

LEIGH MERRILL

Still



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

OCTOBER 5 - NOVEMBER 21, 2013

AUSTIN, TEXAS



The Strip, Panel 5, 20 x 44 inches, archival pigment print, 2013.

Cover Panel: *Still*, dual projections, 7.5 & 4.5 minute looping HD videos, 2013.

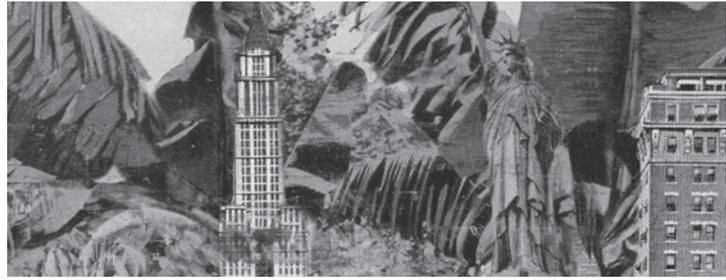
All images courtesy of Liliana Bloch Gallery.

SPACE, SIMULACRUM, MEDIATION:

The Depth of Leigh Merrill's Surfaces
Charissa N. Terranova

The images of Leigh Merrill's *Still* are deceptively flat. Materializing in the manipulated photographs and a looping video of the show, these images are made up of formally tight views and artificial landscapes of cubic warehouses and big-box discount retailers in muted pastel tones. They signify a desolate "anywhere": the unpeopled architectural landscapes of bygone manufacturing and suburban sprawl, their emptinesses so many testaments to those other flatnesses of globalism and a flat-lined American economy. They are derelict while fresh, clean spaces of an absentee population.

In reality Merrill's still and moving pictures of banal architecture are full and fathomless. Simply put, there is a depth within their surfaces. Their combination of flatness and fullness – dumb-box buildings with a lot of innuendo but no context and lapsed memory – makes them heirs to the work of Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Martha Rosler. Think here of pools and gas stations, suburban tract housing, the signage of Las Vegas, the Bowery and views of the road. Merrill's is a subtle pop phenomenology that in its substance concerns three other loadstars of philosophy: space, simulacrum, and mediation.



Detail of *The Strip*, Panel 1, archival pigment print, 2013.

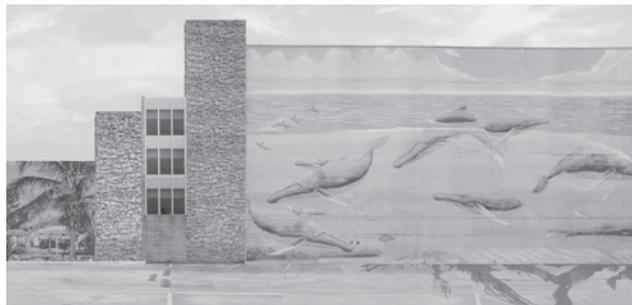
In the photographic continuum of *The Strip* and moving-image foray of *Still*, Merrill has produced space. In this phrase I call upon the French Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre, whose *La production de l'espace* (1974) was built on a lifetime of philosophical work that began with dada and Surrealism and culminated with a Marx-inflected urban cri de coeur, "le droit à la ville," or the "right to the city." Rooted in this mix of art, philosophy, and sociology, Lefebvre's book interrogated and explained the spatial logic of capitalism, the will of endless profit expansion that materializes in space as money: the development of inner-city housing projects and suburban tract housing, real estate boom and bust. Though a digital montage of thousands of pictures, *The Strip* comes across as capitalism congealed. It is very real architectural detritus, with its smoothed over pocked-up continuum of empty buildings a possible veracity on the edges of Houston, Los Angeles, Nashville, or Jersey City. There is no right to the city here, just the dregs of a once useful place.

Yet, Merrill "produces" space in another manner: she creates reproductions of an unreal original place. Photo and moving image alike are simulacra of an untethered real, a pictorial basis that never was or will be. She plays with the simulacrum. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard identified the power of the simulacrum, the reproduction without an original, with a reference to Ecclesiastes: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true." While for Baudrillard the groundless condition of feigned or manufactured truth was something to lament, any good artist, and this includes Merrill, finds liberation here. Merrill makes hay out of simulacra in the video *Still*. Ensconced in sounds of airplanes flying overhead, rain never seen, and the low hum of white noise – all truly unmatched to the place – the clever and understated morphing of buildings in this video loop, single-story box to single-story box, is oddly soothing.



It calms by way of its effortless combining of place to place in the modeling of a landscape simulacrum. Merrill's photographs harbor another metaphorical sense of layering by way of technological mediation. Merrill's process, though seamless in the percipient's experience of the work, is one of technological mediation: shooting information through technological means to create a unique product, in this instance, images. We live and have lived for some time in a world mediated by technology. From language to smart devices, mediation defines our relations between one another and any such connection to the "truth." Bearing on Marshall McLuhan's famous idiom, "the medium is the message," Merrill's sleights of hand, the photomontage and video-montage, body forth a concept of constructed authenticity. Yes, our world is how we make it, for better and for worse.

Beyond this, her mediations, Merrill's confabulations through current technology, bear a message of the odd in the everyday. Using desktop software across her work, Merrill does more than simply channel reality in her work. She creates other, new realities, which are what I would like to identify as image-ruminations: small Gestalts – individual totalities – that draw attention to the realities that they are not in order to catalyze critical thinking about them. They conjure ruminations on architecture as the stuff of political economy and fantasy.



Detail of *The Strip*, Panel 6, archival pigment print, 2013.

She gets at the power of technology to mediate and manufacture our world. Humans, technology, mediation: Merrill identifies this trifecta as the collective force forging life as we know it. And her pictures tell of the untold that is architecture's underbelly, visible in plain sight.

These intellectual cues do not simply prove the richness of Merrill's layered surfaces, but tell of her keen personal understanding of the everyday landscape. Like Flannery O'Connor and J.G. Ballard before, Merrill digs deep into the unconscious of the spaces we rove through as part of quotidian rhythms. There, in the elided and fluidly hybridized flows of suburban strip malls, single-family homes, and derelict manufacturing structures, Merrill manages to unhinge the subtle suggestion of the not homely within the homely, the unhomely or uncanny within the homely or canny.

The question begs, how close are they? How deeply buried is the uncanny within the canny in this architecture of the everyday? Each given

society's architecture strikes it differently. For some, cultural oddities are dissimulated by the clean, monumental symmetries of classicism. A bank is a bank whether bedecked with Doric order columns or shaped by the transparency of a curtain glass wall. Here the building's odd unconscious – its uncanny – seems buried deep within where it will stay never to be extracted. Other architectures and urbanisms, such as the Dutch red light district, Danish free town, or an old Burger King or American storefront upcycled as an art space, wear their lack of mystery on the surface, in broad daylight. Merrill works this space of layers, disinterring the perverse, dreamlike otherness of banal architecture, pulling the profound to the top.

Charissa N. Terranova, PhD – Author of *Automotive Prosthetic: Technological Mediation and the Car in Conceptual Art* (UT Press, Jan. 2014), Charissa N. Terranova is a professor, writer, and critic based in Dallas.

Detail of *The Strip*, approximately 20 inches x 20 feet, comprised of 6 archival pigment prints, 2013.



LEIGH MERRILL

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

Current Assistant Professor of Art, Texas A&M University
Commerce, Commerce, TX

2012-13 Interim Photography Faculty, Texas A&M
University-Commerce, Commerce, TX

EDUCATION

2009 Masters of Fine Arts, Mills College, Oakland, CA

2001 Bachelors of Fine Arts, University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, NM, Summa Cum Laude

SOLO AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2013 *Still*, Solo Exhibition, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX
Fictional/Familiar, Two-person Exhibition, Swarm Gallery,
Oakland, CA

Manifest Destiny, Solo Exhibition, The Tremaine Gallery at
the Hotchkiss School, Lakeville, CT

Staged, Two-person Exhibition, G Gallery, Houston, TX.
Curated by Diane Barber.

2011 *Into the Sunset*, Solo Exhibition, Lawndale Art Center,
Houston, TX

2009 *Streets*, Two-person Exhibition, 1078 Gallery, Chico, CA

2007 *Fence*, Solo exhibition, Eye Lounge Gallery, Phoenix, AZ

2006 *House*, Solo exhibition, Eye Lounge Gallery, Phoenix, AZ

2001 *Bed*, Solo exhibition, John Sommers Gallery, Albuquerque, NM

2000 *Rooms*, Solo exhibition, ASA Gallery, Albuquerque, NM

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 *Recollect*, Liliana Bloch Gallery, Dallas, TX

Trace, Greymatter Gallery, Milwaukee, WI and Box 13 Art
Space, Houston, TX

Splash #2, Recyclart Art Center, Brussels, Belgium

2012 *Just Not Yet*, Landmark Arts Gallery at Texas Tech University,
Lubbock, TX. Curated by Peter Briggs.

Fabricated, Tremaine Gallery at the Hotchkiss School,
Lakeville, CT. Curated by Melissa Stafford.

2011 *Flickrland: the Motherland of Memories*, part of the Festival
Internazionale di Roma at Macro Testaccio, at Galleria
Gallerati, Rome, Italy. Curated by Valentina Isceri.

The Boa Constrictor and the Golden Retriever: Extremes in Tonality,
SoftSpot Online Gallery. Curated by Kim Hennessy and
Ryan Feeney.

Future Forward, Silverevee Photo Gallery, Pittsburg, PA

2010 *Revisiting Beauty*, Orange County Center for Contemporary
Art, Santa Ana, CA

Selections, di Rosa Preserve Art Center, Napa, CA

2009 *Young Americans*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Mills College Art
Museum, Oakland, CA

2007 *Contemporary Forum*, Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2013 *Photo Series: Streets* by Leigh Merrill, Julia Sabot,
Dwell.com, May 30, 2013

In the Studio: Ascendant Visualists, Kate Stukenberg and
Catherine D. Ansporn, Papercity Magazine, May 1, 2013

Grand Illusions: Landscapes drawn from inner spaces,
Molly Glentzer, Houston Chronicle, January 27, 2013

Leigh Merrill's Vision of Texas at Hotchkiss, Carola Lott,
TMI Arts Page, Millbrook Independent, February 21, 2013

Swarm Gallery's Farewell Exhibition, Alex Bigman,
East Bay Express, May 22, 2013

2011 *Leigh Merrill's Streets*, Josh Rothman, Boston Globe: Brainiac,
December 19, 2011

Sutured San Francisco, Geoff Manaugh of BLDGBLOG,
December 4, 2011

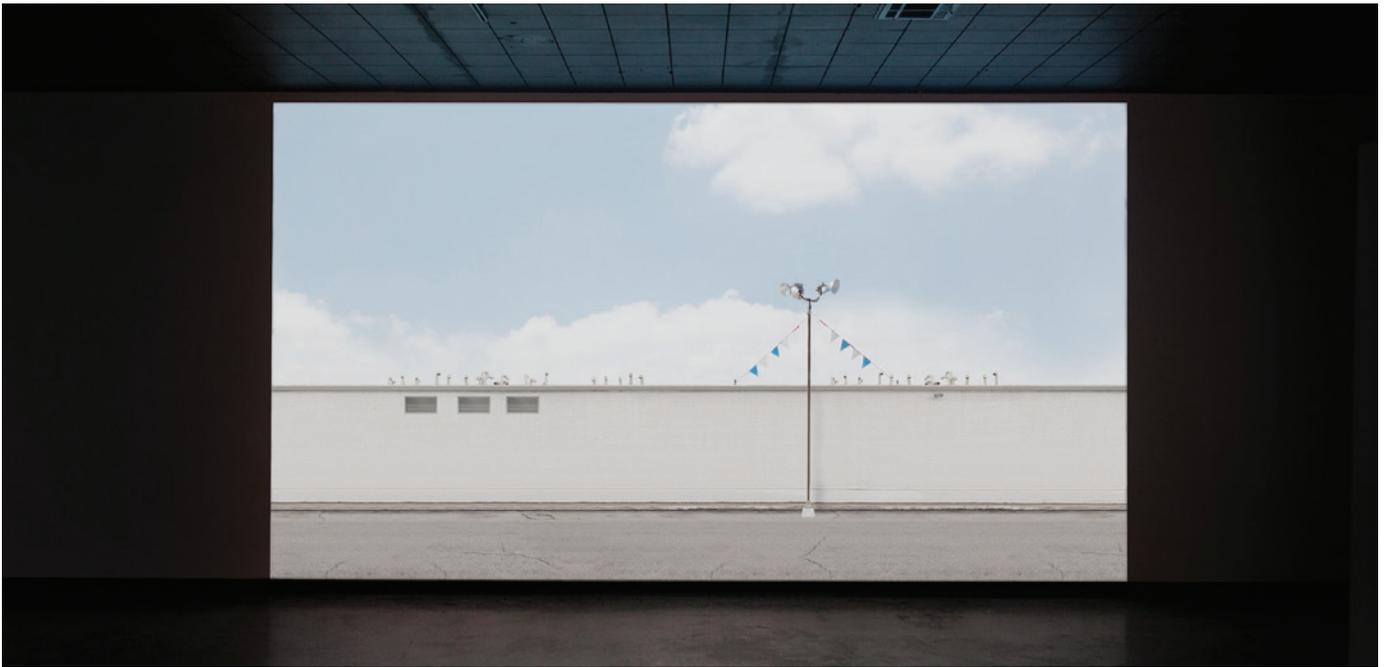
North Texas Strip: Imaginary Landscapes, Design Observer,
Places Journal, July 28, 2011

2010 *Rulers of Engagement*, Steve Carter, Modern Luxury Dallas,
December 2010

Streets: Into the Sunset, Design Observer, Places Journal,
May 27, 2010

2006 *Phoenix: 21st Century City*, Booth-Clibborn Editions,
November 2006





Still, installation view, dual projections, 7.5 & 4.5 minute looping HD videos, 2013.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 35th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,873 artists in 285 visual art exhibitions, 120 music, dance and theater events, 15 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 496 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant

in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 950 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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