

ARTFORUM

Zoe Leonard

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Zoe Leonard, *Arkwright Road (detail)*, 2012, lens, darkened room, dimensions variable. Installation view.

Zoe Leonard has been producing photographic works and installations since the 1980s. Two years ago, she began transforming exhibition spaces into camera obscuras, turning interiors into darkened chambers that reflected the illuminated scenes outside. A new solo show by Leonard at the [Camden Arts Centre](#) in London, “*Observation Point*,” includes a new camera obscura, along with a series of “*Sun Photographs*” and an installation of postcards. The exhibition runs through June 24, 2012.

IN RECENT YEARS I’ve been asking myself basic questions about what photography is; what a photograph is and what it does. A couple of years ago I started teaching, and it seemed to me that the conversation around photography had gotten stuck in certain binaries: analog versus digital or subject versus material. I found myself trying to find a way to open up the conversation, to think about photography in a more expansive way. At the end of that first summer of teaching, I woke up one morning thinking: I want to make a camera obscura. And so I just did it for myself in my studio, and since then I’ve been working with them. I’m thinking about it not so much as a way to take a picture but as a way to create a public space where we can think about looking. Visitors enter a darkened room and see an image spilling into the room and covering the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. It is an image of what is happening across the street, right outside the gallery. It is in motion, ephemeral, constantly changing. You hear the sounds of the street, the traffic. In Camden, there is a building under construction directly across the way, so you can see the scaffolding, people working, the cranes moving. Over the course of the show, the view will change.

For the show at Camden I approach photographic seeing in three different ways, as experience, image, and object. In one space is the camera obscura installation, in another a group of new photographs I've taken of the sun, and in a third a sculpture using found postcards. The title of the show, "Observation Point," comes from a diptych of postcards that are also in the show: Both depict a broad view over a canyon and a small stone hut labeled "Observation Point." This piece encapsulates a lot for me about how we organize our looking. We privilege certain views over others, and this interests me not only within the realm of photography but also as a larger metaphor for the way certain viewpoints are privileged in our society and how dominant views are taken for granted.

The idea of vantage point and perspective has been in my work probably from the very start. For me these questions around the frame are not just aesthetic questions; they are connected to bigger issues that are political and social, questions around subjectivity. I'm interested in making my subjectivity apparent and transparent, keeping the frame right up front. So, rather than saying, "This is how the world is," I'm saying, "This is how I see it." When you admit that it's just your point of view, there is a kind of implied question in turn: "Well, how do you see it?"

I think this is also a way of questioning authoritarian or monolithic constructions of reality, beauty, and truth. Photography has been in service to many different agendas since its inception. It is most often talked about in terms of its subject content, i.e., what a picture is of, rather than where it is from or what it actually looks like. Yet there is so much going on materially in photographs, and all of that plays into how we experience a picture and what it communicates to us. In this new work, I've taken pictures turning the camera directly toward the sun. The subject, the sun, is there but you can't really see it. The prints are subtle and soft; there is barely an image at all. In these prints, I am trying to maintain a taut balance between the image of the sun and the various signs of process: the things that happen during shooting—the flare and glare on the lens—and then what happens in the darkroom later—the grain, the little pinpoints of hair or dust. These disruptions are there to keep you aware of it as a photograph, to keep you aware of your own looking.

In the third space, along with *Observation Point/Observation Point*, I'm showing a new sculpture. The piece comprises around six thousand found postcards of Niagara Falls in stacks on a table. Each stack is of a certain view onto the falls, and stacks are placed in relation to their vantage point of the falls, laid out in a way that mimics a map or an aerial view of the falls. Although all the photographs are of the same place, they do not resolve into one cohesive picture, but instead produce a kind of abstract topography. For me, this work brings up questions of cartography, organization, collecting, control, and surveying. Of course, the postcards are also familiar objects, cheap and readily available. Many of these cards are used, with postal marks visible; they vividly show how we communicate with each other through images, how we want to say: "This is where I am."

-As told to Arthur Ou