

# ARTFORUM



From left: Barbara Kasten at her exhibition "Centric 2: Barbara Kasten, Installation/Photographs," 1982, Art Museum and Galleries, California State University, Long Beach. Barbara Kasten, *Photogenic Painting Untitled 75/11*, 1975, cyanotype print, 30 x 40". From the series "Photogenic Paintings," 1974-77.



## Barbara Kasten

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART,  
PHILADELPHIA

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**IN AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT** written for her 1982 solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Barbara Kasten described her practice as "a specific personal photographic vision with the arrangement of objects as the source," encapsulating her enduring method over five decades. But it is only with the opening of "Barbara Kasten: Stages" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that we are able to see all of her major series together—and understand the extent to which she has gone against the grain of contemporary photography, incorporating the craft and technological tenets of the European avant-garde into her singular exploration of the actual and the optical, the projected and the physical world. Through her exacting considerations of form and process, Kasten constructs work that begets a paradox: It is at once deeply modernist and radically Conceptual.

Like the titles of Kasten's photographs, "Stages" has multiple connotations. It refers to the consolidation in

one space of key stages of the artist's career; it illustrates Kasten's collaboration with art-school-trained curator Alex Klein in creating the show's articulate installation; and it acts as the moniker for the contribution Kasten makes to the field of staged photography with her construction of dramatically lit, large-scale sets of geometric objects and industrial materials. Photographs of Kasten working in the studio—literally within her sets—suggest that "Stages" is also a nod to the artist's gendered and performative bodily acts in her meticulous creation of sculptural scenarios.

The exhibition's open-ended design and lack of interpretive text (though such background is found in the excellent catalogue) anticipate its audience. Some visitors may arrive at the ICA with set ideas about Kasten as an important but uncategorized figure in Conceptual and postmodern photography of the 1970s and '80s. "Stages" suggests that Kasten has combined the photographic, the sculptural, and the painterly in permutations during the course of her practice, taking cues not only from Bauhaus principles—present in all her work—but also from the context and opportunities that she has navigated. At the ICA, Kasten has beautifully arranged on a plinth white-washed pyramidal props—manifestly sculptural and physical entities, which are the starting points for so many of her photographs—that have been in her studios since the early '80s. Video footage of the 1985 Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival shows a performance of Margaret Jenkins's *Inside Outside (Stages of Light)* with sets, costumes, and a lighting concept created by Kasten. There is a tantalizing mention in the exhibition's

archive section of Kasten showing sculptural arrangements, lit with colored light, in a Tokyo gallery. All this multifaceted and unique production is read against the more recent backdrop of software-generated imagery that flattens nearly all images into a vast digital network.

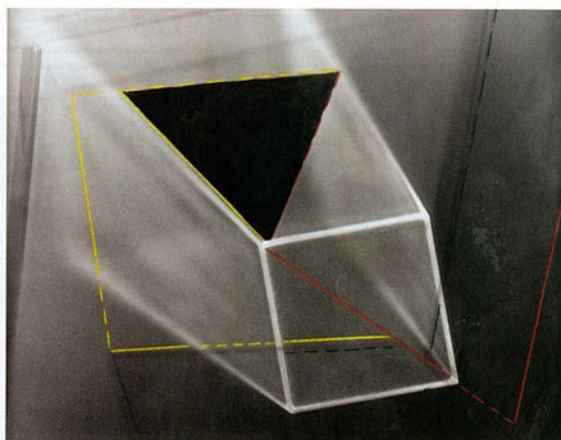
While part of the pleasure of looking at Kasten's historical trajectory lies in being able to trace her resounding influence on a broad swath of contemporary artistic practice, the exhibition and its accompanying programming are careful to place her work in active conversation with younger peers, such as Liz Deschenes, Anthony Pearson, Eileen Quinlan, and Erin Shirreff. To underscore this, the first work you see is a 2007 monochromatic "Studio Construct" photograph: a sparse, raw focus on sheets of Plexiglas, their pale shadows and reflections, and the white backdrop paper. This statement deliberately establishes Kasten as a contemporary practitioner, still exploring her standard props of Plexi and fiberglass mesh and the capacities of photographic materials while bringing a precision of thought and execution to the dilemma of the "blank page."

**KASTEN'S EARLY BIOGRAPHY** confirms what you might suspect: a directly modernist lineage that underpins her intense relation to her environment—a unique combination of Bauhaus craft and technology, and experiments with Light and Space. After completing her BFA in painting at the University of Arizona in 1959, followed by a few years working as a fashion stylist in San Francisco, Kasten took a job as a "recreation specialist" and club organizer on US army bases in southeastern Germany. She readily





From left: View of "Barbara Kasten: Stages," 2015. Clockwise from top left: *Construct XIX*, 1982; *Amalgam Untitled 79/34*, 1979; *Construct VII-A*, 1981; *Construct XIII*, 1982; *Construct V-A*, 1980; *Construct XVIII-Y*, 1982; *Construct XI-A*, 1981. Photo: William Hidalgo. **Barbara Kasten, *Amalgam Untitled 79/9*, 1979**, acrylic paint and crayon on gelatin silver print (enlargement with photograph), 16 x 20". From the series "Amalgam," 1979.



ingested the graphic use of color and clean lines of architectural space deployed by European modernists, and came back to the States in 1967 for postgraduate study bearing the urgency of a mature student with a wider sense of the artistic world. Kasten's keen inclination toward the ambitious pluralism of Bauhaus pedagogy led to her apprenticeship with a master weaver in Scottsdale, Ari-

**Kasten collapsed radically different registers of space and movement into her photographs, staging arrays of physical objects in "real" space, but then exploring them via the virtual flattening of the photographic lens.**

zona. By 1969, she had gained a scholarship to the California College of Arts and Crafts (now CCA) in a new fiber-art MFA program devised by Trude Guermonprez, who had trained at the "Little Bauhaus" in Halle Saale, Germany, and who was the daughter of Black Mountain College teachers Heinrich and Johanna Jalowetz. For her 1971 graduation show, Kasten curated an exhibition in which one of her woven wall hangings was displayed alongside the work of contemporary artists, such as an architectural fiber sculpture by Magdalena Abakanowicz,

making a connection that would lead to a Fulbright scholarship and a year working in Poznań, Poland.

Three of Kasten's brightly colored sculptures from 1972, constructed from café chairs and hand-dyed woven rope (from Gdańsk's shipyard), appear at the ICA still resplendent in their gutsy mimicry of the curves and ripples of women's bodies. The exhibition creates a clever affinity between these and the "Photogenic Paintings," 1974–77, large cyanotypes of undulating fiberglass mesh Kasten made in the sunlit courtyard of the Los Angeles studio she shared with her then husband, photographer Leland Rice. Kasten's cyanotypes—her first deployment of photography—became increasingly complicated once she began to layer colored paint washes in blocks and lines onto the prints. You can sense Kasten engaging with the legacy of the first recognized woman photographer, Anna Atkins, as well as with the painterly gestures of Helen Frankenthaler and Mary Heilmann. The works' explorations of technology and atmospheric visual fields are equally steeped in the climate of Light and Space: An ample use of industrial supplies and a palette that includes otherworldly aqua blues and dusty oranges recalls, for instance, DeWain Valentine and Craig Kauffman. At the same time, Kasten's investigations of what the materials of photography could do—not only the ways in which they could be manipulated but also what they were capable of rendering automatically—stemmed from her deep interest in avant-garde photographers' experimentation with the alchemy of cameraless photography and the extent to which the camera's vantage point opened up the possibilities of seeing beyond the scope of human vision.

In the '70s, Kasten and Rice collected photographs by Francis Bruguère and Man Ray; Rice also curated an exhibition of László Moholy-Nagy's work from the collection of the conceptual photographer William Larson that included the abstract, "super-material" photograms the artist made by crumpling photographic paper before exposing it to light to create imprints of the reaction between flashed light and the paper's own folds. A few years later, Kasten began making black-and-white photograms from fiberglass mesh and light refracted through glass blocks, marking diagrammatic lines with grease pencil onto the photographs' surfaces—a move she saw as a shift away from the more overtly "feminine" versions of her fiber sculptures and cyanotypes. Kasten also transplanted her practice into a studio environment and began to assemble existing materials and props (including Plexiglas sheets) into overlapping and tilting formations for her camera to reconfigure into a two-dimensional form. In the "Amalgam" series, 1979, we see for the first time Kasten's hallmark preoccupations gathered within a single photographic frame: the optical pleasure of oscillating between two and three dimensions—photographic and actual space.

The final *Amalgam Untitled 79/34*, 1979, is installed here as the center of a cluster of Kasten's first color Polaroid "Construct" 8 x 10" photographs, the body of work from 1979 to 1986 for which she is perhaps best known. Polaroid equipment had been sent to Rice as part of the historic Polaroid Artist Support Program; since it was not a format he was interested in using, Kasten took up the system instead, applying her curiosity about new materials to the Polaroid process. The immediate feedback of work-





From left: Barbara Kasten, *Construct PC/IX*, 1982, Polaroid Polacolor print, 24 x 20". From the series "Construct," 1979–86. Still from video documentation of Margaret Jenkins's *Inside Outside (Stages of Light)*, 1985, Brooklyn Academy of Music. Barbara Kasten, *Studio Construct 69*, 2008, ink-jet print, 53 1/4 x 43 3/4". From the series "Studio Construct," 2007–12.



ing with the self-developing technology pleased her. Its instantaneous magic allowed her to spend her time and labor realizing large-scale, three-dimensional compositions of props (some of which would take weeks to assemble to her satisfaction). As in all her subsequent work, Kasten collapsed radically different registers of space and movement into each "Construct" photograph, staging arrays of physical objects in "real" space, but then exploring them via the virtual flattening of the photographic lens.

The first "Constructs"—a term referring to the assembled objects depicted in the photographs, to Constructivism, and to Kasten's understanding of photography as a constructed process—were made with the elegant and restricted palette of painted scrims and colored backdrops. Much like the range of references seen in her series from the '70s, we find here a graphic Malevich language of red and black, as well as golds and greens from the commercial materials and California vernacular of Hollywood signage.

The "Constructs" reached their hyperbolic potential in 1982, when Kasten began to work with Polaroid again, this time with photographer John Reuter at the 20 x 24" Polaroid studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Reuter was employed by the company to operate the gigantic camera and assist visiting artists with their lighting. Kasten took full advantage of this collaboration, creating installations of white-painted props, scrims, and mirrors. Onto and behind these she projected different arrangements of strobes and barn-door film (rather than photographic studio) lights covered with gels in acid-meets-Memphis-

Group colors, layering them into a long single exposure.

Kasten moved to New York in 1982 and seems to have been inspired by the city's skyscraper scale. New props—including decorative neoclassical columns and cornices sourced from Canal Street Plastics and architectural-supply catalogues—brought an explicitly postmodern pastiche of architecture and design into play. The artist's full "directorial mode" (to cite a term coined by critic A. D. Coleman that would become relevant for the staged photography of artists such as Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, as Klein discusses in her catalogue essay) began with her large, gorgeous Cibachrome series "Architecture Sites," 1986–90, which featured (and abstracted) architectural icons of late capitalism, such as Philip Johnson and John Burgee's "Lipstick Building" and César Pelli's One World Financial Center in New York, Frank Gehry's Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, and Richard Meier's High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Working with film-crew gaffers overnight on these intense shoots, Kasten directed the lighting of these predominantly white buildings, distorting the space with triangulated mirrors. The monumentality of this architecture is subject to a double appropriation in Kasten's pictures. It is as if these structures were leveled, their floating signifiers now adrift in a miasma both utterly simulated and strangely tactile, sharp, and physically immediate—an extraordinary implosion of geometric abstraction and stark representation distinct among the largely figurative imagery of the Pictures-generation artists.

This vibrant zone of the exhibition also includes two of Kasten's "Metaphase" works, 1986, which bring her

to the heady brink of postmodern kitsch with garishly hued triangles, squiggles, and balls stacked like a crow's nest in the shiniest and most hollow of forms. It's a testament to the strength of this exhibition that even projects from the '90s—when Kasten undertook residencies at institutions that collect ancient artifacts, including the Amphora vessels at the Museum of Underwater Archaeology in Bodrum, Turkey—make sense within the whole. Her atmospheric nighttime photographs of the Puye cliff dwellings in New Mexico (her last project working with a lighting crew) took her back into the landscape of her early adulthood and hint at the beginning of an active process of review, perhaps aided by her return, in 1998, to her hometown of Chicago, where she accepted a teaching appointment at Columbia College.

The most recent work one encounters is Kasten's 2015 site-specific video projection, *Axis*, which fills the corner of a gallery's high back walls. Kasten's chiaroscuro-lit signature white props rotate, captured in real time by her fixed-position HD video camera. Postproduction software perfectly locks the artist's vision into the ICA's architecture, creating the effect of elemental forms radiating from and folding into the work's corner position. *Axis* suggests a circling rather than a linear narrative of stages, creating yet another specific experience of the artist's incredible perceptual and physical sensibility. □

*"Barbara Kasten: Stages" is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, through August 16.*

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