

METRO PICTURES

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ARTFORUM



Louise Lawler

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Everything must go. At Metro Pictures, which is ending its historic run this year after four decades, Louise Lawler held a two-for-one blowout sale: an exhibition titled "One Show on Top of the Other." Such a tagline—a fairly literal description of what was on display—reminds us of the artist's career-long embrace of the gimmick, a category newly theorized by Sianne Ngai as a phenomenon that, through its simultaneous under- and overperformance (its effort-saving tricks and inherent bid for attention), indexes our anxieties about the relation of labor, time, and value under capitalism. Recall how, for her solo debut at this gallery in 1982, Lawler "arranged" the pictures of other artists on its roster into one piece, tacking on a 10 percent "consultant's fee" for herself to the work's overall sales price. In more recent years, the Conceptualist has become an incisive and playful aggregator of her own content, refocusing her sidelong gaze—once reserved for the trappings of collectors' homes, auction houses, museums, and art storerooms—on her own photographs in ways that further expose the mechanisms of valuation and the contingency of meaning. For her latest presentation(s), the artist converged two previous bodies of work in what was not so

much an arrangement of pictures as an elaborate interface, at once enigmatic and bracingly precise.

A few years ago, as though returning to the scene of a crime, Lawler pared down her famous photographs of expensive art and its environs to black-and-white outlines—actually, she hired Jon Buller, a children’s illustrator, to do the deed (another gimmick). She called the series “Traced,” 2013–. Here, she painted sections of small “Traced” print-outs with primary-colored gouache, highlighting minor details: not the opulent chandelier or the slashed Lucio Fontana canvas from the original photographs, but a single vertical blind; not the fragmented marble Aphrodite sculpture in storage or the tiny disembodied hand of Cupid on her back, but a scrap of shadow thrown against a wall. These framed prints were mounted on a separate body of work titled “adjusted to fit,” an ongoing series begun in 2011. In it, her older photographs are blown up on vinyl, then stretched or distorted to fit the walls of wherever they’re displayed.

By relegating her own images to backdrops for her other images, Lawler seemed to burlesque the curation of art for social media, where aesthetic encounters primarily become backdrops for influencer clout. The strategy acquired a particular irony with her re-iteration of her *Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine*, 1984, that iconic pas de deux between a Limoges soup bowl and the bottom of an allover abstraction by the titular artist. In the gallery’s back room, three outlines of Lawler’s masterpiece—now called *Pollock and Tureen (traced and painted)*, *Red, Yellow, Blue*, 1984/2013/2014/2020, with some of the AbExer’s furious drips colored in with the crispness of Photoshop’s Paint Bucket tool—hung against a large, uncannily beautiful adjusted-to-fit mural depicting a Maurizio Cattelan sculpture in which a taxidermic cat stands on the back of a dog. Shot from behind like a *Rückenfigur*, the beasts stare across the room at a fright wig self-portrait by Andy Warhol, whose specter indeed haunted this show.

In the past decade, a critical consensus has grown around what Helen Molesworth calls Lawler’s “ethic of failure,” a kind of melancholic recursion adopted amid the Pyrrhic success of postmodernist institutional critique. (Case in point: At the onset of New York’s lockdown in spring 2020, the Museum of Modern Art—host of the artist’s 2017 retrospective—invited us to #DrawWithMoMA, using a free downloadable coloring-book version of “Traced” from its website, then terminated the contracts of all its educators a week later.) Such complicity only sharpens the much-discussed poignancy of Lawler’s pictures, which so dependably reflect the confused, multifarious desires we invest in things deemed precious. Cloned, traced, and torqued beyond recognition, her recent works derive their pathos mainly through the artist’s resolve to adapt them to a world of ephemeral but unrelentingly abundant images. And yet the self-sufficiency of her feedback loop—the increasing containment of her systems, which nevertheless open seemingly endless permutations of meaning—has the curious effect of reminding the viewer of their own insignificance in the matter. Everything must go, but Lawler’s pictures will outlive us all.

—Zack Hatfield