

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

**COLLECTOR
DAILY**

John Lehr, If There Was @Kate Werble
Loring Knoblauch
April 22, 2015

JTF (just the facts): A total of 14 color photographs, framed in white and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the front and back galleries and behind the reception desk. All of the works are pigmented inkjet prints, made between 2013 and 2015. Physical sizes range from roughly 14×9 to 60×113 (or reverse), and all of the works (including 1 triptych) are available in editions of 5+2AP. (Imperfect installation shots below.)



Comments/Context: John Lehr's newest works have got me thinking about yet another addition to the critical vocabulary of contemporary photography – the “digital surface”. At first reading, such a term seems impossibly contradictory. A surface is almost by definition a physical place or external reality (that has been captured by the indifferent mechanical operation of a camera), while the addition of “digital” as a modifier implies an analogous “surface” in the realm of bits and bytes, where textures and appearances exist (and can be generated or altered) in a non-objective, non-physical dimension. While this may sound hopelessly esoteric, the uncharted terrain of the “digital surface” is what many contemporary photographers are actively exploring, and John Lehr is undeniably one of this merry band.

Lehr's works start with a Siskind-like affinity for urban exteriors, from painted walls and stained sidewalks to scratched stones and glare reflecting windows. Printed in exacting one-to-one scale, his images depict his discoveries with painstaking attention to (apparent) fidelity. The pictures revel in drips and sprays, gestural scrapes and whorled lights, tape residue and worn dirty remnants, pulling us into found abstractions where random marks (some Twombly-like) seem to imply or at least mimic artistic intention. His “surfaces” are like ephemeral ghosts and erased stories, where the active wisps the past are left behind as incomprehensible evidence.

If Lehr's works were simply images of these straightforward surfaces, we might happily categorize them as derivative of many, many photographs that have come before and which have meticulously investigated these kinds of pleasingly rough and ready textures. But when we're told that after Lehr makes his photographs, he digitally alters the original colors, adds and subtracts marks, and generally uses the subjects as starting points rather than end products, we're suddenly left swimming without a tether. Which parts of these studies of surface are “real”? Which ones were later manipulations or outright digital inventions? It's impossible to tell.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

In this case, it's not so much that the camera has lied to us, but that the photographic surface has now become a venue for artistic improvisation and we have to recalibrate our assumptions about what we're seeing; Lehr's surfaces aren't so much "found" as "created". Others who have been exploring the "digital surface" have left more visual bread crumbs, in the form of overt pixelization, rephotographed layers, glitches, and paint program effects; the fact that we can't follow Lehr's tracks is a conscious decision.

If this conceptual inversion is to become anything more than an academic exercise, Lehr will need to develop works that extend the definitions of the "digital surface" in fresh directions, capitalizing on this newfound freedom to tweak, twist, and create ambivalence and uncertainty. In a certain sense, I'd rather see puzzling impossible surfaces that more overtly break the established "rules" rather than subtle recreations that test my ability to spot a manipulation. The works in this show are a solid start down this exploratory path, in that they successfully undermine (or perhaps destroy) our expectations; we can now hang one of Lehr's spackled walls next to a moody Minor White painted surface and engage in a spirited debate about what is going on in each one. But if Lehr can now go further and boldly amplify what a "digital surface" might mean in a forward looking manner, then something exciting will really start to happen.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show are priced between \$2500 and \$12000 based on size. Lehr's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com