

Outreach coordinator Callie Lugosi spoke with lens-based artist Lisa Stinner-Kun to discuss her work that appears in *Suddenly, no, at long last*. The group exhibition was viewable by appointment only from May 01 - July 31 at PLATFORM, and was curated by PLATFORM Director Collin Zipp. The show features work by Lisa Stinner-Kun, Mark Neufeld, Ian August, Bret Parenteau and Sylvia Matas.

“How do we perceive nothingness or even fully know what it is? Everywhere we look we can see, feel or think something. Nothingness is by no means nothing. In artistic practices nothingness can appear in many forms and in many ways. Using nothingness as the initial starting point, the work in this exhibition explores emptiness, anticipation, the void, stillness and banality. The artists in *Suddenly, no, at long last* examine the many experiential qualities of nothingness in each of their works.”

Lisa Stinner-Kun is a Winnipeg-based artist whose work is concerned with the photographic reconstruction of the human-built environment. Since graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a MFA in Photography, Stinner-Kun has shown her work in exhibitions locally, nationally and internationally. She has received numerous grants and scholarships for her photographic work, including from the Canada Council for the Arts. Stinner-Kun teaches at Martha Street Studio and is a regular instructor at the School of Art, University of Manitoba.

Callie Lugosi: The two pieces of yours in *Suddenly, no, at long last* feature dwellings made with people in mind, but there’s no one in view. Do you think the absence of human subjects is vital to the images you create? In photographing these empty mid century spaces, do you view your practice as an abstract form of archaeology?

Lisa Stinner-Kun: When I look at a photograph that depicts a human figure, my eye will always scan the face and body of the person *first*, before continuing to look at the rest of the image. Because my work is concerned instead with analyzing and reconstructing the stuff that humans build and surround themselves with, it’s always been important for me to focus my camera on the built environment first – by itself - without the distractions of a human figure. (I also feel this way about seeing text in a photograph and, for that reason, I usually Photoshop signage out of my images.) So strangely enough, even though there are no people in my photographs, I think of this project - and the rest of my work - as being a study of people (specifically the environments they create), and not the “absence” of them.

My focus on the built environment allows me to play around with the constructed nature of a scene. I attempt to strip away obvious references to function and purpose and, instead, emphasize each scene’s sculptural characteristics. In fact, I often talk about my work using conceptual models that reference the act of building and digging as processes of exploration - in such places as museum dioramas, science fiction movie sets, and archeological sites - allowing me to imagine the human built environment as though I were an outsider from a different place or time, unaware of the purpose of certain structures, materials or objects. I feel that when my images are successful, the spaces represented will appear more like constructed stage sets, rather than found architecture.

I'm hoping that this sculptural emphasis can be seen in my newest project (tentatively titled *Mid-Century Modest*, with two of the images shown in *Suddenly, no, at long last*). In these works I am photographing mid-century modern homes that are in-transition, being passed on from the original owners - who bought their houses in the 1950's/60's - to new owners. It's important for me to photograph these homes during this stage - without furnishings or hints of a specific, particular personality - so that I can focus on the overall patina and general sense of nostalgia projected onto the shell of the architecture. Similar to conducting an archeological dig, peeling away the layers down to the basics of the scene, allows me to imagine the space as though it were newly discovered, almost like excavating a contemporary ruin.

CL: Both environments have a dystopian feel to them; sanitized and vaguely futuristic, almost a little sad. Something about the spaces makes them feel like they're not meant to be inhabited. Is dystopia something that's on your mind when making photographs?

LSK: It's important to me that my photographs embody some kind of contradiction seen within the built environment. Although the dichotomy of utopic/dystopic modernism sometimes comes up in discussions of my work, I generally make my photographs thinking about other, more subtle, relationships. In this particular project I'm focused on the tension felt between a simultaneous *longing for the past and a yearning for the future*. This contrast can be seen in the photographs while comparing the appearances of patina and nostalgia (referencing the current romance that many people feel for mid-century modern homes) to that of the modern functional design (referencing the original intent of this architecture, which was to break-away from nostalgia and old-fashioned ideas, in a reaction to horrific world events such as WWII).

In a way, this new project is similar in concept to my *Restoration* series where I'm photographing a different kind of living museum: focusing on historical gardens in England under restoration. Both projects are concerned with how the passage of time can change the cultural interpretation of a built environment.

Dystopia is a ripe concept for contemporary artists right now (and has been for a while), but I have never contextualized my work this way. The connotations surrounding utopia/dystopia are so extreme - so seemingly black and white - and I'm interested in finding the areas of grey. In fact, even though most of my photographic projects deal with environments that are somehow in transition and/or meant to be forgotten, I interpret these spaces as being full of positive potential. A quote from the artist statement of one of my more established projects, *vague terrain*, might help illustrate how I see environments that might easily be seen as dystopic:

"The French term "terrain vague" is used by architects and urban planners to describe forgotten spaces which are left behind as a result of post-industrial urbanization. Interestingly, the term embodies two contrasting viewpoints: the first looks at these spaces negatively as representing disorder and disintegration; the second highlights their positive potential as free spaces in an urban environment that is becoming increasingly specialized."

CL: The two pieces appear to form a diptych, with the lines meeting in the space between the pictures. when you composed the images, did you intend for the lines to extend beyond the confines of the crop and meet at some invisible point in the way that they do? did you always intend for these two works to go side by side?

LSK: I actually don't see these images as being part of a diptych (although there are certainly compositional and conceptual similarities between the two). In fact, when I do have a solo show of this new work, I will probably place these two images far apart from one another because they are too comparable. My goal is to bring attention to the uniqueness of each individual scene constructed by the photograph. This is why when I plan an installation of these works, I would likely choose to place images together that are in contrast to one another aesthetically.

By isolating each photograph this way, it also allows me to play even more with the idea that these spaces are individual creations, where every material, carpet stain and patina smudge can appear purposefully captured and orchestrated. And for this reason, I try to keep the viewer's gaze within the frame - hoping to prevent it from wandering into the actual reality of the original space. By doing this, I keep the documentary nature of the photograph from prevailing and allow the image to exist as its own construct.

I often think about the appearance of Thomas Demand's work and how he successfully restricts the viewers' gaze to the dimensions of each individual photograph. To make his work, he physically constructs realistic-looking paper sculptures for the sole purpose of being photographed. The resulting images, although very true-to-life, have obviously been built for the viewer. And the viewer, in this way, becomes less interested in what lies beyond the frame.

CL: Given the current state of the world, do you feel that these works have taken on prescience in regards to the sense of isolation and separation that they evoke?

LSK: Yes, I believe this series does take on a new poignancy during the Covid-19 crisis, especially in relation to the new sense of isolation people are experiencing. I think that the domestic subject matter in this project, coupled with the sense of nostalgia and confinement, creates a similar tension as we spend so much contemplative time at home. In my life at home right now, I'm feeling torn between immense gratitude - for having a shelter for my family - and feelings of anxiety for being held captive by it.