawler: LIGHTS OFF, AFTER HOURS, IN THE DARK," *TheBrooklynRail.org* (October 2021).

BROOKLYN RAIL



Louise Lawler, *Untitled (Sfumato)*, 2021. Dye sublimation print on museum box, 48 x 72 inches.

An homage, a funerary march, a quiet celebration: Louise Lawler's final exhibition at Metro Pictures, which will permanently shutter its doors in the coming months, resounds with a distinct nostalgia. In the pristinely bright white cube(s) that make up the gallery, 12 impenetrably dark—at least upon first inspection—photographs document Donald Judd's most recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, seen, as the title of Lawler's exhibition suggests, with the *LIGHTS OFF, AFTER HOURS, IN THE DARK*.

Gaining late-night access to the same museum that housed her own survey in 2017, Lawler captures an exclusive view into the private lives of Judd's specific objects. Though characteristic of her oeuvre regarding their attention to institutional structures, both literal and metaphorical, Lawler's photographs currently on view at Metro Pictures are not especially intriguing for the location, but rather the time of day that they picture. Such nocturnal environments, off-limits to the general public, stir within the viewer a curiosity to observe the scene beyond the frame, to gain entry, as Lawler does, to these other worlds and clandestine spaces. A semblance of access is provided via the exceptionally glossy surface of the photographs, which reflects and transports the viewing body into the space of the image. And yet, having to contend with one's own reflection further obscures details already difficult to discern, making viewers increasingly aware of their precarious position, simultaneously in front of the image and within it.



Louise Lawler, *Untitled (Brass and Blue)*, 2021. Dye sublimation print on museum box, 48 x 71 inches.

Despite the solemn tenor of Lawler's photographs, a latent humor permeates the titles she has chosen for these works and, for that matter, the exhibition. While the images transport viewers into a tranquil environment, the fully capitalized title is that of a shout tearing through the quietude of the museum, betraying trespassing observers. The photographs' titles, though perhaps not overtly comedic, are akin to a joke shared amongst friends—poking fun at the ever-impractical naming convention strictly employed by Judd: *Untitled* (with an occasional, or museum-amended, parenthetical descriptor). Lawler's descriptors, which include (*MoMA*), (*Judd*), and (*Night*), prove no more helpful than a solitary *Untitled*, as each could be easily affixed to any of the works on view. For better or worse, they made me laugh, highlighting Judd's intentional (and even joyful) obfuscations—perhaps intended to promote an unmediated engagement between art object and viewer, one that isn't filtered through preconceived notions, external references, or curatorial narratives.

Many have bridled at this control Judd exerts on the phenomenological experience of his work, even attributing it to a particular brand of overbearing masculinity. Lawler seems to take a different tactic. Instead of confirming the supposedly confrontational nature of Judd's specific objects by challenging either their affect or the artist's motives, she portrays the works in an uncommon light, or lack thereof. Softened by the ambient glow of skylights and exit signs, Judd's works take on an uncharacteristic humility. No longer powerful and imposing, Lawler renders them nearly invisible, melting into the darkness that surrounds. Such invisibility, however, helps actualize a central tenet of Judd's ideology and practice: the use of materials so raw and structures so primary that they become innate fixtures of the space they inhabit, and thus conjure within the viewer a heightened awareness of that space.



Louise Lawler, *Untitled (First Night)*, 2021. Dye sublimation print on museum box, 48 x 72 inches.

Though portraying a moment of calm, Lawler's new works are a residue of our prolonged instability. Running from March 2020 to January 2021, *Judd* at MoMA coincided with the beginning of the pandemic and a period of exceptional anxiety. The museum closed for many months, only reopening in a limited capacity in late August of last year. It has concurrently been the site of an ongoing strike and extensive systemic critique, but now operates (at least publicly) as though little has changed. Metro Pictures, by contrast, has responded to the challenges of a profoundly changed art world by announcing the decision to close after forty-plus years of operation. As co-founder Helene Winer told the *New York Times*, "I don't think at my present age that I want to be reinventing the wheel." Reactions to paradigmatic change are naturally varied and unpredictable, but underlying them we often find a quiet longing for simpler, more aspirational times, before the lights turned off and we were plunged headlong into darkness.

It feels like a long time ago that my one true bible was Donald Judd's brick-sized book of writings. Since then, my interests have expanded, and I've shed some of the stridency that comes with adolescence—a stridency that is all too compatible with Judd's thinking. Yet Lawler's photographs have catapulted me back to a moment when I found Judd's work to be the unmarred pinnacle of artistic achievement. I am now much more attuned to the ideological discrepancies, the damage (chips, scratches, scars born out of time), and the allure of new models and new ways of thinking. But most of all, with this exhibition Lawler has made me aware of my own hypocrisy: I once relished Judd's work for its emotional detachment, and here I am, succumbing to sentimentality.

Today, I find the *idea* of a Judd to be a far more satisfying thing to behold. This is what Lawler provides: in her darkened photographs all we can glimpse is the outline of a shape or the shadow of an object. She generously leaves the details to our imaginations.