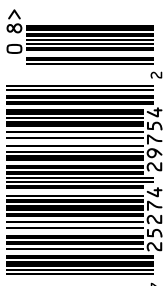


UPSTATE DIARY



HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Mickalene Thomas / Sean Kelly / Judy Pfaff / Mary McCartney / Donald Judd's *Casa Perez*
 Terhi Tolvanen / Brice Marden / Letha Wilson / Georgie Hopton / Kirsten Owen

In her bedroom, Wilson stays under the covers.

Looking

Interview William Jess Laird



new

Letha Wilson explores the possibilities

Photo Collaboration by Letha Wilson and Guzman



Can photography ever adequately represent space? This question has pushed Letha Wilson to work at the boundaries of photography and sculpture, constantly pushing the two-dimensional outward. Her work engages with the classical landscape, well-trodden ground in the history of photography, and asks how this genre might be renewed. In Letha's spirit of approaching the image not as an endpoint, but as a beginning, she took Guzman's images of her and her place and went to work. William caught up with Letha, in Las Vegas, after her cross-country road trip.

William Jess Laird *It seems like the Western landscape is important to what you do. Where did you grow up?*

Letha Wilson I grew up in Colorado. That definitely has a lot to do with the spaces that I'm drawn to. We lived on the plains and my dad was into ice fishing, backpacking ...

WJL *Ice fishing?*

LW Yeah. We had a little cabin near Estes Park. Every summer, my family and I would do a weeklong backpack trip in the mountains somewhere in Colorado. I think that was important to me, even though at the time I'm sure I was probably annoyed that my dad was dragging us on these trips. But in hindsight, I love that feeling of being in a remote space. Everything else kind of fades away and it's just you and the lands, and that sense of timelessness.

WJL *When did you first begin taking landscape photographs?*

LW It goes back to those backpacking trips. Our family would always have a little camera, and at the end of the summer my dad would go through all the photographs and choose the one he liked the best. He'd blow it up and have it framed on the wall. When I moved to the East Coast I had photographs from these trips, but the funny thing was I didn't know if I'd shot them because, as a family, we kind of passed the camera around. Once I left Colorado, I became fixated on those places and those images. I love sculptural objects and this idea that a work can be immersive and you can have a physical relationship to it. I always wanted to make sculpture, but I naturally have more of a 2D eye. Taking a photograph, that kind of framing, comes very naturally to me. But building things was something I really had to work at. It wasn't until the end of graduate school that I made my first piece that was literally combining a photograph and a sculpture, where the form comes out of the image. That's when I started thinking, why are there all these rules about photography?

WJL *I was curious whether you were drawn towards photographers or sculptors.*

LW Well, I was a painting major at Syracuse. One of my professors, Sharon Gold, talked about looking at art as being like decoding images. Whatever the format or material is, it just brings

Above: Portrait of Letha by Guzman.
Right: *Headlands Beach Steel Pipe Bend*, 2018, by Letha Wilson. **Left:** Momo posing in livingroom.



in another layer of looking at and talking about art. I was really interested if something could be sculpture, painting, and photography simultaneously. I was making work, but I was also taking all these other classes learning a lot of processes, so I could understand what I could create using mold-making or layering images onto fabric. My peers were always painters and sculptors. I never took a photography class and I feel like an outsider as far as photography goes. But the thing is that, eventually, I realized these pieces I was making, these extrusions using digital prints and sculptural forms were kind of cumbersome. So in order to break down my practice into something more immediate, I started printing in the dark room, which has been a huge part of my process. I've been printing for 12 years, but, still, I go to the dark room and they're like, "Which enlarger lens do you need?" And I'm like, "I don't know." I don't know the technical lingo of photography, but I know how to do what I need to do. My goals are just different. I shoot with this old box camera, a Yashica-Mat, so there's a certain amount of not seeing and not knowing what I'm doing. And then, when I'm in the dark room, I just want to see images as quickly as possible. I know that I'm going to subject these prints to extreme duress, so I print quickly and really large — and the colors can shift. But it isn't perfect color that I'm looking for.

WJL *Right. Your priorities are different.*

LW Yeah, exactly. There could be dust or things out of focus. Of course I'm trying to do the best I can, but there'll be these happy accidents and it's all OK. I think one part of my practice is trying to release the preciousness of the photograph. I used to look for a certain kind of vista. But I realized I could use a beautiful landscape, or it could just be two rocks on the ground — it's all potentially something I could use. I just try to be present and take in what I can. It relieves the pressure of shooting.

WJL *When you're shooting, are you consciously thinking about ways you're going to manipulate the photograph?*

LW I'm not thinking ahead to what the piece is, except sometimes I see something and I know that it will translate well. I think more generally in terms of the mood. I did this trip to Hawaii a few years ago, and I've used those images so much. Sometimes it's almost more of a color that I'm looking for. That's what I like about working with photography; the images change as you change. I can always find new inspiration by going back through my archives. I think of my work as like cooking a meal from scratch; literally planting seeds, harvesting, to then cooking. And this whole cycle might take years.

WJL *What's your place like?*

LW It's a little 100-year-old fixer upper. I got it about four years ago and the first winter someone broke in and stole all the copper pipes in my basement. There was nothing in the house, I hadn't bought anything, not even a TV, but they took the one thing that was worth something: the copper pipes. There's a two-seater outhouse and it's right

along side of a creek, which is awesome. It's all very rural, so there's just farms all around me. I converted the garage into a studio, and have been gradu-

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ally working on it. Once I get settled, I would love to garden. I've been in New York City for 20 years; I never even had a backyard.

WJL *It must be great having your own creek.*

LW It was a huge reason I wanted this place. It's such a calming sound. You look at this river and think "This water is flowing regardless of all the bullshit going on."

WJL *Have you felt a change with your work since having the place in the country?*

LW It's really interesting. I love working outdoors, especially because I'm pouring concrete and stuff for my sculptures. I use to work outdoors assisting for Jason Middlebrook [Issue 6] — I loved those days. It has really been a goal of mine to get back to work outside again — to me that's the ultimate.

WJL *What was it like to collaborate with Guzman?*

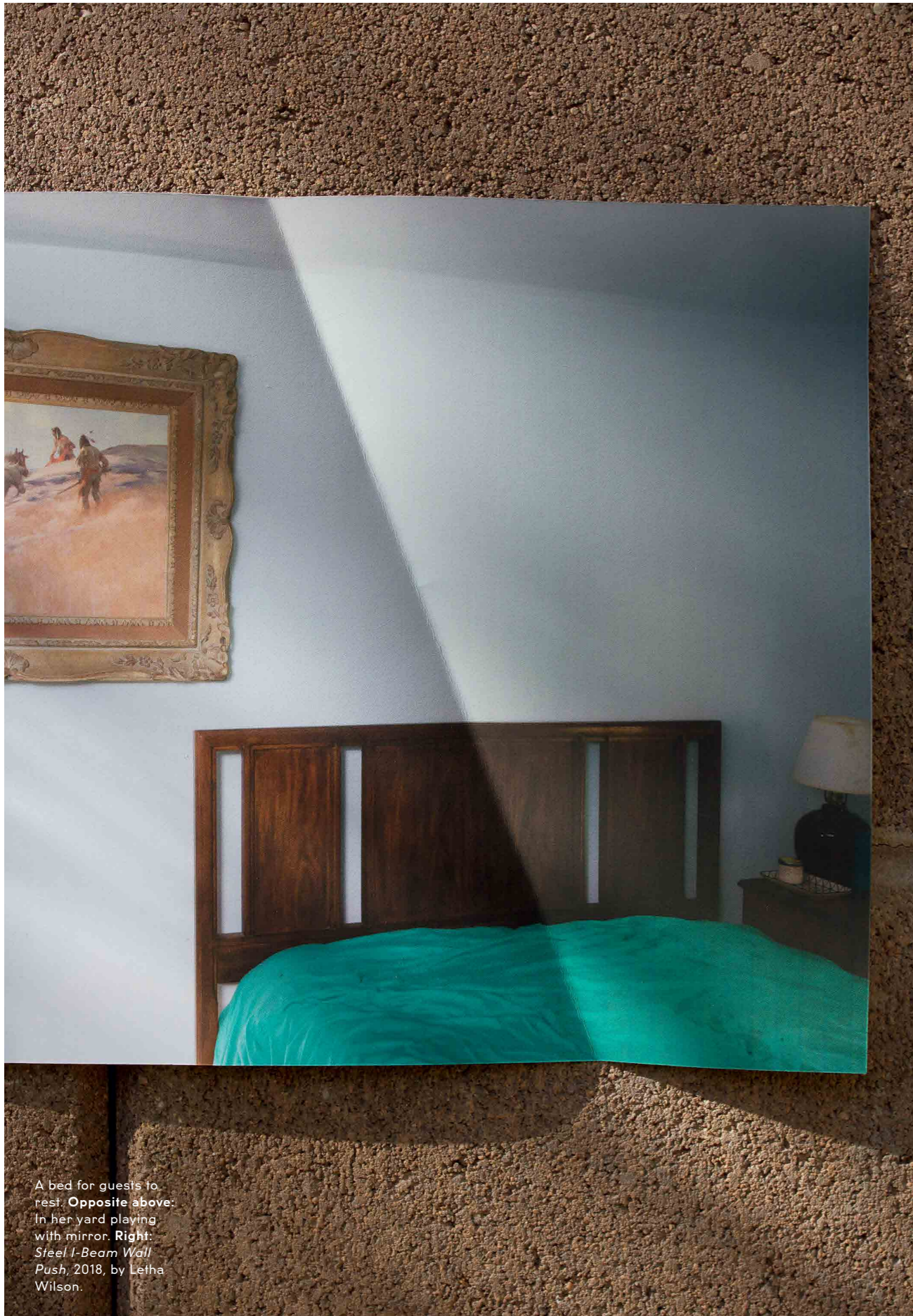
LW It was cool to see my place through their lens and see that a lot of the things that I see as problems, they ended up being drawn to, like the weird wallpaper, a giant hole, or a crack, which is kind of funny. Once Guzman handed me their photographs, I did my moves of slicing, cutting and folding the images, which I then photographed against backgrounds, like during a hike I did near Grand Canyon. Travel is a big part of my process so it was interesting to literally transplant images shot in the North East to out here in the West.

WJL *We talked about how you go about composing a photograph, but when you start a sculptural*



Right: *Hawaii California Steel (Figure Ground), 2017, by Letha Wilson.*
Opposite: *Got mail?*





A bed for guests to rest. **Opposite above:** In her yard playing with mirror. **Right:** *Steel I-Beam Wall Push*, 2018, by Letha Wilson.

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piece, how do you begin to make those decisions?

LW It depends. One thing I really like is to do projects where I am responding to a specific site. That's where I actually start the process. Responding to the architecture of a space is ideal. Sometimes I have an idea of a form and I go back through my archive and think about what image would work with it. Sometimes ideas could come from a test. Like, what happens if you weld the print on metal? Can I bend steel? What are the options? Often ideas come from the material. I spend so much time learning about paper. Like, what can that Kodak paper do? Does it fold? Does it crack? How does it react if I rip it? All papers have different reactions. There's also this thing about photography and archival-ness. You don't want it to stop you from trying things out but you need to be concerned enough about it to not be completely irresponsible.

WJL *It's funny you bring up the archival quality because photography is relatively new, many of the first important photographs, which are close to 200 years old, are starting to deteriorate.*

LW Yeah. And I think there's something really creepy about things that don't change. It's not natural for something to be so inert. If you've spent any time outdoors you realize that things constantly change and anything alive will die. The natural elements are powerful. I find that to be really interesting territory.

WJL *How do you understand your place in terms of photographic history?*

LW I never understood why photography was sort of sectioned out in terms of this art conversation. What do photographers think they're doing that separates them from artists? There is such convention surrounding photography, how it's framed, how it's hung, how it's presented. I am amazed that people assume that once the image is captured nothing happens after that. To me, that's just the beginning of the conversation. The image is not the end point but a starting point. And even going back to someone like Anna Atkins, I find it really interesting thinking about the first camera, the first photograph, the camera obscura. It's all really based on science, a spirit of experimentation and figuring out what works. I get excited about that. ■

Letha Wilson is represented by grimmgallery.com. Find William Jess Laird on Image Culture podcast & williamjesslaird.com. Guzman are regular contributors to UD. @lesguzman

