

DLK COLLECTION

Barbara Kasten and Justin Beal: Constructs, Abrasions, Melons and Cucumbers @Bortolami

MONDAY, JULY 16, 2012



JTF (just the facts): A paired show of works by Barbara Kasten and Justin Beal; since Beal's works (cast aluminum sculptures and wall objects) are not photographs, they have been omitted from the discussion. Kasten's works can be divided into three chronologically based groups (installation shots at right):

- 3 cyanotypes, framed in white and unmatted, each 30x40, from 1975
- 11 Polaroids, framed in white and matted, either 10x8 (in editions of 7 or 10) or 24x20 (in editions of 8, 9, or 10), from 1980 and 1981
- 3 archival pigment prints, framed in white and unmatted, 50x40 (in editions of 5), from 2009 and 2011

Comments/Context: Given that she has been thoughtfully exploring the realms of photographic abstraction for the better part of four decades now, Barbara Kasten is one of those photographers that still somehow seems underrepresented in our contemporary dialogue. So it was with some excitement that I came across this pairing at Bortolami, which brings together a mini sampler of works from across her career, including some brand new pieces.



Kasten's early cyanotypes from the 1970s combine a Bauhaus mindset with a deeper investigation of the diaphanous nature of light. Using a thin woven sheet reminiscent of airy gauze or screen door, her compositions capture highlights as they glance across the folds and ripples of the drapery, making patterns like waves of sand dunes or refractions of light on water. They are crisp and delicate, eschewing blurring to create softness and instead letting the gossamer texture of the cloth take center stage.

Her 1980's constructions have a decidedly Duran Duran vibe, with a bright New Wave palette

and lots of jutting angles. But perhaps a more serious and appropriate context for these works would be a dialogue with the Light and Space artists (Turrell, Irwin, Wheeler, et al). Kasten's sculptural images from this period are full of mirrors and lines, recalibrations of space, experiments with light coming from different angles, and illusionistic reflections where light and color are carefully managed. Certain compositions also recall Constructivism, with interlocked steel bars, slashing lines, primary shapes broken into component parts, and hard edged geometries flattened from three dimensions into two. Even though some of these abstractions feel dated, their sophistication as structural exercises is undeniable.



Kasten's recent works have become darker and more minimal, moving to a monochrome palette and employing more transparent plates of glass, plexi, or resin. Light is still the principal actor in the works, but the number of variables has been reduced; simple lines and edges have come to the forefront. For the first time, there is also a sense of imperfection, of scuffs and scratches that abrade the surface or jagged broken edges that saw across the picture plane. Layers of transparency amplify these flaws, creating distorted shadows and hazed rubbings. In the end, these works are much less showy and eye catching than those from the 1980s, but more refined and clear when examined with patience.

Given the current vogue for photography of sculptural constructions made solely to be photographed, Kasten is due for a critical reappraisal. Not only are her compositions (old and new) more complex than most of this new crop of work, her evolution as an artist may provide an important set of connections between today's trend and various historical precedents we have previously overlooked.



Collector's POV: While I never actually saw a detailed price list for this exhibit, I was told that the Kasten works were priced between \$6500 and \$25000; I didn't inquire about the Beal works. Kasten's photographs have only been sporadically available in the secondary markets in the past decade, with only a few lots coming up for sale in any given year. Prices for those sales (which may not be entirely representative of market for her best work) ranged between \$1000 and \$4000.

Rating: * (one star) GOOD

Barbara Kasten and Justin Beal: Constructs, Abrasions, Melons and Cucumbers
Through August 3rd

<http://dlkcollection.blogspot.com/2012/07/barbara-kasten-and-justin-beal.html>