

MAY 2018





ART BOOKS

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## Zoe Leonard: Survey

by Brianna Leatherbury

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**Zoe Leonard: Survey**  
**Bennett Simpson**  
 (Prestel, 2018)

*Zoe Leonard: Survey* begins directly with Leonard's images. Devoid of preface or foreword as guidance, the viewer must grapple with the unassuming yet assertive images, driven by their capacity to look. This directness reflects that within Leonard's own work, her photographs present the very physical experience of looking, indexing, using cropping as guide and often centering the subject within the image. Her photographs produce an ambiguous effect, at once analytical in their starkness and centrality, yet intimate in their framing, speed, and attention to the peripheral. These two sensations never collapse upon one another; they interlace, entering one to end up in the other.

*Survey* performs this same weaving of ambiguity and intimacy. Bennett Simpson, editor of the book and organizer of the exhibition at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which facilitated the book's creation, draws together an exhaustive binder of Leonard's oeuvre with texts that examine her work both critically and personally. Simpson takes us through a range of Leonard's varied body of work, including her early aerial photographs that show us familiar cities and landmarks from an unfamiliar vantage point, her sculptures of mended fruit skins that evince the pain and frustration of loss, her anatomical images that probe the contrived role of the female form, her sculptures that question the history of photography, and her photos that reveal the capacity for surprise even within the routine. Subjects collide and bleed into one another, making it easy to meander through the pages, seamlessly slipping from one theme to another. The diverse procession of images, punctuated by equally diverse texts, creates a book that is fully enveloping.



Zoe Leonard

Survey

Leonard extracts her examinations through the reach of her lens, showing just how much is reflected in the everyday and the routine. Simpson notes this revaluation of the quotidian in his opening essay "Zoe Leonard: The Interior Outside." In it, he examines the richness Leonard exposes in the simplicity of her *Tree + Fence* (1998) pictures. The photographs depict a commonplace occurrence in New York City. A tree is planted to improve the scenery, the air quality, the visual effect of the block, yet it must compete with the concrete sidewalks and metal fences the city builds for order. What results almost without fail is a tree, large and strong,



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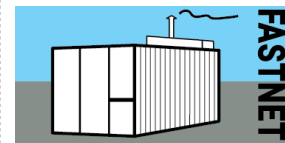
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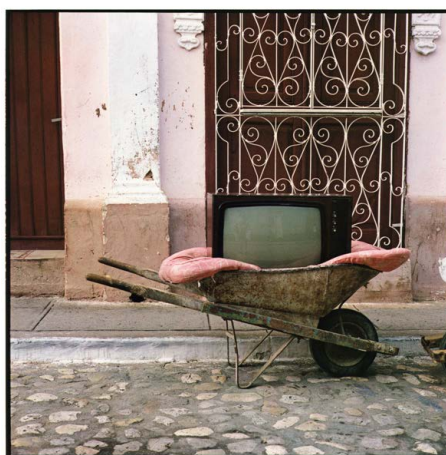
## STUDIO IN A SCHOOL

**A NOTE FROM  
THE PUBLISHER**  
"From the Crooked Timber  
of Humanity, nothing ever  
came out straight"

pressing through a wireframe or growing over an edge. The photograph titles often allude to a personal geography, such as *Out My Back Window: 6th St.* Attaching the image to a location, it is as if Leonard depicts a memory we all share, altering it from the mundane into a meaningful event. Leonard captures multiple instances of the same subject, supporting the prevalence of its poetics. Nature and culture intertwine, battling for space in their irrepressible growths. These images appear one after another in the book, uninterrupted. Multiple images of plastic bags latched onto bare tree branches, birds-eye views of brightly colored gum flattened into the sidewalk, and close-ups of boarded windows create a chapter that fragments, slowing the urban landscape into slices of time. Adopting Leonard's repetition, Simpson highlights the artist's ability to see the worthwhile in every experience.

The subtle shift in perspectives around a subject generates a critical and intimate experience. The book uses repetition, presenting each series as an uninterrupted sequence, as if it were a film strip. The generous white margins surrounding many of the photographs distance the images further from the world beyond the pages. In isolation, it feels as if one is falling into the photographs, into Leonard's shoes as she takes each picture. This is especially the case in her *Anatomical Model* pictures, the titles, which include phrases like, "full view from above," "shot crooked from above," and "partial view from above," acknowledge the force of perspective upon the image. Each reads as a cinematic shot sheet as much as topographic record. Just as our eye does not focus on an object in the periphery, Leonard almost always places her subject at the center of the image. Hence the lens truly acts as an eye, recording the elongations and foreshortenings of the object before us, communicating our shifts in position as we move around it. Like the frame in cinema, the sequences allow the reader to assume her vantage point, to look to the left, slightly down, to walk to the right, to crane their neck, mentally engaging in the physical spaces present in Leonard's work, revealed in the repetition. The distinct outwardness of the images, flattened into a time and a stance by the persistent black frame of the unexposed film reifies the process of looking. You are not only looking; Leonard is intently showing you.

*Survey* alternates between an immersive, experiential view of Leonard's work and examinations of her contributions to the political. Élisabeth Lebovici's essay acknowledges Leonard's art as activism. She focuses on Leonard's *Documenta* installation in which she installed small, closely shot black and white pictures of vaginas in place of any image that was not of a woman in the Neue Galerie. Her intervention foregrounds the female body as an agentic body, reclaiming their own gaze. She challenges the representation of female sex and sexuality within the museum; she also recalibrates the imbalance of female artists within the museum. She moved the images from the gallery to the streets straight away, with one of the "pussy shots" becoming the poster for ACT UP's campaign against President George W. Bush's reinstatement of the global gag rule.



Zoe Leonard, *TV Wheelbarrow*, 2001, Dye transfer print, 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm). Collection of the New York Public Library; Funds from the Estate of Leroy A. Moses, 2005



While this activism is often what's most emphasized in Leonard's work, *Survey* uses repetition to highlight the consuming visual beauty of her images. Leonard's work is as important now as it was in 1992, when her images adorned the posters for women's reproductive rights and when she wrote her famous protest essay, "I want a president." While her work provides a much-needed political force, *Survey* reminds us that it is an equally necessary proof of beauty in a challenging and at times ugly world.

CONTRIBUTOR

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BRIANNA LEATHERBURY is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in Brooklyn.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



ZOE LEONARD:  
*Survey*

by Jason Rosenfeld

APR 2018 | ARTSEEN The relationship between "take" and "make" is essential to Zoe Leonard's deeply personal, associative, nostalgic, and generous art.



Bruce Davidson: *Survey*

by Zack Hatfield

OCT 2016 | ART BOOKS A photograph, like a chance or an oath, is something taken. This is an idiom that goes unexamined. But the verb also implicitly charges photography with some unspoken crime, a visual theft or trespass.



Robert Mangold: *A Survey, 1965 - 2003*

by David Carrier

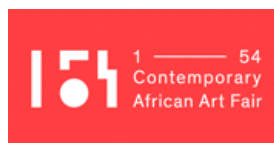
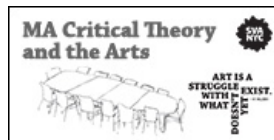
MAR 2017 | ARTSEEN Mangold works in series, reworking a visual motif in varied colors and, sometimes, in paintings of various sizes until he has exhausted its potential.



Venice Biennial: At a Glance, 2017

by Barbara London

JUNE 2017 | ARTSEEN Last week I flew to Europe for the opening of the Venice Biennial. On the way, I stopped by the Kunstmuseum Bern to see "Elemental Gestures," a survey featuring projects by the anti-disciplinarian Terry Fox (1943-2008).



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