

# Worlds Within Worlds

by Karen Irvine, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago

*Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination...*

-Gaston Bachelard

Dean Kessmann has long been interested in examining the ordinariness of the spaces we inhabit. By offering unconventional views of standard architecture, such as the white box of the gallery, a university classroom, or his own apartment, Kessmann creates new, photographic spaces that approach the uncanny. By selectively focusing his camera on details, he abstracts three-dimensional architectural spaces into two-dimensional images that incite the imagination and reveal the complexities of perception.



*Untitled (Washington House #5), 2009*

In two of his series that preceded *Architectural Intersections*, Kessmann revealed that which is invisible in architectural spaces, uncovering layers of construction materials and markings that are normally hidden from view. In *The Spaces In Between* (2001), he probed gallery walls by x-raying them and displaying the resulting images of pipes, wires, and shadows as back-lit transparencies hung over the exact spot in which they were made. In a subsequent project, *Below the Surface* (2007), Kessmann took photographs of a wall under construction at the university where he teaches, recording the pencil marks made by builders and the joint compound that smoothes out and seams slabs of drywall together. In both projects Kessmann allows his viewer into spaces that normally remain unseen, revealing traces of construction that like fossils, are evidential and demarcate the passage of time. Ultimately, he reveals the intricacy of the building process as well as the layers of chaos and detail that occur between the idealism of architectural drawings and their translation into polished, finished form. He also hints, in a more metaphorical sense, at the inner workings and complications that exist behind pristine facades of all types.

In Kessmann's most recent body of work, *Architectural Intersections* (2009), he shifts his focus to the surface of architecture by offering fresh views of that which is in plain sight. By shooting photographs of the ceilings and walls of his post-War apartment in Washington, DC, and then turning them upside-down, he creates images of spaces that appear elemental and empty. The light casts soft shadows in the neutral interior, and the intersecting planes of walls and ceiling combine to create minimal

compositions of shape, color and line. Like the two series discussed above, in this work Kessmann confines himself to strict parameters, and through editing and cropping creates images that explore the limits of representational space. Like Aaron Siskind's pictures of tar markings, or Harry Callahan's close-ups of seaweed or his wife Eleanor's body, Kessmann's photographs have bold graphic form and approach abstraction, but ultimately remain true to their representational subject. This tension between representation and abstraction—between seeing and knowing—is an engaging condition of his artwork.

The sculptor Robert Morris once observed “It would seem that photography has recorded everything. Space, however, has avoided its cyclopean evil eye.”<sup>1</sup> Kessmann understands that being in a space and seeing it represented in a two-dimensional image are very different experiences, but his work resists the idea that photography simply folds the three-dimensional world into a static, two-dimensional surface. Photography may not be able to record space, but it can *convey* space. Kessmann employs various strategies to activate and heighten the ambiguity of the spaces he depicts. His images are limited to planes of painted drywall and are cropped so that there are no interruptions by windows, doorways, outlets, or any other detail that might help orient the viewer in the room or provide a sense of scale. He then further complicates the reading of his images by turning them upside down. What makes them compelling is our need to make sense of them, how automatically our mind's eye turns the ceiling into a floor and the soffits into platforms or steps. Our persistent faith in photography as an agent of the real arguably exacerbates this desire to make sense of the image. Ultimately, Kessmann's work poses provocative questions: Isn't the illusion of space in photography—its fidelity to the real—the very thing that makes it compelling, possibly troubling? Is there a strict distinction between phenomenological space and imagined space, and how unambiguous, or understandable for that matter, is the difference between the two experiences?



*Untitled (Washington House #9), 2009*

In his book *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes extensively on how the imagination is predisposed to responding to the home environment. To Kessmann, it is significant that the spaces he captures are the domestic spaces that surround him on a daily basis, yet he does not usually consider in a very profound way. In fact, all of his projects from the past decade are based on observations of his immediate environment. According to Bachelard, the personal dwelling, our first frame of reference, shelters and incites the imagination, and is fertile territory for daydreaming, “A house that has been inhabited is not an inert box,” he writes.<sup>2</sup>

By controlling our view and eliminating almost all identifying architectural characteristics in the spaces he records, Kessmann obscures the fact that the images he makes are of his own apartment. This strategy is not to deny the personal nature of the space depicted, however, but rather to demonstrate that magical, immersive experiences can be found in the most ordinary of places. One image, *Untitled (Wisconsin House #9)*, expresses this well. The only seemingly blurry picture in the series, it was shot during sunset when the light was so intense that it made it difficult for Kessmann's



*Untitled (Washington House #8), 2009*

camera, or for his eyes, to register any clear distinction between the wall and the ceiling. In this chance occurrence he discovered a beautiful light effect that rational planning could not have anticipated.

Like the photographer Luisa Lambri, who also takes photographs of light infused, minimal spaces, Kessmann is interested in an intimate and subjective, rather than an objective, cold, or comprehensive view of a place. But unlike Lambri and other contemporary

artists such as Thomas Ruff or Hiroshi Sugimoto, all of whom explore the evocative power of iconic buildings, Kessmann's images reveal that a sense of magic can be found anywhere, in any sort of architecture, ultimately proving that the essence of a building exists in the person who experiences it. His work also invites us to consider the experience of architecture as a set of fragmented, highly subjective moments instead of an easily labeled, unified whole.

Like Rachel Whiteread's casts of house interiors, Kessmann's photographs bring spaces to life that are usually ignored or uncelebrated, yet provide us with the framework for our most fundamental sense of security. A photograph, of course, is a unique kind of threshold, to stand in front of its flat surface and read it as an inhabitable space requires an unanchored mind. Like the corners of the ceiling when viewed upside down, a photograph provides a complicated abstraction of the experience of being there. Kessmann's work demonstrates that the translation of three dimensions into two dimensions can open up worlds within worlds, and create spaces that our imaginations are able to roam. Like Bachelard, Kessmann treats the home as a haven for our thoughts and dreams, found in corners that are activated by concentrated looking.

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Karen Irvine is Curator and Manager of Publications for the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago, where she is also an adjunct instructor of photography. She has organized numerous exhibitions, including *Paul Shambroom: Evidence of Democracy*; *Alec Soth: Sleeping by the Mississippi*; *Shirana Shabbazi: Goftare Nik/Good Words*; *An-My Le: Small Wars*; *Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography*, a group show investigating the role of hearing and seeing in perception; *The Furtive Gaze*, artists who use the camera as a surveillance instrument, and *Camera/Action*, on the relationship between performance art and photography as a record of experience. She received her MFA in photography from FAMU, Prague, Czech Republic and her Masters of Arts in art history from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space (1978)," *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 201, in *Sculpture and Photography*, Geraldine A. Johnson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 237.

<sup>2</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 47.