

Crown Point Press

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End Grain: The Displaced Shadow

New Photogravures by Catherine Wagner

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Still Wave, 2021

"I've always looked at contemporary culture and reflected on what are, in effect, some of the major building blocks of who we are—science, the built environment, notions of home/domesticity, institutions of learning, etc. ...A variety of disparate subject matter is a foundational component of how contemporary culture is constructed."

—Catherine Wagner

Crown Point Press presents an exhibition of new photogravures by Bay Area artist/photographer Catherine Wagner. She completed her first project with Crown Point Press in the fall of 2021. Wagner is known for her observation and documentation of inanimate objects in series. She is interested especially in our collective history and the evidence of time's passage and how culture is revealed through language and architecture. For her project at Crown Point she chose to work with small blocks of wood with their ends cut to emphasize the grain. "These elemental shapes serve as basic architectural gestures; foundational pieces constructed to define shape, space, and volume," Wagner said.

Wagner has created multiple meanings within a structured format. Her new prints show the passage of time as similar to the way we can understand the history of a tree by observing its growth rings. Photogravure is used as a tactile language, minimal in design. The images are all printed in the same shade of blue and they illuminate the tangible, sensual experience of the blocks. For this project, Wagner created a nine-panel print, five diptychs and three large single images.

On her first day in the studio, Wagner announced she was in her "blue period" and added that the work she was making in her own studio has architectural foundations. To begin her print project, she created a studio within the studio at the press. She brought professional lights and cameras and used them to photograph small end-grain blocks that she had fabricated into various geometric shapes specifically for this project. Although the sculptures she constructed from these blocks were temporal, their images are captured in the medium of photogravure. Wagner often shoots her photographs on site, she said. Atmosphere, architecture, and the history of a place are important elements in her process. She commented that the light coming through the Crown Point studio windows and the beams of the architecture were an inspiration for the project consistent with her practice of developing a body of work on site.

The Crown Point printers, led by Emily York, made film positives from the photos Wagner took, in the studio. These images were exposed through light-sensitive gelatin and etched with aquatint into the copper plates. (The process is called photogravure.) The shade of blue Wagner created for all the prints, she said, is reminiscent of

the blue used in architectural drawings. In fact, Wagner was pleased to learn that the engineering firm Kennedy Jenks, a previous tenant in the building had offered blueprint services to architects.

The first print Wagner completed, *Language I*, looks a bit like an eye chart, though the shapes can also be seen as building-blocks for language. While working on this image, Wagner said she became very aware of the empty space between and around the shapes, and the shadows took on an important life of their own. The second print, *Language II: Displaced Shadow*, celebrates the shadows as entities unto themselves. While looking at the studio wall where the two prints were pinned up for viewing, Wagner said, “The shadow in itself is a wonderful image.” After she made the first two prints, the objects and their displaced shadows became the main theme of the project.

The final print, *Still Wave*, presents a scaled-up image of a piece of wood with an exaggerated end grain and curved on one side. We can see time’s physical passage in the growth rings of the wood. Wagner remarked that the image represents time as an abstraction. She has said, “photography both embraces and eludes literal description, offering a reinterpretation that moves beyond whatever happened in front of the camera. Much of my thinking about this is based on the idea that there is nothing more mysterious than a well-described fact.”

Along with Wagner’s work, the exhibition includes prints by two artists she has chosen from the Crown Point inventory. Wagner asked that the artists Sol LeWitt and Richard Tuttle be included as they were influences in the early stages of her career. She wrote these statements about them:

“The way that Richard Tuttle uses seemingly simple gestures, and the way he works with banal materials, have always made me think about language and poetry. His humble and brilliant 2D and 3D works are negotiations between opacity and transparency. For me, architecture and language have always been cultural barometers as well as mirrors of time in which we live.”

“I have long admired Sol LeWitt’s idea process. For me, thinking is a sensual pleasure. During the pandemic, I’ve spent the last two years making a series of wall drawings/paintings/photographs. So LeWitt’s work has been in the forefront of my thoughts. I’ve always associated his work with a vocabulary of instructions, where his language becomes form. The shadows are displaced, leaving a perceptible residue of the language that was once there.”

Catherine Wagner was born in San Francisco. She studied at the Instituto del Arte, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, 1970-71, and also studied briefly at the San Francisco Art Institute. She received a BFA in 1975 and an MFA in 1981 from San Francisco State University. She has taught at Mills College since 1986, and in 2017 was awarded the inaugural Nancy Cook Endowed Chair in Photography. Her work is held in many collections including those of the de Young Museum, San Francisco; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Tate Modern, London. Wagner has received the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award in 1987 and the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome in 2013. In addition, Wagner has completed many public art works, most recently a site-specific installation in the new Yerba Buena Museum subway station, San Francisco.

Catherine Wagner lives and works in San Francisco. She is represented by Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.