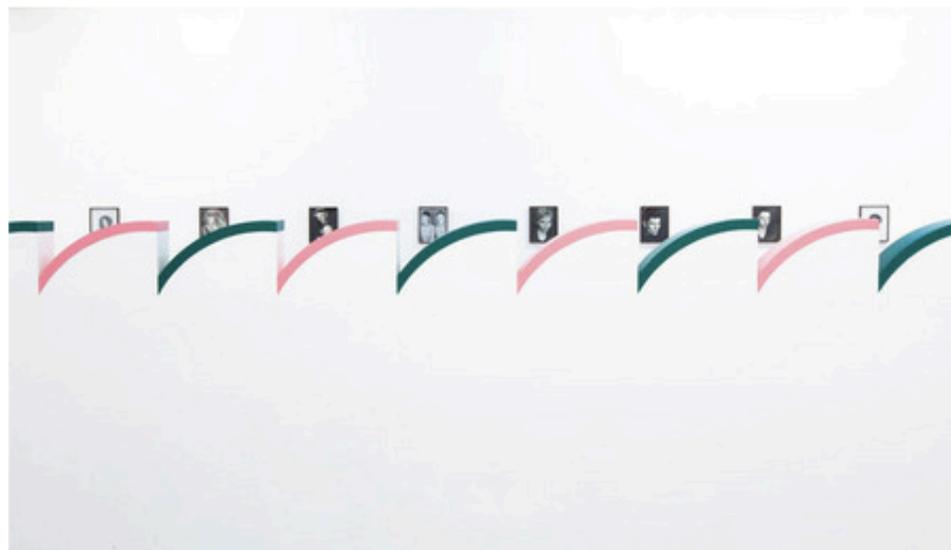


ARTFORUM

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Being Framed

DOUGLAS CRIMP ON ELAD LASSRY AT THE KITCHEN



View of "Elad Lassry: *Untitled (Presence)*," 2012, The Kitchen, New York. Foreground: *Untitled (Wall, New York)*, 2012. Background, from left: *Woman 065*, 2012; *Woman 071*, 2012; *Man 077*, 2012; *Men (055, 065)*, 2012; *Woman 084*, 2012; *Man 044*, 2012; *Woman 097*, 2012; *Woman 055*, 2012. Photo: Jason Mandella.

ELAD LASSRY remade the Kitchen's gallery space for his "*Untitled (Presence)*." Entering through a parabolic arch, you immediately confronted a wall with a long rectangular opening at eye level. Beyond that stood a medium-height wall whose top was scalloped and painted bright pink and green. (Lassry has an unflinching sense for hideous colors.) Through the scallops you could catch glimpses of photographs on the back wall. These deliberately clunky framing devices were presaged in the room demarcated by the arched and slotted walls. There, projected directly on the gallery wall, was a looped 16-mm film, *Untitled (Eggs, Eyes)*, 2012. The "eyes" were mechanical cat-eye-shaped slots that opened and shut to reveal and conceal three wooden plinths of varying heights, each one painted a different color. Such plinths have appeared in Lassry's work before, both as pedestals to display still-life objects in his photographs, and as props in two of his "dance films" from 2009 and 2010. With them, Lassry knowingly refers both to Robert Morris's *Columns* of the early 1960s and to the modular stage props used in Doris Humphrey's dances of the '30s. The eye modules in this 2012 film follow upon a sequence in which similarly shaped zebrawood eggs "dance" on a tabletop.

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Extending the subject of a number of his previous films, Lassry also staged a short performance on three evenings at the Kitchen, using members of the New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater. Here, too, Lassry deployed multicolored sculptural framing devices: a low mint-green wall right in front of the audience, a brown wall with two oval-shaped openings (eggs again), their bottom thirds fitted with removable pink inserts, and a blue wall with a horizontal slit, much like the white wall upstairs in the gallery. These framing devices were manipulated at various intervals by the dancers, who were dressed in bright yellow and blue outfits that looked like a costume designer's version of workers' coveralls. You wouldn't really call what the dancers did choreography. It was instead a series of dance phrases and shifting arm positions, executed repeatedly, as in a dance class. There was sustained bourréeing on the part of the women, who were on pointe; the only sound was that of the dancers' feet, especially the staccato of the women's toe shoes. Changing combinations of dancers and steps were punctuated by blackouts.

It was a coup on the part of the Kitchen's director, Tim Griffin, to open his second season with a performance that was an extension of—indeed integral to—a one-person gallery exhibition. It's not that Lassry is a performance artist. In fact, I think it's fair to call him a Pictures artist—a self-conscious, *après-la-lettre* Pictures artist. In the version of my "Pictures" essay that I wrote for *October* in 1979, I employed a quotation taken from Henry James's ghost tale "The Jolly Corner"—"The presence before him was a presence"—in order to effect a transition between two parts of the text, and between pictures and performances. I had in mind Jack Goldstein's performances, which, though live, were apprehended as though mediated. Lassry does something else. Because *Untitled (Presence)*, 2012, is so brightly lit, the colors of its framing devices so garish, and the dancers so vividly present, you are tricked into thinking you're really watching a dance performance. But a dance never happens. Just some pictures—"nervous pictures," as Lassry calls them.

Lassry's use of dance is unusual in relation to the current art-world obsession with the form, for which the Judson Dance Theater is the touchstone, and for which ballet and modern dance are virtual taboos. Lassry's first "dance film" (*Untitled*, 2007) has two stated points of reference: George Balanchine's modernist ballet masterpiece *Agon*, made in 1957, and Doris Humphrey's book *The Art of Making Dances*, published posthumously in 1959. In this work, two New York City Ballet dancers—both of whom appeared again in last year's *Untitled (Presence)*—perform the final minute of the *Agon* pas de deux seven times. Because that pas de deux is perhaps the most famous duet choreographed in the twentieth century, it is—or at least it was to me—instantly recognizable, in spite of the fact that the film is silent and the dancing is captured in close-ups so tight as to show only fragments of the moving bodies. Lassry used Humphrey's diagram that mapped the strong and weak points of the stage to determine his camera angles. The seven shots of dancing are bookended by headshots of the two dancers, silent and relatively still, not unlike Warhol's Screen Tests from the '60s.

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Lassry's "Untitled (Presence)" also contained portraits of some of its dancers, in this case photographs hanging in the upstairs gallery. Two of the female dancers' faces were contained within odd, upside-down-tear or thought-bubble shapes. (We got a preview of two of the dancers on the billboard that Lassry made for the High Line last summer.) An equally peculiar framing device—a sort of ribbon-shaped object that outlined the face in a circle and the body in a triangle—was pushed around the stage on casters during the performance.

Lassry obsessively frames his "presences," but more is at work than these sorts of devices. Along with the all-too-obvious literal frames, Lassry's pictures are framed by something you can't quite put your finger on, something that makes his "presences" the haunted kind that James had in mind in his ghost story, and that I had in mind when I quoted him. You feel it when you look at the appropriated pictures that are headshots of movie and television actors. Sometimes you recognize them. I think one was Juliet Prowse, but who among us remembers exactly what the young Prowse looked like? You also feel it when, every now and then in the performance, the dancers execute a few steps or make a gesture that *seems* like something from a Balanchine ballet. It's more ghostly in this case than that final minute of the *Agon* pas de deux. And it perplexes: Should I recognize this phrase? This face?

A dance critic, blogging about her displeasure that the performers went uncredited, identified each of them; she seemed less perturbed by the subjects of the appropriated portraits or, for that matter, the two pictures called *Dishes* and the Judd-like (or is it Artschwager-like?) wall relief that was the sole object in the space between the slotted and scalloped walls. I admit that I, too, was curious about who the dancers were, but no more so than who the actors are (if indeed they *are* actors). I want to be able to put a name to a face, make a proper identification: hence "Judd-like," "Artschwager-like," "Balanchine-like." But what makes Lassry's "Untitled (Presence)" productively irksome is that such an identification won't do the trick: It won't banish the ghosts.

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