

ArtSeen

January 6, 2022

Facts of Light

By **Tim Maul**

BROOKLYN RAIL



Installation view, *Facts of Light*. Cathouse Proper at 524 Projects. Courtesy Cathouse Proper. Photo: Yanka Kostova.

In the fall of 1973 I found employment as a guard at MoMA. Having finished SVA (Fine Arts) that spring I was aware of the local mythology around important artists working as museum guards and I earnestly wondered what I would take away from the experience. Perhaps I would find, in Marcel Duchamp's terms "a window on to something else" akin to Brice Marden's discovery of encaustic through a Jasper Johns painting while guarding at the Jewish Museum in the early '60s. As the new kid, the "lifer" guards snubbed me and I had no idea what to eat for lunch in expensive midtown, maybe those sugary breakfast bars I was addicted to? I got good at pointing people toward the bathrooms and directing them to Pavel Tchelitchev's *Hide and Seek* (1942) a trippy example of magic realism with a cult following that Kynaston McShine, my history instructor at SVA, had informed me of (I knew the painting). That spring Kynaston had cautiously lent me his new copy of Lucy Lippard's biblical *Six Years; The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, which changed my life and remains my go-to reference for establishing "who got there first" during those feverish years in the art that mattered. Avant garde art "de-materialized" in the early '70s and "re-materialized" by decade's

end having, to paraphrase Joseph Masheck, “forgotten history.” I was allowed a long hard look at Kynaston’s Duchamp retrospective (1973) even springing for the catalogue, thrilled the way students are over first loves. What I did retain from the experience and what was demonstrated to me daily is that art doesn't work as hard in the world as other things do and dies when the lights go off. Even the art I revered unplugged and receded into the wall maybe to whisper amongst itself assuming everyone got along.

Gowanus Brooklyn can resemble an Art Deco frieze illustrating the word “transportation” with active canals, bumper-to-bumper overpasses, and descending aircraft. Cathouse Proper at 524 Projects is one flight up and a corridor leads into a purposeful room two stories high with six windows, engineered solely for a late artist's contemplation and appraisal of his art. The space, that ethereal '70s term for gallery or art context, is an appropriate host for *Facts of Light* (“FoL”) curated by (and including) Robert(a) Ruisza Marshall whose press release leans into the poetic permitting the art to register differently than overly determined art writing meant to cover all the bases. I went because J Pasila invited me and J’s work always merits attention.

I’ve only read Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” (1967) once in Jed Perl’s collection and I acknowledge that the persistence of his argument lies in the shared agreement that “white box” galleries shifted the engagement with painting and sculpture from the absorptive/scholarly to one of connoisseurship/commerce performed around chic isolated displays. Not so here. Visiting this modest exhibition is more like walking around the inside of a camera, gently reinforced by an off-white supremacist square painted and centrally located on the far wall. (When visiting John Cage’s spare downtown loft Isamu Noguchi commented that “...an old shoe would look good in this room” while decades later with ad-copy pizazz David Salle wrote that “one thing art does is make a room look better”). The installation organizes walls and light into an optic machine that with some additional preparation could transform into a camera obscura or “pinhole” camera as employed by my friend the late Barbara Ess. The images in the main room of Li, Marshall, Pasila, and Sighicelli suggest chemically receptive surfaces that have been exposed to either manufactured or natural daylight.



Gwenn Thomas, *Sky Shaped Window (Ingots III-XIII)*, 2021, Cast. neodymium glass, 4.5 x 6 x 2 in. Courtesy Cathouse Proper. Photo: Yanka Kostova.

In researching a lecture I became aware of Joseph Cornell's *Nymphlight* (1957) a film featuring the young Gwenn Thomas photographed by Rudy Burckhardt that observes Thomas in Bryant Park that I found unusually lyrical for Cornell whose other film's, like his boxes, confine rather than follow movement. So I cannot easily dissociate surrealism from Thomas's own box works. However, we enter the gallery through a corridor where her "Sky Shaped Window (Small Ingots I and II) (2021) are arranged along a shelf which is logical in that the semi-translucent objects may project too many haptic effects in the bright main gallery. Inhabiting a mineral cool each molded ingot is of a domestic scale that like her boxes feels radical in our unsettled art moment. Trapezoidal as Inca masonry, every rippled surface(s) of neodymium glass conducts light and pulsates with an unexpected '60s sci-fi vibe. They may slumber in a museum at day's end but they'd also be the first to wake up. Inversely her four box works operate as the mirror- fixated Robert Smithson wrote of Donald Judd's as "traps for time." Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920) with its black leather panes awaiting polish is a clear precedent of these uncanny meticulously crafted enclosures. Marshall has installed several above eye level in that area usually occupied by vents, EXIT signs and basement windows. Joining them up there are Xingze Li's *Untitled* (2021), two aluminum forms in a constructivist echo chamber duet.



Ethan Ryman, *Still Life #55*, 2021, Dye sublimation on aluminum with metal hinge, 28.25 x 28.25 in. Courtesy Cathouse Proper. Photo: Yanka Kostova.

Ethan Ryman's *Still Life #55* (2021) could read either as signage or as a late precisionist composition in which the gallery's wooden floor may be recognized. Ryman has intimate knowledge of the dimensions, material and other considerations with planning this room. Taken as a sign it directs us into surprising hard edge Allen D' Archangelo territory, unfinished '60s business. (Maybe all painting is "unfinished business.") The lower left hand corner is angled toward the wall "denting" the sign/shield and eluding the camera which isn't unique to the documentation of the art in *FoL* that while photogenic enough rewards the physical encounter. Not all recent art does.

Robert(a) and I talked about Francis Bacon's insistence on glass over his painting which I believe introduces a fleeting Dorian Gray moment of self recognition in his lubricious stagings of grief. Conversely Duchamp (again) referred to one of his "Glasses" as a "delay" or "hilarious picture" because he believed it would reflect laughter in the gallery-goer. He also mused in later life

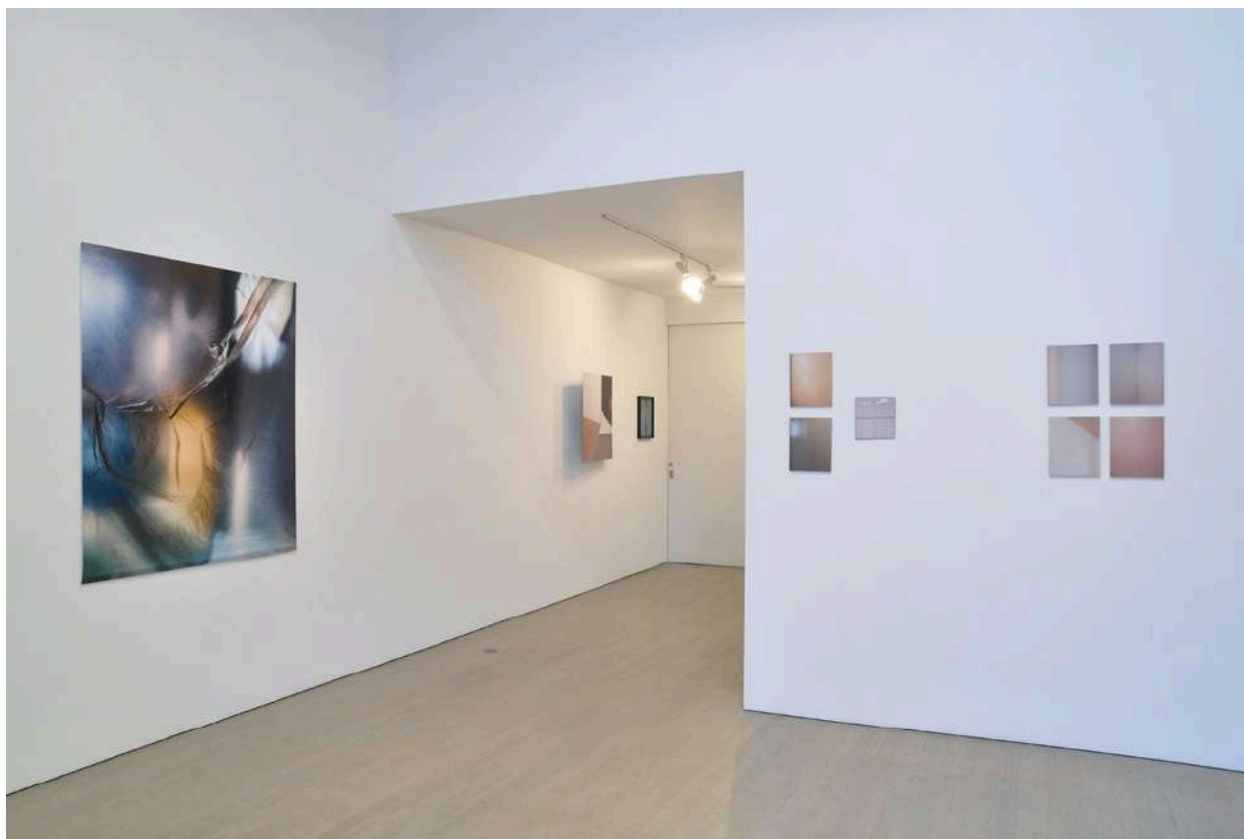
on the "infra thin," a molecular space between surfaces now under actual forensic scrutiny in the cleaning and study of, well, the *Mona Lisa*. Robert(a) approved of my thinking that windows, curtains, and drapery were mildly ceremonial symbols of the introvert and a decorated transitional zone between us and the world inscribed by light and knowledge in addition to places to observe from unseen. The very first photograph was a view outside a window and Bernard Faucon's luminous *The Thirteenth Room of Love* cover image contributes to the overall beauty of Roland Barthes's *Incidents* (1992). Marshall's printed fern pattern along the

objects right side is wistful but not sentimental while their *Hotel Corridor Santa Monica* (2019) on the opposite wall could have been extracted from an amateur paranormal investigation. (I actually like Pistoletto's gimmicky mirror pieces, especially the '60s mod ones, and yes, they would make any room look better). Marshall's "day" converses with Elisa Sighicelli's *Untitled* (2020) "night," a possibly infra-thin tactile shadow world printed on silk of plastic being peeled off another reflective surface. I recall my Irish grandparents turning mirrors to the wall after a death in the house for fear of entrapping the traumatized departing spirit. As a lure for ghosts Sighicelli's humid picture would make an intoxicating dimension to flit around in.



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We are reminded that light describes what we see by every Vermeer or in Gerhard Richter's air-brushed representational work. In addition we know the technically reproduced image originates from the indexical mark lauded as some sort of truth, but not for long. As pure visual demonstrations of the factual J Pasila's studio space reproduces itself in its own pictures, doing double duty as the artists subject and site of production. Pasila's three contributions to 'FoL' make a strong argument for the reproduction operating as direct substitute for the thing itself. Andy Warhol and his '60s tin foil entourage droned on about "nothing" like Beckett characters on speed and I regard Pasila's work to be humane descendants of his *Shadows* (1978–79) that repeated a single inscrutable high contrast void filtered through the texture of a '50s porn film. I also wonder what kind of music J listens to, her *1:19, 1.10*, (2007) would make a cover for the best ambient/electronica album ever. A few months after my brother's covid related death in the late summer of 2020 I visited the Met to find Richter's *Birkenau* (2014) paintings installed there, epic responses to an atrocious sequence of documentation from Auschwitz, the only known photographs taken by a prisoner in a death camp. Up close, each frigid canvas degraded into granular feedback and I remembered that Isa Genzken introduced Richter to '80s punk and to Sonic Youth, then a striving local noise band.



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In Xingze Li's burnished surfaces incidental 'side effects' result from applications of spray fixative on photo paper along with other treatments incurring muted reflections. The quadrant *Untitled* (2021) are discrete two dimensional miniatures resembling plaques or tiles and whose compact portability again feels novel while the light in and around them looks ancient. Installed overhead I'm informed that Li's untitled 2021 metal disk depicts a lone enshrouded light bulb, a comic strip idea somehow painted by Whistler. The hybrid "photo object" was a brief mannerist subset of the postmodern '80s and was reintroduced to another generation in Carol Squire's important ICP exhibition *What Is a Photograph?* (2014) where nostalgia for the liquid, absent in digital imaging became spectacularized in manual processes bordering on the occult. Throughout *FoL* the hoary "window/mirror" and "presence/absence" conundrums of fine art photography are rendered moot.

FoL quietly pushed numerous buttons in me and I kept returning to a phrase I read soon out of art school that compared a certain artist's project to "a stone thrown into a pond producing ever expanding ripples." Robert(a) Marshall's written advice "to resist pinning everything down" is well taken but with my head made busy I was slow to leave.

Contributor

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