

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



BACKSTAGE: JOHN LEHR
NICOLAS NIARCHOS
OCTOBER 24, 2008

Meet John Lehr: Artist, Visionary, Professor.

Favorite Camera? Toyo view camera.

Favorite Book? "White Noise" by Don DeLillo. Right now I'm reading "Sut tree" by Cormac McCarthy.

Favorite Snack? Pretzels.

Hometown? Baltimore, MD.

Your Photographs seem to explore the subject of decay in the urban environment. Is that your main aesthetic?

Well, I don't think the work is solely about decay. I think you see that in some of the pictures, but I think the main stress of the work is on seeing the American landscape as sort of a reflection of the desires and aspirations and anxieties of the people who built it.

Where is your work being shown at the moment?

Two exhibitions right now; one at the Carnegie is about artists and architects looking at the suburbs as a subject in their work. The one at MoMA is about the history of photography. The thing about the MoMA show was that it was put together by Richard Benson, the former dean of the art school who still teaches in the photography program. He's this incredible expert on photography and an expert on printing technology. He had a big impact on me when I was in the graduate school, so it's just a big honour to be included in a show that he put together. The Carnegie show is interesting because it's looking at a newer generation of artists who are looking at the suburbs in a different way than artists were in the '60s and the '70s. I think the show is signalling a shift in the way that a lot of artists are thinking about the suburbs in their work.

What is that shift?

I think it's a recognition that they're kind of here to stay, that there's real life going on in them that's not always so alienating and hermetic as maybe we used to think. One of the things that I'm interested in is finding a kind of wonder within an environment which is, in our perception, monotonous.

Your art seems to be very object-based. Is that a main focus of your work?

I think the focus of my work is looking at the stuff that we make and produce as a culture that's reflective of a certain set of anxieties. I think that one of the things I'm really interested in when making photographs is when you see a kind of transformation where there's sort of a tear in the thought of normalcy or seduction. It's something that, although kind of ubiquitous, is also kind of personal. The example of the Coke bottle picture is a good one because I see it on the face of it just as a film-work detail of a Coke bottle on a billboard but I've turned it upside down. The bottle

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then becomes a fist or a pulled tooth, so it's a kind of an iconic thing that we know the source of but we're seeing it in a new way and it puts us in a different relationship to that object.

What school of thought would you say you come from?

The work, for me, comes out of a tradition that goes back to people like Walker Evans, the American photographer, and Eugene Atget, the French photographer. Both of them are also looking at the built environment in their work. The difference ... is seeing the stuff as it's in the process of turning into something else or being transformed in some way.

What did you do between undergraduate and graduate school?

I was a high school teacher, but I was also making my work. I wanted to make sure that I could continue making my work without anybody telling me to, so I could allow my work to develop without having a professor telling me where to go. At some point, I realized that I wanted to be back in that critical environment, so that's what took me back to graduate school. I think the thing about the photography school at Yale is that it's really intense and rigorous. It really forces you to dig deep and figure out what's supposed to point to you in your work and how to express that in your critiques in the way you present your work and the way that you're thinking about your work. I think one of the things that happens there is that it's so intense that it fast-forwards your development in a way. Maybe those things would have happened in your work, but everything happens faster there; you're surrounded by so many talented students and visual artists.

Were you a suburban high school teacher?

I spent most of my life living in cities, but I was teaching out in the suburbs, so I do think that driving to work every day probably had some kind of an impact, although I didn't really start to focus on that until I got to graduate school.

What was your earliest experience of photography?

I don't really remember my earliest experience of photography. I took a class in high school and I think that like so many other people I was sort of seduced by the medium — seeing a picture come up in the developer for the first time — and I've been hooked ever since. The thing I was interested in first in photography was the way that the world looked and how, if you made a photograph of it, it looked so different. That process of discovery and surprise is something that I'm still really interested in in my work, that the world is so much more interesting than you could imagine.

A lot of your pictures are of things. Do you ever take pictures of people?

Yeah. Right now that's not happening in my work. I feel for right now, I'm so obsessed with the stuff we make and although you're not seeing any human beings in the pictures, in many ways that's what the work is really about. It's really about looking at the stuff that we build as a kind of portrait of our collective experience.

Have you had any exhibitions at Yale?

Not since my MFA. I did just find out that the show that's at the Carnegie, which started at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, is going to be put up in the [Yale] architecture school in February.

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