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REVIEWS NEW YORK

## Laura Letinsky


Yancey Richardson Gallery

By Jenny Wu



Laura Letinsky, *are cleaning up nat*, 2023, ink-jet print, 40 × 32".

A white string stretched like an angler's line from the center of Laura Letinsky's photographic still life *spring is bloo* (all works cited, 2023),



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, 2024, 4K video, color, sound, 45 minutes.

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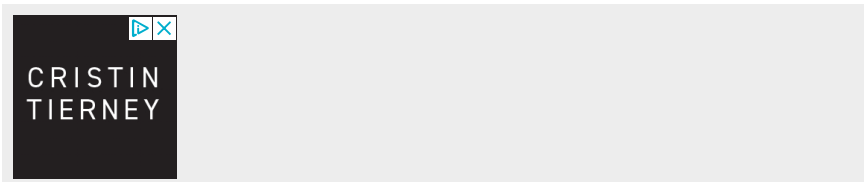
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exhibition here. The red bloom, which appeared to grow from a cluster of incongruously fresh young leaves, was attached to them with a strip of blue painter's tape. This greenery was bound with string and packed together like incense sticks into the bulbous body of an onion.

Reminiscent of the manicured hand that emerges from a whorled conch in Dora Maar's black-and-white photograph *Untitled (Hand-Shell)*, 1934, Letinsky's vegetal chimera challenges popular perceptions of still lifes as straightforward, symbolically coherent images.

If the surprising juxtapositions, visual indeterminacies, and air of uncanniness pervading this exhibition invoked Maar's haunting gelatin silver prints, it was likely because Letinsky created most of the photographs in her show during a residency in the late Surrealist's former home in Ménerbes, France. The depicted objects—ceramic vessels, glassware, craft supplies—may have belonged to Maar or to the site's previous artists-in-residence. In either case, most were borrowed from a hyperlocal context, thus representing a choice that counters the cosmopolitan neophilia that has been associated with still life since the Dutch Golden Age, when luxury goods from colonial exploits were documented in sumptuous oil paintings. In a sense, Letinsky's pictures revise what it means for an object to be familiar or exotic, stripping the concept of the latter down to a rudimentary fascination with things not necessarily acquired from afar but simply belonging or having belonged to others.



Letinsky's still lifes—like those throughout the genre's history—constitute social tableaux. Despite having been set in hermetically sealed interiors, they register material evidence of real exchanges between people beyond their frames. Among the items pictured were editions of recently published newspapers. In a choice that calls to mind the artistic decisions of Maar's lover Picasso, who incorporated clippings of the French periodical *Le Figaro* into his Cubist collages to unsettle the categories of reality and representation, Letinsky included in *fe alternative t 2* a *New York Times* front-page headline reading WITH ROE GONE, A SAFE ALTERNATIVE FOR DESPERATE MOTHERS. The article discusses “baby boxes”—found at hospitals, fire stations—in which newborns in the US can be surrendered. In *are cleaning up nat*, a *Times* headline visible along the fold of the paper announces THE CRYPTO DETECTIVES ARE CLEANING UP, in reference to those hired to track transactions in a sector once believed by many to promise anonymity. The shifting terrain of the public sphere is reflected in the disorienting formal properties of Letinsky's photographs, in which linear perspective goes awry. For instance, in *two or three pinks*, some objects—a white mug, a glass pitcher

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Throughout her exhibition, Letinsky revitalized images of natural decay and the mess of lived environments through meticulous staging, assembling microcosms of the social sphere that unfurled any discourse on representation in cautiously measured doses. By giving mold, rot, stains, roots, and sundry bits of plastic pride of place alongside silver serving trays and pieces of fine china—and at times exposing the rigging of this controlled chaos—Letinsky produced a vision of order predicated on an acceptance of artifice as our only claim to permanence. Consequently, photographs such as *orange pink 9109*, in which an arrangement of melon rinds, vessels, and weeds threatens to tip onto the tiles but instead looms impossibly over the edge of a table, seemed to wink at the viewer, reveling in the secrets of their construction.

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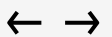
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