

Lorna Bauer Challenges the Limitations of Photography



Lorna Bauer, *Untitled (Garment District)* (detail), 2012

by Sky Goodden

Published: March 13, 2013

Montreal-based Lorna Bauer is fast emerging as the young Canadian photographer to watch. With a star turn in the 2011 Quebec Triennial, notices in *Artforum*, a recent solo exhibition at the Nicolas Robert Gallery, and a string of international artist residencies behind her, the future is looking bright through her masterfully-lit lens. ARTINFO Canada recently sat down with Bauer to discuss her Montreal exhibition, the ways in which the New York textile industry parallels her changing medium, and the challenges ahead.

You seem to be standing out in your generation for your commitment to analogue practices, and for your in-depth understanding and theoretical investigation of the medium. What attracted you to photography, and why is it your chosen medium?

Although I do work with photography, I don't see myself as a photographer, per se, but rather that I work *through* or *with* the medium. I enjoy working with my analogue camera, but I don't feel bound to analogue, as I also use digital technology. So I'm not a purest in that sense. What I like in using my analogue camera is that it provides me with a set of limitations. It's a huge clunky thing and given its size and the extra expense of using film, I have to plan what I want and need to shoot. I try to be shrewd about what I photograph.

I am not so interested in the accidental or contingent aspects of photography.

Given photography's relative nascency, what do you see it being capable of, and what are its greatest challenges and revolutions that lie ahead?

I would say the obvious: everything is going digital. As all technologies go, the advancements and refinements continue regardless of what goes on in art. On the other hand, the age old question, *what is photography?* continues to offer great challenges.

Your latest series was borne-out of a residency in New York, and that city's changing textile and fashion district. Your series strikes on formal, theoretical, and sociological notes. What parallel do you see the textile trade and its industries drawing to your medium, and what inspired this series?

It was a situation where a lot of things converged. Part of what drew me to New York City's textile and fashion district occurred while preparing for a residency in Gatineau, Quebec. I was invited to conduct a residency and exhibition at an artist-run center that's housed in a large former textile mill. I was in New York leading up to this residency, and in preparation, I began to investigate the history of textile manufacturing and was working on the border of the city's garment district. Walking through the district on a daily basis alerted me to the parallels that exist between the Canadian and American textile industries – they're both changing dramatically. By engaging a North American textile industry that was unable to fully compete in the global economy (or had at least moved offshore), I was seeking to draw an analogy with the analogue photographic processes that are now facing obsolescence, raising questions about technology and facture. Some of these photographs document the emerging technology of the digital loom and the new role it is playing in these districts.

To what extent is self-reflexivity important to your photographic practice?

My work from the past two years or so directly deals with the medium-specificity of photography. I have used my work to question and explore - in a self-reflexive way - the institution of photography. Part of this was an effort to push boundaries or taboos that exist within the medium. This in part stemmed from my frustration working alongside certain photographers in the darkroom. There are certain engrained ideas about what makes a good photograph, and a lot of these stem from certain technical competencies and standard practices bordering on the masturbatory and cliché. An example of what I mean can be seen in the "Bracket" piece - it was a way to go against choosing the "right" image. Other times, I deliberately choose not to spot tone, so I keep the marks caused by dust on my prints. But it's always conscientious, yes.