

ARTFORUM

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Letha Wilson

HIGHER PICTURES

How does an artist become both modish and quaint? Both timely and anachronistic? Such is the predicament of Letha Wilson. In photography circles, the conversation seesaws between ontology and social function—that is, between a modernist concern with medium specificity and a contextualist inquiry into photography's various "discursive spaces." Of late, a generation of young American photographers has tipped the scales toward the former topic, insisting on photography's status as an artistic medium by lavishing attention on its material support. Following the lead of Liz Deschenes, artists such as Walead Beshty, Mariah Robertson, and Farrah Karapetian have turned to the photogram, exploring light-sensitive paper's capacity to register the process of its own production and reflect the space of its display. Others have retained the camera but affix their pictures to supports of almost sculptural heft: the vacuum-formed plastic of Ethan Greenbaum, the twisted steel of Virginia Poundstone, or the bric-a-brac of Kate Steciw. In these respects, Wilson is unimpeachably of the moment, as her first solo exhibition included both photograms and photographs encased in, encrusted with, or backed by concrete.

Letha Wilson,
*Photogram New York
(Colorado)*, 2012,
gelatin silver print,
C-print, 24 x 17 x 1/2".



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Yet Wilson is also dowdily old-fashioned, by dint of her subject matter. Her penchant is for nature and landscapes—and not just any landscapes, but vistas of the American West: the Badlands, the Bonneville Salt Flats, the Grand Tetons. Here, Wilson is out of step with her peers, for another hallmark of recent photography has been the sculptural tableau. Erin Shirreff, Sara VanDerBeek, and Talia Chetrit all specialize in rigorously controlled arrangements of objects set before blank backdrops—an approach that protects photography's integrity as an art form by sealing it within the studio and its counterpart, the gallery. Straying into the wilderness, Wilson stumbles into photography's own more variegated past.

Take, for instance, Wilson's *Photogram New York (Colorado)*, 2012. Whereas Beshty's and Robertson's photograms bear polychrome abstractions, announcing little beyond their own origin in a darkroom, Wilson's captures the white-on-black silhouette of a pine branch, invoking the nineteenth-century use of cameraless photography to catalogue botanical specimens. Wilson has cut into and peeled back a circular portion of the photogram to reveal that there is a second photograph attached to its backside, a C-print showing a pine tree in situ. Two forms of photographic "truth" fold into each other. For the casual browser of *National Geographic*, the C-print offers the more vivid depiction of plant life, yet the trained botanist finds more reliable data in the photogram's isolation and flattening of its object. The photogram wavers between artistic medium and scientific tool.

Wilson's "concrete" photographs point to traditions of documenting the American West usually traced back to Timothy O'Sullivan and Eadweard Muybridge. In *Badlands White*, 2012, Wilson crumples C-prints of rugged South Dakota terrain between rough-hewn layers of actual concrete. The grain of the photographs rubs against the coarse texture of stone, conjuring the effect of a stratified rock face and serving as a reminder that most early photography of the West occurred under the auspices of the US Geological Survey, which balanced popular demand for spectacular images with the need for accurate topographical records. The composition is dense and craggy, with a crevice running at a diagonal through its center—a rift that's a fitting emblem for current photographic practice, given the stress and fractures that result from attempts to suppress photography's restive heterogeneity.

—Colby Chamberlain