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ART

## Zoe Leonard Transcends Time at the Whitney Museum

A survey show at the Whitney Museum of American Art asserts ideas about the collapse of time in spaces natural and constructed.

Alex Jen May 7, 2018

Zoe Leonard, "Niagara Falls no.4"  
(1986/1991) gelatin silver print, 41 7/8 ×  
29 1/4 in. (106.36 × 74.3 cm) (collection  
of the artist; courtesy Galerie Gisela  
Capitain, Cologne, and Hauser & Wirth,  
New York)

Zoe Leonard's photographs in [\*Survey\*](#) at the Whitney feel like memories you've always known, even if sometimes they don't feel like yours — a story you've heard before, or a friend of a friend whose name is

always on the tip of your tongue. Leonard fixes the familiar with both a fast instinct and wide-eyed sincerity, somehow preserving in her photographs the awe of seeing something for the first time, or realizing you haven't noticed it until now. They hint at a bittersweet irony – that capturing is losing, and looking through the viewfinder to preserve a moment means giving it up in person. But the trade-off is a gift for the viewer. While Leonard's aerial views and emptied spaces don't often show people, there is a lingering, just-missed feeling in her works in *Survey* that urges you to look more closely and in turn hold tight onto the present.

Museum)" (1990) gelatin silver print, 43  
× 30 1/4 in. (109.22 × 76.84 cm),  
(collection of the artist; courtesy  
Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and  
Hauser & Wirth, New York)

"Mirror no. 1 (Metropolitan Museum)" (1990) is taken at a striking slant, as if Leonard wanted the photograph to be a secret — that tension is enhanced by the sheet of captured light that nearly escapes the frame's edge. There's a spectral mystery to how the mirror reflects an ambiguous space, and reflects a representation of light that seems to glow itself, blurring into the very light that wrote the details of the image. And yet, oily smudges on the mirror, pronounced by the photograph's grain, reveal a grimy but real human trace. Leonard has managed to avoid being captured in the mirror's reflection, but her presence is felt in this and the rest of her photographs: waiting unseen but sensitively considering when to squeeze the shutter.

"Niagara Falls no. 4" (1986/1991) has a similar physical effect, the flattened depth of its roaring pit pulling you in, as the mist gently suffuses the image. Foaming water froths and fringes near the overhang, reminiscent of the dust that might sit atop a neglected photograph. A flat, tiny boat floats as a speck in the water; in this and other aerial photographs, Leonard makes you feel as if you're in the rush and risk of nature's might, even though you look on from above, watching the scene calmly. The feeling is uncanny, as if you stumbled into the moment the photograph was being made, and are simultaneously seeing yourself being made into a memory.

Installation view of *Zoe Leonard: Survey*  
at the Whitney Museum of American  
Art; from left to right: "Tree + Fence, S.  
3rd St." (1998/1999); "You see I am  
here after all" (2008); "Robert" (2001)  
© Zoe Leonard. (photograph by Ron  
Amstutz)

Looking back toward the first gallery,  
the Whitney's enfilade frames several  
of Leonard's aerial photographs, and a  
line of faded blue suitcases from her  
sculpture "1961-" (2002), an ongoing  
work to which she adds a suitcase each  
year to match her age. My eye tracked  
Leonard's photographs and then the

places in them — the wispy clouds enshrouding the suburbs in two "Untitled"  
photographs (1989/2008) — I imagine looking through the enfilade as a parallel  
experience of seeing through the viewfinder, and of having your sight leap from

your eyes and travel through space. The suitcases come into this frame, but don't fill it — the most recent years trailing like an ellipsis, waiting to be added to. One more year, one more trip, nothing's a hard stop — even Leonard's photographs surge, waiting to be unpaused by each viewer.

Installation view of *Zoe Leonard: Survey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art; from left to right, back to front:  
"Model of New York" (1989/1990);  
"Model of New York no. 2" (1989/1990);  
"Water no. 1 + Water no. 2" (1988);  
"1961, 2002-" © Zoe Leonard  
(photograph by Ron Amstutz)

*Survey* never feels like more than it needs to be, curated by Bennett Simpson and Rebecca Matalon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Elisabeth Sherman of the Whitney. For a retrospective, *Survey* is sparse — leaving out Leonard's camera obscura projects and hunting photographs, among other series —

but elegantly so, giving each work enough room to breathe and simmer. Maybe Leonard doesn't need all her work to be present, to speak, in much the same way you can sense how someone's feeling just by being next to them. At the Whitney, Leonard's photographs are slightly different sizes but still hung together, horizontals and verticals in a line like the sporadic, charged details of a past moment.

Leonard's photography and sculpture evoke the fondness we have for our favorite-for-no-reason things, made special because of a personal story no one else knows about. But since those stories aren't revealed, the result is something sad but restrained — perhaps afraid of being vulnerable, which Leonard reassures us is okay. "Strange Fruit" (1992–1997) scatters empty, decaying fruit skins across the gallery; the peels sag and lump, and have the tender oddity of something dead and mummified, unable to be resuscitated. A banana peel is only recognizable because string and metal wire holds it together like a cast, and an orange peel has loose threads and pins sticking out of it, more abused than fixed up. While "Strange Fruit" is painful — a reminder of how society wanted to "fix" sexualities during the AIDS crisis — it is also defiantly proud in its persistence and fluidity. A banana conjoined to a lemon peel with electric blue thread becomes a crown; an orange tassel dangles from the center of 7 multi-colored skins, decay becomes sculpture to last.

Installation view of *Zoe Leonard: Survey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Strange Fruit" (1992-97), orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax, dimensions variable. (Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with funds contributed by the Dietrich Foundation and with the partial gift of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery. © Zoe Leonard. Photograph by Ron Amstutz)

them really just ache to say "I was here."

Zoe Leonard, "New York Harbor I" (2016) two gelatin silver prints, 21 × 17 1/8 in. (53.3 × 43.5 cm) each. (Collection of the artist; courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Hauser & Wirth, New York)

from Poland. In one, Leonard's grandmother doesn't seem ready — her eyes are closed, and she's clutching the rail. It's windy, as seen by the stripes of the American flag rippling in the air. The family photos are torn and crumbling at the edges, but cradled by the white paper background — re-loved and re-photographed. These photographs are documents, proof of why Leonard is here. Looking back on these relatives we've never met, we wonder how they lived and loved — and we are oddly connected, or reminded of our own relationships to family.

Installation view of *Zoe Leonard: Survey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art; from left to right: "You see I am here after all" (2008); "How to Take Good Pictures" (2018) © Zoe Leonard (photograph by Ron Amstutz)

That reminder is boldly reaffirmed in Leonard's photographs of bathroom graffiti, which are heart-dropping but earnest statements of love and identity. Slickly painted stalls become cloudy skies in the grain of the photograph, and the flash alights etched messages, traveling into the stall's carved grooves and blowing out their dust. "Lesbians" reads one, "Suck Me" reads another. But all of

Leonard's photographs bristle with reality; they're documents, with all the tenderness of a treasured family photo, frayed at the edges from creases and rubbing. In her "New York Harbor" photographs, Leonard re-photographs snapshots of her mother and grandmother arriving in New York

Throughout her career, Leonard has kept an endearing commitment to preserving the intimate and personal. "You see I am here after all" (2008) and "Survey" (2009–2012) collect postcards of people who've visited Niagara Falls over the years — 10,149

between the two works. Leonard's work reminds us why we save. Because no matter how dog-eared, yellowed, or creased, sometimes a photograph — of a sumptuous red in a bricked up wall, or the warm glint of light in a river's crook — amplifies the familiar, so much so that you can live in the photographer's moment of making. Photographs are memories, selected and framed, and can mark time and place. Photos often fade, and are subject to mis-remembering — but Leonard's sculpture "How to Take Good Pictures" (2018) suggests maybe that's the point. Stacks of Kodak's amateur photography guide take us through the book's different editions, but near the beginning we see it was first published in 1912 as *How to Make Good Pictures*. Its blue, fringed cloth cover fading and threatening to fall apart. Although we talk about "taking" photographs, I want to think that it's still "making." Leonard's photographs appear as extensions of her mind, extensions of her glance, moments made hers that we long to know better — they run up against your own memories and photographs, waiting for you to ask, "Haven't we met before?"

[Zoe Leonard: Survey](#) *continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) until June 20.*

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