

NEW YORK

Zoe Leonard

MURRAY GUY

Moving. It's a word that, used to describe artworks, risks cliché, to say nothing of dangerously separating affective responses from intellectual ones. Yet for the past three decades, Zoe Leonard has honed a practice that calls for and complicates this slippery denomination: In her first solo show in a New York gallery since 2003, she even employed the literal valence of the word. She rendered Murray Guy's newly expanded Chelsea space a giant camera obscura, conjuring a vast, continually changing image. Emptying the room while filling it lushly to the brim, she shuttered its windows, refusing all natural and artificial light, save that which penetrated via a small circular hole fitted with a lens, so that viewers entering the space found themselves initially blinded—their eyes needing time to adjust to the lack of light—then slowly engulfed by a dawning, ever-shifting landscape.

Leonard's photography is often recognized for utilizing the medium, its histories, and its material capabilities, with rigorous, if experimental, fidelity. Such an assessment is true, but it fails to account for what is perhaps most crucial to the practice. Though she continually plumbs the ontological and conceptual possibilities of photography, Leonard's object is less "the photograph" per se than the systems and structures of visibility for which it serves as vessel. Expressive, even poetic, in tenor, her projects never fail to call attention to the ways in which representation is always about *point of view*, always, that is, about power. Yet Leonard calls attention to hierarchies of the image (who and what enters the frame? Who and what does not, or cannot?) without resorting to deconstructive tactics. The deep, singular pleasure to be found in her work owes to the fact that even while pointing toward the unavoidably violent aspects of picturing the world, Leonard recommits to doing just that—and thus produces *other* kinds of images. These, I would argue, ask viewers to openly acknowledge their own situatedness relative to every frame.

Indeed, to "see" *453 West 17th Street* (both the address for the gallery and the name of Leonard's 2012 camera-obscura piece; she has made similar works in Cologne, London, and Venice) one had to give oneself over with abandon to an experience at once acutely phenomenological and undeniably public. The work—for its equally wondrous and candid capture of the world just outside the gallery—also captured those who came to see it. The image pulled through the exaggerated pinhole and thrown against walls, floor, and ceiling evidenced a microcosm of Chelsea: that strange non-neighborhood that was once populated by various diverse communities but has now been laid claim to largely by "the art world." *453 West 17th Street* is a work made up of that living image (which is, importantly, not a photograph, but rather a mechanism defined by its not *recording* that which it pictures) and also the people

who witness it and are therefore implicated in its logic, one that prompts consideration of, among other things, social and economic dynamics.

In the gallery's other room, Leonard hung five black-and-white gelatin silver prints, titled not by place, but by date and frame number. In each, a dully glowing orb rests approximately at the center of an unevenly gray ground. These are pictures of the sun, taken straight-on, frontally, and thus, necessarily, blindly. They picture what cannot be pictured, a kind of literalization of what Lacan called the Real. Drained of their radiant light, they seemed strangely fragile, precariously situated. I felt big in front of them, then small: moved, even as I stood staring into their absent centers.

—Johanna Burton

Zoe Leonard,
December 3,
frame 3, 2011–12,
gelatin silver print,
30½ x 24¾".

