

2016/17 Jerome Fellow Interview: Kelsey Olson

Story by Aaron Olson-Reiners. May 2017.



Kelsey Olson, Untitled (detail), 2017, inkjet, photogram, rubber cement, vinyl, on silver gelatin paper, 14 x 11 in.

In this interview, Kelsey Olson discusses her wide-ranging photographic practices in relation to other forms of artmaking, the value of the unquantifiable, and the nuances of artistic intention.

Does exploration or surprise play a role in your approach to photo processes? Is making work a way of learning? What does your studio practice teach you?

Of course making is a way of learning. That seems true for almost any activity—art related or otherwise. But yes, most work starts with wondering if it is possible to make something and then figuring out how to do so. Making things leaves you with more questions; questions you may not have anticipated when you began. There’s always a lot of exploration to see what’s productive, interesting, and hopefully surprising. Some people think that process or material-driven work “puts the cart before the horse” by “having form but no content.” But it’s a total fallacy to believe that one aspect must come first and is more important than the other; that form and content are independent of one another. Form and content are inextricably linked. They make each other. Not recognizing that is a failure. My work feels wide-ranging to me, although I choose to work with a fairly limited photo/darkroom/studio setup. I usually use readily available

materials and resourceful methods to make my work. The idiosyncrasies of my process are tools that can be used in multiple ways and combined with what I continue to learn and discover.

Does your photographic work have a relationship to painting?

Yes, but also a relationship to printmaking. The photo-based works I make are unique—not edited or reproducible. They are made over a period of time like paintings can be and are sometimes very layered. But like many methods of printmaking, my process is often a sequence of steps that, once completed, cannot be undone. There is also a one-to-one, indexical relationship: one thing touches another and leaves a trace of itself. This is another trait that is shared by photo and printmaking. I also make paintings, and they actually have more in common with the photographic idea of “a moment frozen in time” or “a snapshot” than the photos I make do.



Untitled, 2017, digital photograph, dimensions variable

Is photography an inherently two-dimensional medium?

No. I love paper and have done a lot of origami and paper folding, so for me, flat things become three-dimensional forms so easily I find it hard to think of paper or prints or a photograph as just something two-dimensional. I think a lot of the distinctions made between categories—like photography and painting or representation and abstraction or two-dimensional and three-dimensional—are mostly useful for placing work in a genre or a historical or material context; they're a way to point someone in a general direction when talking or reading or writing about art.

When does the result of a photographic process cease to be "a photograph" and become "a sculpture or painting that incorporates a photographic process?"

It just depends on the work and how an artist wants to describe what they're making or how a viewer wants to describe what they're seeing. For me, some of the characteristics of photographic processes, like light sensitivity and the chemical abilities of the materials, are very important to the work but I don't get hung up on whether to define what I have made as a photo or a painting or a sculpture. I don't really consider that when I am making or looking at my own work. It seems limiting and unnecessary to try and define the work in ways that may or may not apply just for the sake of defining them.

How have your experiences in running exhibition spaces and publishing projects informed your studio work?

Activities outside of artmaking help you learn how to get things done: how to work on a timeline and meet a deadline, how to work with other people, and how to organize something bigger or totally different than what you might make on your own in the studio. The things I have done—running a space, working at a gallery, making a zine or a book, organizing events—are all ways to try out new roles and formats. My peers and I were taught in school that if you want something, like to have an exhibition, to make it on your own and not to wait for someone to offer you one. Figuring out how to do that will help you accomplish other projects in the future.

Things happen when and where you need them to. My housemates and I ran a gallery space together out of our garage for two years. We were fresh out of undergrad and wanted to see what people around us were making, meet artists, and have a place where younger people could have a show. It was a great experience but we got burned out and wanted to move on to new areas and interests in our lives—not to mention wanting to literally move out of the house we were renting. It's nice to have different aspects outside of your individual studio practice that are energizing and to let these happen when it feels right for as long as you want. This is not to say these projects are short-lived because they aren't taken seriously. It just means working on something and having fun with it, and not letting pressure (whether outside or self-induced pressure) to constantly professionalize or legitimize what you are doing wreck the spirit of why you started doing it in the first place.



International Conference Call, 2016, digital image, dimensions variable

Does community play a role in your studio work?

There are innumerable communities in Minneapolis and each person is a part of multiple communities. If I take “community” to mean the people I talk to and interact with on a regular basis, then yes, community does play a role in my studio work. I am around lots of artists, I try to keep up with what people are making in Minneapolis, have conversations with my peers about art/life, and see different exhibitions and events around town. All of these inevitably inform what I make in the studio even if it’s not easily named or apparent in the work itself. You can’t help but be influenced by your surroundings and in turn influence what’s around you including whatever communities you are a part of.

Has the post-election social/political climate affected how you understand your practice?

It has made me have a better defense for why art is important. Sometimes it is easy to think that art is useless and inconsequential when it feels like everything is falling apart around us. Especially when there are more obvious things one could do to help someone else or make a difference. But that thinking isn’t helpful. We need all kinds of art just like we need all kinds of science and activism and music and teachers and skilled labor because they each serve different purposes and speak to different people. There is no single, all-encompassing way in which art is important or can have an impact. The vastness of art and its effects are often diffused or hard to discern. Some art may neatly fit the metrics we use to quantify its worth in order to prove to institutions (like the government) that art is valuable and should be funded. But an artwork’s ability to fit a narrow, albeit occasionally useful, system of measurement should not be the litmus test for determining its necessity or importance. At the end of the day, people need to do what motivates them and brings them joy, happiness, pleasure, or purpose.

How important is it for viewers to grasp your intention for your work?

I don’t think viewers can totally know what an artist’s intentions are from looking at a work. I also don’t know how an artist knows if a viewer grasps their intentions unless you are able to talk to them or if someone writes about your work. Once you make something and put it out into the world it’s kind of on its own—available for whatever interpretation anyone wants to make. Intention can be so wide ranging too. It could be anything from a very general feeling the artist wants a viewer to have, to a very specific message they are trying to relay through their work. Just because an intention seems obvious in an artwork doesn’t mean that the work necessarily achieves those intentions. I think a lot of artists rely on language or written material to accompany the work to make sure the viewer gets what they want them to, but the writing itself may or may not successfully ensure that the viewer understands the work any better than without it. The thing that is so great about visual art is that you can look at a work (or read it or watch it), have a powerful, moving, or surprising response to it that could lie outside of the artist’s intentions but happen regardless of whether or not you fully grasp their intention.

What is your work's relationship to beauty? Do you strive to create beautiful work?

“Beautiful” is so subjective; it can literally be anything. I strive for a range—a range of how to make work, a range of the kinds of things I make—to make work that looks and feels different from one another (despite the similarities they often share). I want the work to be interesting, exciting, and beautiful to look at as well as to make.

What are your short-term and long-term goals as an artist?

In the short term, I’m trying to make good work for the Jerome exhibition! I’ve recently had some breakthroughs with a photo process idea I’ve been attempting for over a year now. So that is very exciting and helps give me a more definitive direction. Long term, the most basic goal is to keep making new work and pushing myself to do new things that maybe feel uncomfortable (like answering these questions). My hope is that if you work hard, enjoy what you do, and aren’t afraid to put your work out in the world, then opportunities—like exhibitions, collaborations, new projects, and interesting experiences—will inevitably arise. Not out of thin air but because of your continued hard work and commitment to what you make.

What qualities does "good art" have?

It depends on what “good” is or if an artist even wants to make “good” art. Either way, nobody knows what qualities “good art” has or will have. That’s why people keep working.