

**ZOE LEONARD  
AT TRANS  
AVANT-GARDE GALLERY,  
SAN FRANCISCO,  
APR 20 - MAY 18, 1991  
AND AT MATRIX GALLERY,  
UNIVERSITY ART  
MUSEUM, BERKELEY,  
APR 17 - JUNE 29, 1991**

**BY LIZ KOTZ**

**Poetic** investigations of public space and spectacle, Zoe Leonard's photographs display a concern with patterns, structures, and relationships that can be seen only at a distance. This is most evident in her series of aerial photographs, some of which were recently at Trans Avant-Garde Gallery in San Francisco.

**With** their aerial views of cityscapes and landscapes, these black and white prints initially look like surveillance photographs. Yet upon examination they become something very different, much more interior. This is especially true of the diptych *Scary Cloud #1 & #2* (1989), a quirky contemplation of abstract forms and movement, and the associations the viewer can project onto them. Another intriguing series of

clouds shot from an airplane (included in her one-person show at Gisela Capitain Gallery in Cologne) mediates the clouds with the outline of the curved window, the shadow of the wing, and the streaked, reflected glass. Insistently subjective, these photographs evoke the combined fascination of looking at clouds from this vantage point with the incredible boredom of air travel, and the habitual experience of distance, dislocation, and enforced inactivity. Such a sense of detachment underlies almost all of Leonard's work, which implicitly distances itself from the idea of photography as a kind of immediate, unmediated recording of the world. Focusing on the ephemeral reality of "perfect moments" or newsworthy events, Leonard investigates everyday surroundings, the structures embedded in daily life, and the systems visible from afar.

**Viewed** from the air, all is pattern and surface: tract homes, roofs, sports arenas, roads.



Alongside the aerial shots of cities—Paris, Washington, D.C.—Leonard mounts close-up photographs of a model of New York City, a globe, and a map of Japan. In these instances, the object of examination is not the world represented, but the almost abstract patterns of lines, forms, and planes of the model. Lit from the side, the map is explored as surface, with its creases and crinkles looking like hills and valleys; the globe, rather than representing something else,

is examined as an object, with its own form and texture. This tendency toward visual abstraction is most evident in the photographs of train tracks (*Untitled Aerial*, 1987/90), and a baseball field. Aestheticizing these mundane and everyday forms, the images also gently probe their pervasiveness, their ordering of movement, their grid-like and highly controlled structures. The visual rhyming within the exhibition—the honeycomb-like hills of *Cappadocia #2* (1987/90) and the photograph of a honeycomb—plays with a logic of association and substitution. The endless cities and grids and the desire to plan, map, and control evokes Walter Benjamin, whose study of Paris of the nineteenth century often serves as a paradigm for the analysis of city planning and urban design as forms of modern surveillance and control. Yet Leonard's photos, as assembled at Trans Avant-Garde, read less as a critique of scientists and planners than as a fascination with pattern, design, and obsessive systems of organization.

**Such** a fascination with the aesthetic qualities of order (and the ordering qualities of aesthetics) may have more to offer at this point, now that the critique of supposedly objective systems of science, medicine, journalism, etc., has become so taken for granted. Like Michel Foucault, whose work on the panopticon has sometimes been read too loosely as a metaphor of the modern state, Leonard seems interested in visual structures and aesthetic systems as forms of power and organization. Like Foucault's method, which is often more literary than sociological, Leonard's work tends to seize on a particularly telling instance in which certain relations of power and desire become more visible and most knotted. The process of interrogation is personal, casual. There's a pleasurable arbitrariness to Leonard's images that suggests a selection governed more by chance and whim, and by certain

recurring obsessions, than by any systematic analytic framework. The most opaque images are also some of the most powerful. For instance, *Water #1 & #2* (1988) look at water not as wetness or fluidity but as mass, power, and force. The ocean's surface of contours and lines looks like nothing so much as skin magnified. Collapsing the micro- and macrocosmic, Leonard's photos play on a fascination with the idea of a cosmos, an ordering system, a worlding.

**Leonard's** method of observation is most evident in the Matrix exhibition, which presents six carefully controlled recordings of melodramatic subject material. An image of a bullfight suggests the intersecting obsessions of site and spectacle, and an interest in theatrically controlled spaces as arenas of contest and negotiation, in which the bullfighter—or, in another image, a fashion model—engages and manipulates the gaze of the spectator. Attuned to the nuance of interplay between performer and audience, Leonard probes the ambiguity of being-looked-at, exploring it as a position of both power and vulnerability.

**The** notes to the Matrix show relate Leonard's work to the possibility of a "lesbian gaze," merging objectification and identification, which can be counterpoised to the 1980s feminist photography of Kruger, Sherman, et al., predicated on a more dualistic male-female axis of power. While that argument can be made, I'm not sure this is the work to make it. Such an interplay of desire and looking was more evident at the earlier Luhring Augustine Hetzler show in L.A., where Leonard's photograph of two models meeting eyes on the runway (not included in the Matrix exhibition) was juxtaposed with an image looking up a model's skirt (*Frontal View, Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show*, 1990). The latter photograph, especially as presented at Matrix, suggests not so much eroticism as the awkwardness underneath spectacles of glamour and beauty, with its view of exposed pantyhose and dizzying lights.

**Investigating** the operations of artifice and masquerade, the Matrix installation examines the structures and rituals that uphold spectacle and performance. It moves from the image of the bullfighter to a large gilt mirror, to an arresting image of an eighteenth century female anatomical model (*Wax Anatomical Model, Full View from Above*, 1990) with a string of pearls around her neck. This last image is a strangely erotic figure, whose languid pose and long blond hair say a lot about the intersection of the scientific and the erotic. Dating from a premodern era, its baroque trappings offer a glimpse of medical science's history; viewed with a distance of time, the intertwined mechanisms of desire and control are more naked and yet more anxious.

Anchored by an earlier photograph of a cross-dressed man (*Iola Carew—Wearing my Slip*, 1981), the installation positions gender as a form of performance, a sometimes precarious spectacle. This sense of spectacles caught in a moment of instability or awkwardness seems central. Leonard's photographs are most interesting when they move beyond an overtly politicized reading of gender and sexuality to probe the peculiar fascination of certain images and the implicit gaps in totalizing theories of power and representation. At this point, photographic work critiquing sexual representation has become quite formulaic; undoubtedly informed by these analyses, Leonard's work differs from much 80s feminist photography in her commitment to beauty, making beautiful objects meant for the gallery, and aestheticizing her implicit analysis in these gorgeous, grainy, very seductive photographs.





