

Photographs connect us with the past by capturing an image of a particular moment, thereby inviting the viewer to engage a conversation between then and now, there and here, other and self. Maybe we look for something familiar in a strange setting, or vice versa: a dialog in which we have participated for over a hundred years. But contemporary photographic artists are challenging the traditional conversation with exciting combinations of methods and materials, including forays beyond photo paper which expand the boundaries of the medium and role of the photographer. Betsy Kenyon, in her new project *LightHouse*, negotiates a multitude of dualistic realms, binaries, and pairings in an abstract mode that shifts between the precisely geometrical and a rangier, dynamic form. This work—photographs, sculpture, and installation—explores dimensions of a place, a past, and the physical body which are not merely surface but also an interiority brighter, darker, and stranger than we could have imagined.

The two primary materials of Kenyon's new work are also primary components of life. First there is light: the filament bulb used to expose the photos, its mate hanging in the closet, and all of the brighter areas in her photographs, some of which register not as light on an object, but pure light just leaving its source. Then there is carbon: the filament in the two bulbs, the soot in the sumi ink, and the darkness evoked by the blackest shapes, shadows, and figures. The two are neither opposing forces nor disparate energies; light and dark are extensions of one another, ends of the spectrum. It is difficult not to see light and dark (life and death, past and present, etc.) as separate and opposite, but in Kenyon's work they are never so starkly defined, even when the transition from one to the other is sharp and sudden. (There is always grey; there has to be.) Light uninterrupted travels forever. Carbon atoms cannot be destroyed. Aside from the Victorian references, the connection to the Gilded Age, and the complicated history of Governors Island (which inspired the work), Kenyon reaches deep into a mysterious past and connects the non-physical realm of hauntings and the occult with elements physical and scientifically trackable.

The traditional photographic process—using a camera and producing prints from negatives—captures images of the material world. Kenyon forgoes the camera and generates her prints by (in simplest terms) applying objects (including her body) and chemical developer directly to photo paper, then manipulating these materials, however she does it, giving us unique recordings that are not reproducible. Without the camera, something seemingly non-material manifests. Kenyon's process acts as a sort of photographic Ouija board. Not exactly a portal, but a lens *the other side* presses itself up against. Things are not represented; things are *revealed*. Perhaps the installation pieces can be viewed as the three-dimensional materialization of certain key items from an alternate space, more literal but still rendered strange.

By working with two irreducible components, carbon and light, Kenyon's work asks a timeless question: what never dies / what lives forever? Among totally abstract pieces are those where the human reveals itself, though never completely or without suggesting disfigurement and decomposition, a state of transition to whatever the body becomes after it passes. If the work in *LightHouse* reaches for the light and dark extending from a distant past, doesn't it also suggest some kind of future? Will the light cast by these works keep traveling and show up mysteriously in some unimaginable elsewhere? Will the dark (as carbon, a shadow, an outline) be highlighted by that light as it gives form to negative space? Kenyon's work engages the relationships between then and now, there and here, self and other by finding the thread that connects the two ends of such binaries, each one a variation of light and dark and always making time feel like something alive, slippery, and moving. The carbon filament bulb does not shine forever, but perhaps that which is produced in/by its light can attempt to.

-Jason Labbe