

In-Camera: Q+A with Zoe Leonard

by [Courtney Fiske](#) 11/06/12

For her first show at Murray Guy in New York, Zoe Leonard turned half the gallery into a camera obscura in order to consider photography anew. The fourth installation in an ongoing series, Leonard's lens, *453 West 17th Street* (2012), cast an inverted panorama of the street outside, complete with a lustrous high-rise, across the gallery's dimmed interior. As their eyes adjusted to the low lighting, viewers found themselves immersed in an uncanny image. Glass-and-steel geometries spread across the floor and walls, while pedestrians, taxis, and trucks traversed the ceiling's beams. Never resolving into a coherent scene, the street's shifting forms demanded decelerated, sustained viewing.

In an adjacent room, five selections from Leonard's series of sun photographs (2011–12) imaged the solar surface in a spectrum of aquarelle grays. Nailed directly to the wall without protective glass, each print betrayed traces of process—grain, scratches, and other subtle imperfections—framed by the negative's black border. The pairing of these series produced two divergent visions of what photography can be: the first, durational and unfixed; the second, bound to paper and resolutely analog.

A.i.A. spoke with Leonard about these two projects in her studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

COURTNEY FISKE How did you come to photograph the sun?

ZOE LEONARD For about 10 years, I worked on a piece called *Analogue* (1998–2007) [an archive of over 400 images, shot on celluloid, of worn objects, derelict storefronts, and unkempt urban spaces]. Among other things, that work examined how the medium of photography is changing. When I finished *Analogue*, I didn't take any photographs for several years. I worked in other ways, with found images and with sculpture, but I wasn't sure how to continue with photography. I was thinking about abstraction and representation as two simultaneous possibilities in photography. I began thinking about what it means for a photograph to have a subject: if the subject of a photograph is always the thing that is depicted, or if it can also be the idea of seeing, the process of looking. The sun is such a strange thing to photograph: it is there and you know it—you see it—but you can't look directly at it. It's what makes photography possible, but it is impossible to really depict it.

Many of the early sun photographs contain rooftops, treetops, or other recognizable objects. But, as the series progressed, those images just weren't as interesting to me. The ones that held my attention were those where you couldn't locate a specific place, a landscape, a city or any kind of narrative content: where the image consisted solely of a circular emanation of light.

FISKE What was the significance of imaging the sun, specifically?

LEONARD One of the basic rules of conventional photography is that you're not supposed to shoot into the sun. Usually, the way photography works is that light illuminates a subject and you photograph the subject, so there's a triangle. With the sun photographs, I've cut off this triangle and gone straight to the light source. The result is a reduction: what remains is the light source, the mechanism of the camera and my position or vantage point.

What you see in these photographs is not actually the ball of the sun, but rather, the light that emanates from it. I guess with very sophisticated equipment you can take a picture of the sun itself, but with my camera, I'm just registering the light. As the light hits the lens, there is flare and glare, and this shows up in the pictures. In this way, the process of taking the picture is recorded. Photographing the sun is a way for

me to turn the camera back onto photography itself, and to deal directly with structures of seeing and depicting.

FISKE Where did you find inspiration for this series?

LEONARD Liz Deschenes took some beautiful photographs of the sun [editor's note: these have never been shown] a few years ago that were, and still are, very important for me. James Welling's "Light Sources" [1992-2001] and "Glass House" [2006-08] have been very much on my mind. Moholy-Nagy's experiments with light are incredible.

In the last few years, I have been turning more and more to 19th-century photographers like Daguerre, Le Gray and Talbot, as well as Watkins, Muybridge and O'Sullivan. I'm increasingly interested in these early days of photography, before the medium was standardized. At the time, there were vehement debates over the nature of photography: whether it was a science, an art or magic. A spirit of experimentation—a sense that everything was up for grabs—animates that early work, and in many ways makes it seem less old-fashioned than some contemporary photography.

FISKE Some artists and critics consider analog photography a mode of resistance to the totalizing regime of the digital. Others have criticized analog photography for its nostalgia or preciousness. What does shooting in analog mean to you?

LEONARD I don't think that analog is better than digital, or vice versa. They're just different image-making processes. For example, the line between moving and still images in digital is much more fluid. I shot some of sun photographs digitally, on a small snapshot camera, but the images didn't stick. The physicality and material texture of prints felt necessary for this work. Analog was just right for what I wanted to explore.

I still mostly shoot analog. I love the way that film registers light: the translation of light to film and film to paper; the way that grain looks; the way that light is broken down. But while I love the beauty of analog, I also recognize that it's beginning to occupy a space of fetish in our society. When I started taking photographs in the late 1970s, analog wasn't perceived as precious. It was standard. The vocabulary of analog had more words. Now, its language is more constrained. Every year, a few more film stocks go out of production, and the selection of photographic papers dwindles. It's an emotional moment for us as a society. We have strong feelings about photographs, and I don't think we know what the status of the image is right now. The lines between information, art and personal snapshots—whether captured on phones or posted on Facebook—are completely fluid. It's a fascinating moment to try to take a picture.

I don't see photography as a set of binaries: analog versus digital, material versus subject or abstraction versus representation. I've been trying to find ways to pose a more expansive set of questions: How do we see? Why do we depict? What do we want out of this terrain of picture-making? The sun photographs and the camera obscurae offer a way for me to engage with these questions visually. They're an effort to work through the process of being a person who looks and makes images—and by that I don't only mean myself. I mean us as a society. Why take pictures? Why show each other these things?

FISKE Or, in that vein, why make a camera obscura?

LEONARD Taking up the camera obscura was my way of starting over: of stepping all the way back and thinking about the entwined processes of producing and looking at images. It seemed to provide a way out of the binary logics that we've been discussing.

I made the first one in my studio, just for myself. I thought, okay, I'll try this for a day and see how it goes. I realized that what was happening was a sort of double exposure. Light entered the space from outside and projected a recognizable image of the world, but it also illuminated the space that I was in. The image was the light source. So I was occupying this double space: being inside and seeing the space I was in, but also

thinking about outside and seeing outside. There is a kind of simultaneity. That's when it started to get interesting. I began to understand the camera obscura as a way of exploring subjectivity and location, of unpacking how we see as well as what we see—of slowing all of that down.

FISKE Why did you decide to make camera obscurae in a series?

LEONARD Each installation has a unique context that invokes a different set of references. The historic and cultural meaning of each place changes the meaning of the work. Not only do you see different images. Different questions about picturing are broached. By making this work as a series, in a number of different locations, these questions accumulate into more complex conversation.

At Murray Guy, the image that enters is somewhat dominated by the facade of a rather postmodern glass-and-brick condo building. This grid is splayed across the gallery's interior, the walls, ceiling and floor. For me, the grid calls to mind early modernist photography from the Bauhaus and Russian constructivism, as well as artists like Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, who collaborated on the short film *Manhatta* [1921]. I also thought of Gordon Matta-Clark's film *City Slivers* [1976] and Nancy Holt's *Points of View: Clocktower* [1974].

The image also carries a narrative about this city. Seventeenth Street [the street where Murray Guy Gallery is located] is very particular. It reminds me of how New York used to look. There's a mix of tenements, housing projects, and a few commercial spaces, but the high-rise across the street is very contemporary. The interior of the gallery—the exposed wood and steel beams of the ceiling—reveals the history of the building. West Chelsea used to be the meatpacking district, full of warehouses and commercial lofts. Before the art galleries opened, it was a marginal, industrial area, and it was also a queer neighborhood, with cruising areas, gay bars and leather bars.

FISKE Traditionally, the image generated by the camera obscura was projected onto a level surface, such as a screen or a piece of paper. The world was thus made flat. In your camera obscurae, however, there is a more complex movement between dimensions: the real world outside is compressed into an image and then projected into a different, interior space. The image that results is at once planar and architectural: sharp in some places and distended in others.

LEONARD I love that you bring that up. I think that's exactly what happens. In one sense, space is flattened out because you're not bringing the actual world inside, but rather, an image of it. But when the image is projected into the gallery, it's re-spatialized. One could say that the space reinterprets the image. Just last week, I spent some time in the camera obscura at night, and I started thinking about music, about jazz. I was thinking that the street outside—17th Street—is a standard melody we all recognize, but when you bring that image inside and it interacts with the gallery space, it's fractured and distorted: compressed in some places, stretched out in others. The image remains familiar, but it's undergone an interpretation. Because the work happens in real time—because it's not a fixed image or a video that can be rewound—it has an improvisational quality. There is a chance element to the work: I choose a position for the lens and make certain structural decisions about the room, but then the piece just unfolds. It's always happening in a continuous present for the duration of the show.

We have these agreements about what things look like, but what we see is dependent on the instruments that we use to look: on our eyes, and, in this case, on this lens and this room. With the camera obscura, I'm asking people to think about looking as an interpretive act that is heterogeneous and fallible, mutable and unfixed.

FISKE You've described the camera obscura as a metaphor for the way that the eye registers light: the inverted image it displays mimics the images our retinae receive before our brain turns them right side up. It's a technology that, quite literally, materializes how we perceive.

LEONARD Right, in some way, you're inhabiting the process of sight, the part that happens before your brain corrects the image. Because the image is upside down, you receive it as light and shape, shadow and brilliance before being able to organize it as a coherent picture. There's something about dwelling in this

disordered space that aligns with the unconscious: the internal, darkened space of what we don't know and haven't yet organized. There's a quiet inside the room that lends itself to contemplation. It's a subtle space of upending and unknowing.

The camera lets you experience seeing as something spatial and temporal. The image isn't organized into a framed picture. It takes time to understand what is going on. And in this experience, something can start to happen. Your assumptions about seeing can get a bit unhinged. The automatic and habitual process we all go through where we take one thing to automatically mean another slows down and opens up a bit. It's my hope that once you've created this space to think about how you see—which also means to think about how you think—space is cleared for a whole other set of questions about subjectivity and human experience.

I love the visuality of the camera obscura. But, for me, on a more profound level, these installations offer a way to reconsider our own habits of mind. In order to see an image in the camera, you have to wait for your eyes to adjust to the low light level. The work relies on you changing, on you taking the time to see what is right before your eyes.