

**Leslie Dick speaks with Stephen Berens**

**Leslie Dick:** Looking at these photographs, in your series All days are nights, I found myself thinking about time and place. Also what it might mean to layer different moments on top of each other, and how that relates to painting. I'm interested in the photograph as something that marks a moment that is irrevocably past, yet at the same time preserves that moment. Loss and preservation are registered in the same image. It seems that your decision to layer these moments, these instances of looking, really draws us into the emotional dimension of that question of time.

**Stephen Berens:** First off, it's important to me that the process is a generative system, where you lay one image on top of another--the first print contains a single image; the second print, two images; the tenth print, ten images--until the print appears entirely black. But I'm not interested in the work solely because it was made using this generative system. I think, at a certain point in time, making art by following a set of rules was enough. But I purposefully make interventions into the system.

**LD:** I was remembering Michael Asher's show at the Santa Monica Museum in 2008, where he rebuilt all the temporary walls from the various exhibits of the previous ten years, using only the studs. That work engaged architecture,

exhibition, repetition, redundancy, and many other things. It was extremely rigorous and completely systematic. Still, there were all these incredible by-products. It started to look like a hall of mirrors. It generated all sorts of optical effects and illusions, and it was very, very beautiful.

**SB:** Yes, I remember that to navigate through the space you literally stepped through the walls, which made me hyperaware of my presence as a viewer and a participant.

**LD:** It's paradoxical: as if the tighter you squeeze--screwing the system down--the more this ooze of emotional by-product comes out the side. With All days are nights, you never set out to produce such emotional effects, to call up memories of Romantic painting, for example. It happened as a result of a system. Like going the long way around the barn.

**SB:** I believe that when Michael Asher and Sol LeWitt designed their systems, whether or not something turned out to be beautiful didn't concern them. In the catalogue for LeWitt's retrospective at MASS MoCA, John Baldessari tells a story about meeting LeWitt in the late sixties. Baldessari told him that he thought one of his wall drawings was beautiful and LeWitt's response was basically

that this was beside the point. And I would say I don't think it is.

**LD:** Right on!

**SB:** I think that the reason their work is still engaging is because it is both incredibly rigorous and beautiful. While they always made their decisions beforehand, I have been developing a way of working where my specific history and interests leak in, without abandoning the system. The choices I made in All days are nights are mostly about maintaining distinctions: the first image has very even lighting, then this one adds shadows, this one adds a bird, this one adds another bird. This one adds a cloud. This one starts to add more clouds. Out of this process a series of unplanned connotations begins to appear. And that's much more interesting to me than someone setting out to make a photograph look like a nineteenth-century painting, for example.

**LD:** By layering these photographs, you've constructed a set of images with multiple associations. They invoke those architectural views in the backgrounds of early Renaissance paintings, as well as neoclassical views of Rome, and heavy-duty Romantic painting, and even that early moment in art photography when Edward Steichen was wanting

photographs to look like paintings. This work has got all these things buried inside it.

**SB:** It's interesting to me that making art using a generative system, which is a twentieth-century idea, and executing it using the most recent printing technology produces something that looks like it was made 150 or even 200 years ago.

**LD:** It stretches from early Renaissance to the daguerreotype, and through to Ad Reinhardt's late work! It's mind-boggling that it can extend so far with only eighteen images, layered one on the other, and then removed in reverse order, one by one . . .

**SB:** That's why the generative system is so important.

**LD:** Absolutely. It's productive: you discover things you never imagined were there, as if the system itself holds all this visual potential or memory. A time machine. What about the ways we tend to use the image now, on our various different screens?

**SB:** I didn't set out to do this, but I think the work becomes a reaction to the proliferation of images and how quickly everybody looks at them--especially photographs. On Facebook people may look at a photograph for a tenth of a

second, right? They're grabbing little bits of information. With this work, I am making something that's the opposite of that, something you have to be in the presence of and spend time looking at. Trying to get back to Reinhardt, perhaps. It really impressed me that he was willing to make works that were just not reproducible. To see the way he subtly shifted value and luminosity, you had to be right there, standing in front of the paintings. I'm wondering, given the present proliferation of images, seamlessly transmitted from device to device, does it still make sense to ask viewers to slow down? Not to absorb an image instantly, but to decipher it?

**LD:** So encountering the work can be an embodied experience, located in the particular time and place of viewing. For me these photographs are more about the time and place of those lost moments, which somehow aren't lost, but then they do get lost because the image turns black.

**SB:** Well, almost. Different shades of black.

**LD:** Maybe it's about having and not having at the same time. It's all still there: the birds, the clouds--even the helicopters! All eighteen images are there, but we can only see the tiniest trace of them.

**SB:** Yeah, but I think as our life goes on and our moments accumulate, the same thing happens, right?

**LD:** Yes.

**SB:** It becomes so dense that you can't separate it out anymore.

**LD:** Time and place.

**SB:** I can separate out when I left Nebraska. I can separate out when I left Florida, when I moved from East LA to Eagle Rock. But it's hard to separate out all the cumulative moments in each of those places. So I think the work is also somehow about that.

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