

Jenna Westra: Armatures

By Susan L. Stoops

How we construct meaning from Jenna Westra's photographs lies, in part, in our consideration of the relation between the printed image and the action that took place before the camera in her studio. The looking process engages in the residue of that experience. It also involves reconciling the artifice that is part of her staged photographic process with the forms of genuine connectivity – spatial, tactile, temporal, visual – that characterize Westra's images and provide the formal and conceptual frameworks upon which her photographs are structured.

The studio as a set – a place where animate bodies behave in relation to other bodies and inanimate props – plays a prominent role in Westra's work. Hyper-conscious of translating a live, three-dimensional environment into a static two-dimensional print form, Westra conceptualizes photographs as fragments of isolated interactions and as images that maintain a complicated spatial coherence with the existing space of the studio. Pre-execution, Westra keeps an image sketchbook – a situational playlist of sorts – with simple verbal descriptions of choreographed scenarios and directions for her models; once on set, she embraces elements of chance and unforeseeable possibilities that emerge from exploring different camera angles. Westra's curiosity translates into a creative freedom that is apparent in the photographs.

While Westra's work is indebted to photography as a conceptual practice (a position pioneered by the previous generation) it also is informed by the photo-documentation of postmodern dance and performance of the 1960s. Repeated, pedestrian gestures established alternative ways for bodies to move through space and interact with objects. The presence of the camera not only documented these ephemeral performances but directed post-performance viewers' attention to particular actions and framed certain perspectives.

The young figures populating Westra's photographs (non-professional models, often female, sourced on-line) engage in unexpected yet nonchalant gestures and physical transactions – legs raised, arm bent, head turned, leaning, holding, reaching – with their positions transmitting signals of the body as a variable not a constant. Props and bodies, regularly redefined as cropped fragments, perform interdependently in a non-hierarchical arena measuring space, defining shape, and marking time. Geometry is interrupted by sinuous curves, fabric folds, and body contours. Specificity of surface textures – flesh, hair, cloth, wood – and strategic passages of color against neutral backdrops impart to the photographs an authenticity and formal presence. Westra's compositions privilege encounters that create dynamics of visibility and obscurity, presentation and concealment, which are replete with complex relations to female subjectivity.

In a trio of black-and-white images, *Anna Gaze Studies 1-3* (2019), Westra deconstructs the constant negotiation between photographer, subject-model, studio set, and viewer. A closely cropped image affords proximity to the subject but reveals little, suggesting instead the ways information beyond the frame (or concealed, like the model's face behind her hair) can be unknowable yet trigger content for

our imaginations. In contrast, two full-frame exposures present the environs of the studio set but disclose different details, the most prominent being the model's transformation in pose and gaze from passivity to agency. The studies compel us not only to look for meaning in the relations among the three images but in the connections between the newly constructed reality of the photograph and the dynamics Westra once directed in the studio.

On the Occasion of *Armatures*

Jenna Westra at Anthony Greaney, Somerville, MA.

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