

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS: LUKE STETTNER "EYES THAT ARE LIKE TWO SUNS" AT KATE WERBLE GALLERY
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NOVEMBER 2011



Luke Stettner, *Three Identical Cubes*, 2011, three-channel color video, 5 minutes 20 seconds

In Luke Stettner's almost colorless New York solo debut, one work stood out: a squat column of bright plates—seven small ones stacked atop nine large. It has the look of a toy, though it turns out to be anything but; Stettner has fashioned the cheery 1970s vintage dishes, sourced from his childhood home, into an urn for his father's ashes. He ground the original funerary vessel, a traditional marble affair, into dust and displayed it here under water and oil in a straight glass vase that resembles a laboratory test tube. Both vessels sit on slender wooden—ash, get it?—pedestals, and together describe a neat set of material, ideational, and emotional switcheroos. The original vessel has been transformed into a simulacrum of its own contents, while its replacement invests mass-produced Pop-Minimalist form with a surprising emotional frisson.

This systematic but playful and sometimes poignant approach is common to all of the work in "Eyes That Are Like Two Suns"; the show had a visual and procedural clarity of a kind that is currently rather unfashionable but still highly satisfying when done right. On this occasion, Stettner focused specifically on chance and memory as "calculable phenomena," subjecting a variety of sources to more or less drastic reframings and reorganizations aimed at identifying their uniqueness and universality. The theme was established with *An Immutable Law That No One Can Count On*, 2011, an array of seventy-two maple dice representing every combination of two numbers that it is possible to throw. The set represents a kind of totality but also underscores a limit: We can, as mathematicians and gamblers know, understand the operation of probability without coming any closer to transcending it.

Cubes pop up again in a lovely three-channel video, *Three Identical Cubes*, 2011, which shows an origami master folding three sheets of white paper into three perfect boxes. Each of three monitors follows the master as he takes a different route to what looks like the same result in almost exactly the same amount of time (a little over five minutes). Filmed close-up and accompanied only by the sounds of paper being scored and creased, the performance is entrancing, a mesmerizing portrait of sleight-of-hand dexterity. *Three Identical Cubes* is a study in doing a lot with a little, and hints at the significance of variation, even—or especially—when difference is an aspect of hidden intention as opposed to a readily discernible outcome. Getting there is, after all, half the fun.

More self-consciously serious, and arguably less successful for it, is *Untitled (Absence Grows Sharper)*, 2011, a grid of eighteen small slabs of high density foam coated in glossy white enamel. A hair-thin black line that runs vertically down the center of each piece turns out not to be a painted addition but a physical cut, adding an echo of Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concept" canvases, 1946-68, to the flavor of Piero Manzoni's "Achromes," 1957-62. Another set of almost-blank panels from 2011 consists of twelve framed sheets of handmade paper, each a mottled pale gray. The work's extended parenthetical subtitle offers a list of dates and places, while details of its medium provide a final clue: What we are looking at is a Cartier-Bresson calendar, pulped and reconstituted into a year of mute abstractions. The discovery that *Grey Area's* raw material held sentimental value for the artist, then, only muddles things. Stettner's art is most successful when the absence it traces is both deeply felt and transparently embodied.

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