

COLLECTOR DAILY

John Lehr, *The Island Position* @Kate Werble

Loring Knoblauch

April 17, 2019

JTF (just the facts): A total of 24 color photographs, framed in white and unmatted, and hung against white walls and displayed on two-sided pedestals in the front and back gallery spaces. 23 of the works are pigmented inkjet prints, made between 2012 and 2018. Physical sizes are roughly 22×26 inches each, and the prints are available in editions of 5+2APs. One larger work is displayed across the corner of the back gallery. It is a pigmented inkjet print with archival varnish, made in 2019. It is sized roughly 62×138 inches and is available in an edition of 5+2AP.

A monograph of this body of work was recently published by MACK.

Comments/Context: Across the years, the appearance of commercial storefronts has consistently offered an unexpectedly insightful cultural barometer for American photographers. Through repeated cycles of economic boom and bust, photographs of restaurants, grocery stores, and countless other retailers, and their styles of advertising and promotion, have reflected the subtleties of who we were (or are) at specific historical moments.

While the foundation of this kind of American photographic observation was largely laid post-Great Depression by Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, and others, storefronts have remained a rich subject for artistic exploration, even for today's contemporary photographers. In the first decades of this new century, the financial crisis and its reverberations through the economy led to a wave of stark, and sometimes pessimistic pictures of empty shopping malls, closed big box stores, and foreclosed businesses overgrown by weeds. These were then flanked by more muted images that tracked the less noticeable ripples of urban gentrification and the turnover (and closure) of legacy small businesses, the proprietors chased out by the toxic combination of Internet retailing, changing consumer habits, and rising rents. More recently, the aspirations and trappings of luxury have returned, at least in some spots, creating opportunities for visual juxtapositions that highlight the mismatches and inequalities that have once again become more widespread.

John Lehr's photographs from his series *The Island Position* fit neatly into this American consumer chronology. His recent images wander through a no-man's land of faceless ground floor retailing, much of it located on side streets, in strip malls, and in suburban settings. His subjects are the tenacious businesses that have survived both the downturn and the relentless onslaughts of ecommerce - the payday loan offices, the sell your gold jewelers and pawn shops, the mini marts, and the cheap pizza parlors. They are also the stubborn survivors that have in some cases hung on too long - the tired electronics retailers and furniture dealers who haven't kept pace, but who also haven't yet succumbed to the forces of change.

Lehr's images were taken in the ruthless light of midday, where withering bright sun blasts the exterior facades. Aside from one display of sun-faded boxes and a few neon signs, almost none of the stores offers an actual view inside - most of the windows have been blocked by shades, decorated with graphic lettering and symbols, or covered edge to edge by adhesive vinyl imagery. Emptied of people, the displays shout in desperation, their ultimate exhaustion and futility most apparent when the windows are simply covered over.

While these views offer plenty of architectural echoes of the 1970s suburban office park work of Lewis Baltz, Lehr has moved in closer, cropping out flat roofs and parking lots and forcing us out

of our cars and into more intimate interaction with plate glass windows and entry doors. When the shop windows are blocked, the formal geometries of his compositions become more central, with grids, rectangles, and even a octagon taking shape and the nearby patterns of brickwork and tile adding further linear interest. In other images, he zeroes in on isolated letters, fragmented words, and descriptive symbols, the fonts and graphics decontextualized to the point that they too become abstractions.

When the imagery in the storefronts is more legible, the moods and messages take a decidedly darker turn. If these displays are any guide, fast cash seems to be the most pressing need most customers have - dollar bills (\$100s of course), gold coins, and diamonds all become visual motifs for this kind of desperate, right now, transactional business. Other small discoveries in the windows reinforce this looming sense of distress. The bright green artificial grass carpet is worn at the doorway in one shop, while hand scrawled signs plead for customers to come and sell their cans and plastics at another. Other storefronts are deceiving, perhaps deliberately so - an obviously boarded up shop protests that it is indeed open, and pristine racks of cleaning products turn out to be an illusion of vinyl decals. A shop selling books and HEALING is perhaps the antidote, but even this has a grim edge of hopelessness. We know we've reached the decline and fall part of this American story when we see the entrance to EMPIRE (perhaps Empire Plumbing or Empire Title Company, who knows), the tile cracked and stained and the shadow covered door missing a handle.

Between the unforgiving sun and Lehr's subtle digital manipulations, these photographs are filled with a heightened sense of energy - the colors pop and the edges are sharp, almost to the point of having to squint to reduce their tanginess. When Lehr amplifies these scenes in this way, he is keying up the quiet dissonance and tension, making them almost hyper real representations of otherwise mundane realities. While his activations never reach the point of obvious exaggeration, it's clear that we've entered a world that is a bit more visually tingly than the one we normally inhabit, making the artificialities that are found in these storefronts all the more disheartening.

Seen together, Lehr's photographs seem to document a contemporary extinction event, not unlike the ones we've failed to witness taking place right before our eyes in the natural world. Circumstances have changed so much, and so quickly, that these businesses have become dangerously exposed, and we shouldn't be surprised when something stronger or tougher out competes them for survival. These pictures show us the imperfect science of commercial adaptation, where good intentions meet the harsh realities of commerce. It doesn't seem likely that many of these businesses will be thriving in five years; what seems more probable is that they will be unceremoniously swallowed up by something else, the endless cycle of regeneration continuing. Lehr has found a strange kind of beauty in these storefronts, but like any struggle for survival, the last gasps aren't always pretty.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show are priced at \$4750 or \$22000 each, in rising editions. Lehr's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.