

BARBARA KASTEN

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Taylor Dafoe “87-Year- Old Artist Barbara Kasten on How Her
New Career-Defining Mono- graph Shows She’s More Than Just a
Photographer”

Artnet, March 2023

87-Year-Old Artist Barbara Kasten on How Her New Career-Defining Monograph Shows She's More Than Just a Photographer

The book unpacks the multidimensionality of the artist's practice.

Taylor Dafoe March 13, 2023



Barbara Kasten's best-known work is, in a sense, all about flattening. So good is she at this technique, though, that her successes have, ironically, had a flattening effect on how her work has been received, understood, and supported.

Fortunately, a new monograph from Skira looks to expand the narrative around the now 87-year-old artist. Called "Barbara Kasten: Architecture & Film (2015–2020)" (<https://www.skira.net/en/books/barbara-kasten/>), the book looks at the most recent chapter of her five-decade-long career—an ultra-fruitful period for the artist that coincided with a newfound interest in her work from a young generation of curators and critics—outside the limiting lens of photography.



"Barbara Kasten: Architecture & Film (2015–2020)," 2023, published by Skira.

If you've ever read an article or review about Kasten, chances are it contained a line like this: "In her studio, Kasten stages makeshift tableaux with angular pieces of plexiglass, mirror, and other industrial objects, then lights and photographs them."

You probably also learned about the illusive quality of her pictures and their supposed debt to the geometric abstractions of the Constructivists, say, or the material preoccupations of the Light and Space movement. You almost certainly read that she prefers old-school, analog processes, and never uses Photoshop.

This information is all accurate. It's even useful, offering readers ingress into the artist's reference-laden world. But you'll notice that in the passages above, as with almost every piece of writing about Kasten, the descriptions of the artist's work are actually just descriptions of her process, and they're recounted largely through the language of the photographic. That hasn't always sat well with her.

"The reality is that I never thought about myself as a photographer," Kasten said in an interview over video chat. She was in London at the time, prepping for her new show at Thomas Dane Gallery (<https://website-artlogicwebsite0087.artlogic.net/viewing-room/vip-02e5ad1f18414ad1935fd0e2ef3e1db3/>), and wearing a pair of effortlessly chic, pistachio-colored glasses.

Photography, she went on, is "sort of circumstantial to what I do. The core of what I do is really sculpture—sculpture that incorporates the use of space and color and light and form. All of those things are more important to me than the production of a photograph that ends up being the object that you see."

But, Kasten conceded, "sometimes you get identified one way and people have a hard time letting go of it."



Barbara Kasten, *Collision 5E* (2016). Courtesy the artist and Bortolami Gallery, New York.

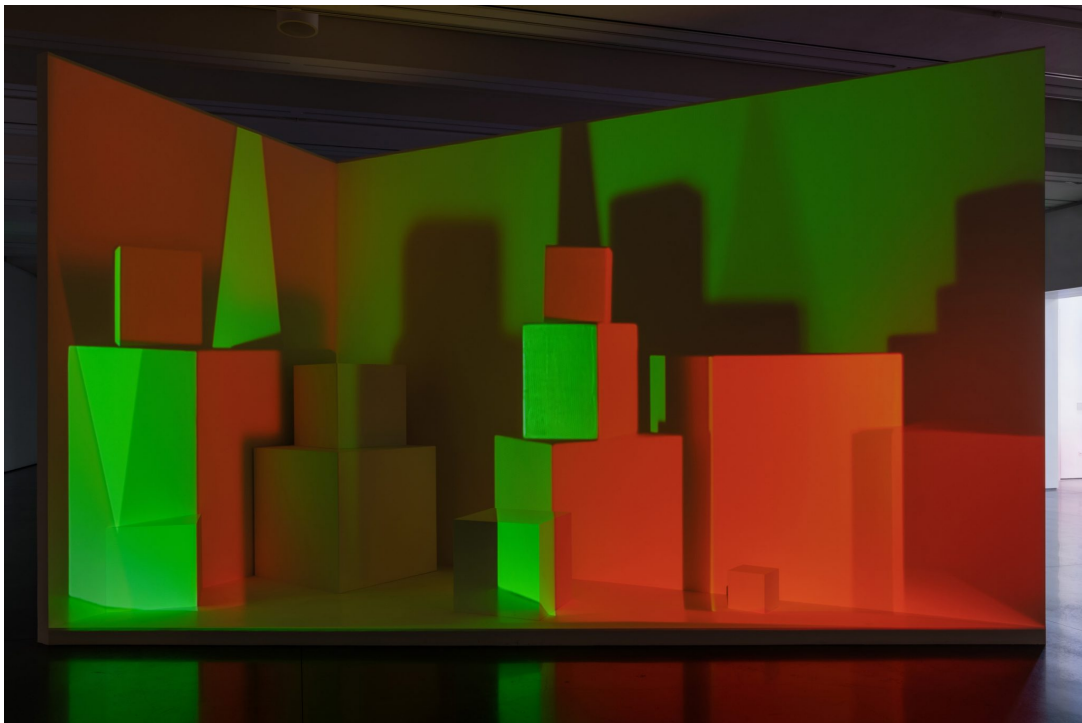
Indeed, much of the criticism around Kasten tends to focus on how her work exploits the flattening and compression effects of the camera to turn three-dimensional scenes into two-dimensional objects that play with perspective. And that makes sense. One of the joys in looking at a Kasten photograph is figuring out how they were made—and the artist, to her credit, often gives viewers just enough clues to solve the puzzle: Even as scale is distorted and perspective muddled, the materials are recognizable, as is the setting in which they were arranged and documented.

But with so much attention paid to her ability to turn photographic properties in on themselves, her work has historically been portrayed as though it was fundamentally *about* photography. Kasten is painted as a kind of dogmatic formalist who erects

temporary installations just to take a picture of them. The installations themselves, and the work that went into them, are subordinate to the final picture.

If this is the only aperture through which you think about Kasten, then her work will merely serve to reaffirm what we already know about photographic images—that they can be manipulated in the name of aesthetics or politics, that they lie. Such a single-minded approach lowers the ceiling of her creations. It also decenters the artist’s own role—and her body—in our understanding of her work.

This, Kasten said, is a masculine approach to thinking about photography that has been baked into the medium since its creation. “It was a mechanical, technical achievement rather than an artistic one that brought photography into our lives,” she said.



Barbara Kasten, *Scenario* (2015). Photo: RCH | EKH. Courtesy of the artist.

The limitations of the labels foisted on Kasten were apparent to curator Stephanie Cristello, who edited the Skira book. “When we started having these conversations,” Cristello said of her preparatory meetings with Kasten, “she was pretty vocal about a dissatisfaction of being lumped into a medium.”

For the curator, Kasten’s ephemeral, in-studio installations—not the photographs of them—are at the core of the artist’s practice.

“The camera figured into her work only insofar as it could document what was there before she had to take it down,” Cristello explained, adding that the book was borne from a question that doubled as a challenge: “How can we... provide a different perspective to where the photographs came from?” The book, she said, “is almost like a different origin story, but through the conversation of new work.”

With the monograph, Cristello posits new ways of situating Kasten's work, drawing connections to architecture, theater, choreography, and film. "I was trying to situate it as a phenomenological project—that is, a conceptual abstraction project," she said. "Sometimes there are photos, sometimes there are sculptures, sometimes there are installations, sometimes there's film. But in the end, it's all part of the same project."

The monograph's many plates document Kasten's recent creations, including the elaborate plexiglass and metal installation (<http://barbarakasten.net/artistcity-barbara-kastenchicago-s-r-crown-hall-at-iit-julyaugust-2018/#3>) she built for the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology, as well as the sculptural video pieces featured in her 2020 solo show "Scenarios" at the Aspen Art Museum (<https://www.aspenartmuseum.org/exhibitions/238-barbara-kasten-scenarios>). An essay by Cristello, meanwhile, looks back to some of Kasten's earlier, lesser-known bodies of work, such as a series of intimate cyanotypes and the stage set she designed for a 1985 collaboration with choreographer Margaret Jenkins.



Barbara Kasten, *Artist/City (Crown Hall)* (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York.

These artworks—the old ones and the new—do not easily fit the prescribed, process-obsessed descriptions so often found in writings about Kasten. But they're certainly not anomalies either. That these non-photographic creations haven't been seen as much is, for Cristello, a question not of quality, but support.

"I don't think the way she's worked has changed," the curator noted. "I just think the opportunities provided to her at this stage of her career have changed immensely."

In the interview, Kasten said she's "enjoying a renaissance" in terms of how her work is being appreciated—and who is doing said-appreciating.

“It’s a younger generation,” she explained, “that has been open to thinking differently and giving credit to other experiences that aren’t so rigid, so conservative. I’ve found an audience that relates to what I do. Age has nothing to do with it. We happen to be in different generations and are still able to speak to one another.”

BARBARA KASTEN

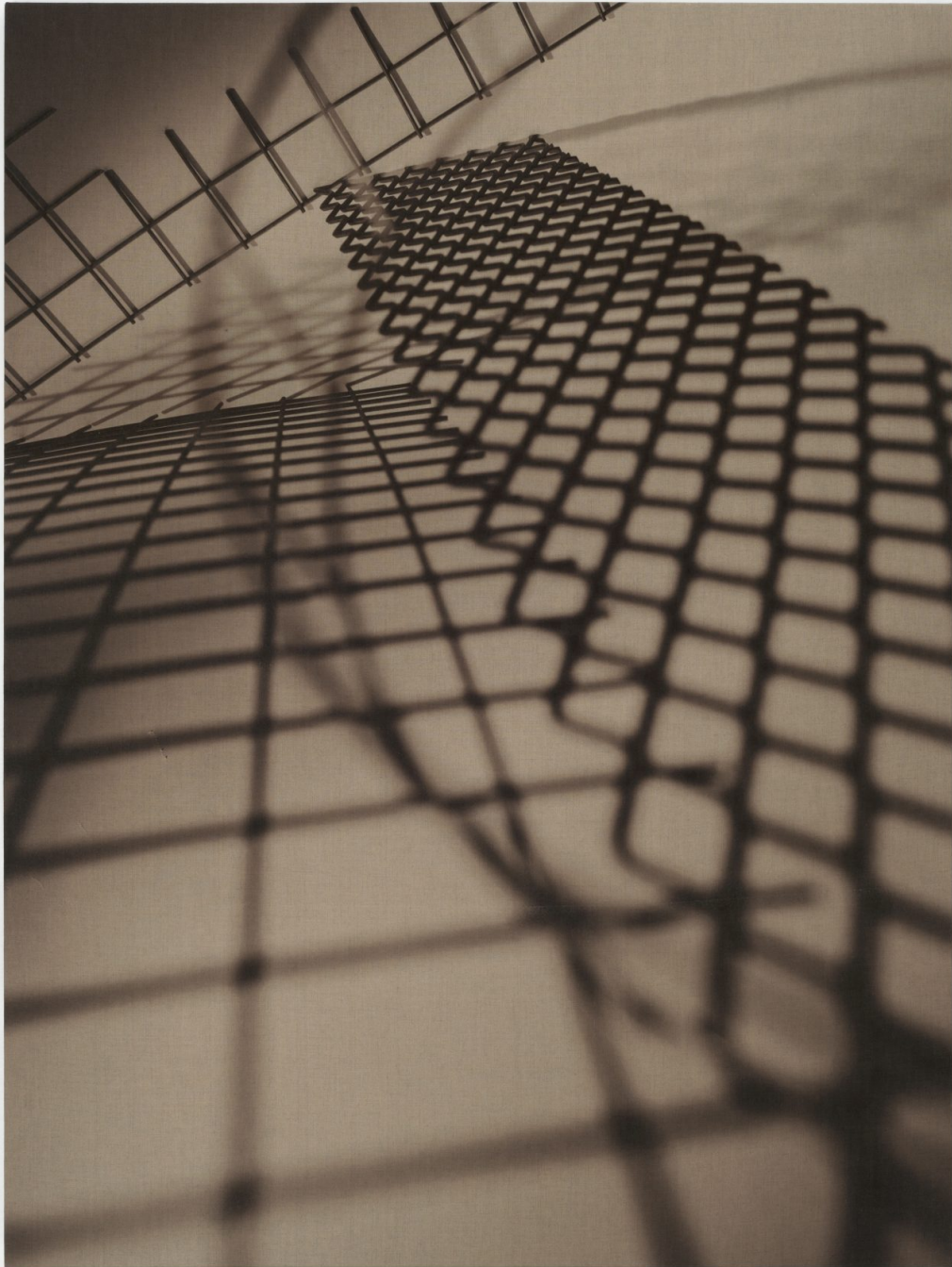
Susan Aurinko "A Builder of Images : A review of Barbara Kasten
at Document Space"

Newcity Art, November 2022

Visual Art Culture of Chicago and Beyond

A Builder of Images: A Review of Barbara Kasten at Document Space

NOVEMBER 9, 2022 AT 7:00 AM BY **SUSAN AURINKO**



Barbara Kasten, "PLAN II-A," 2022, archival pigment on raw linen, 56 x 42 inches

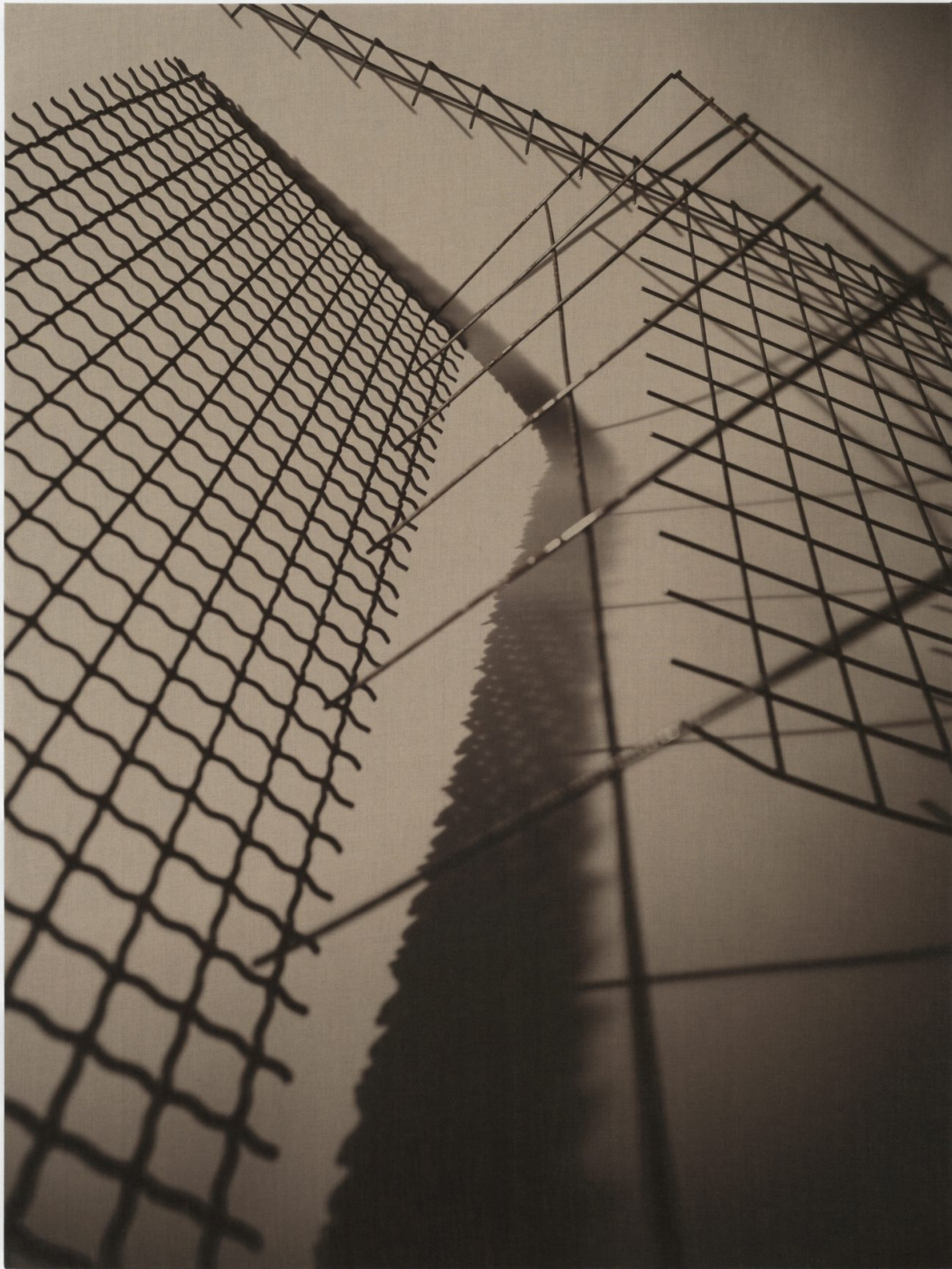
Barbara Kasten has been constructing things for her entire career. I have not been to her studio but imagine it to be a treasure trove of materials of myriad types. Her early work in the 1970s, particularly the "Amalgam" series, captures

shadows with lines intersecting forms, some even stitched with thread. In the 1980s, her images became colorful in “Architectural Sites” and “Metaphase” and, in the early 2000s, “Scene” and “Studio Constructs” shifted Kasten’s work into black-and-white, light and shadow, still material, still abstracts captured from compositions constructed in her studio, but more minimalist and ambiguous. For all those years, the majority, if not all, of Kasten’s work was two dimensional—three-dimensional constructions rendered into two dimensions by the camera.



Installation view. "Barbara Kasten: Architectural Fiction," Document Space, 2022

At Document Space, Kasten's large-scale photographs are only part of the whole piece. She has taken the construction out of the studio and into the gallery in a dramatically lit installation of four photographs archivally printed on linen. Wire fencing, lightly rusted, casts shadows on the white walls surrounding the printed images. The photographs themselves are strong, high-contrast diagonal geometric forms, created with fencing not unlike that that surrounds them. They are deep images, large and crisp in the middle ground, dissolving into softness elsewhere. The impression is stunning, and one feels completely inside the created space, as if entering a dream. That this very architectural work is printed on natural linen references the fact that architects' building plans were historically printed on linen, prior to the advent of the blueprints now in use and Kasten's images have a wonderful if somewhat chaotic architectural feel. As in all her work, lines intersect, and shadows become solid objects.



Barbara Kasten, "PLAN II-D," 2022, archival pigment on raw linen, 56 x 42 inches

Barbara Kasten has continued to surprise and amaze over the years, and this show extends her reign as a fierce and fearless artist who creates without trying too hard to please. She has always crafted work to the sound of her own

drummer, and once again has constructed something remarkable and quite magical.

"Barbara Kasten: Architectural Fiction" at Document Space, 1709 West Chicago. Through December 23

BARBARA KASTEN

Conversation with Stephanie Bailey “Barbara Kasten : out of the
box”

Occula, August 2020

OCULA

Conversation | Artist

Barbara Kasten: Out of the Box

In Conversation with

Stephanie Bailey

Wolfsburg, 7 August 2020



Barbara Kasten. Exhibition view: *Parallels*, Philara Collection, Düsseldorf (2 February–18 March 2018). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Susanne Diesner.

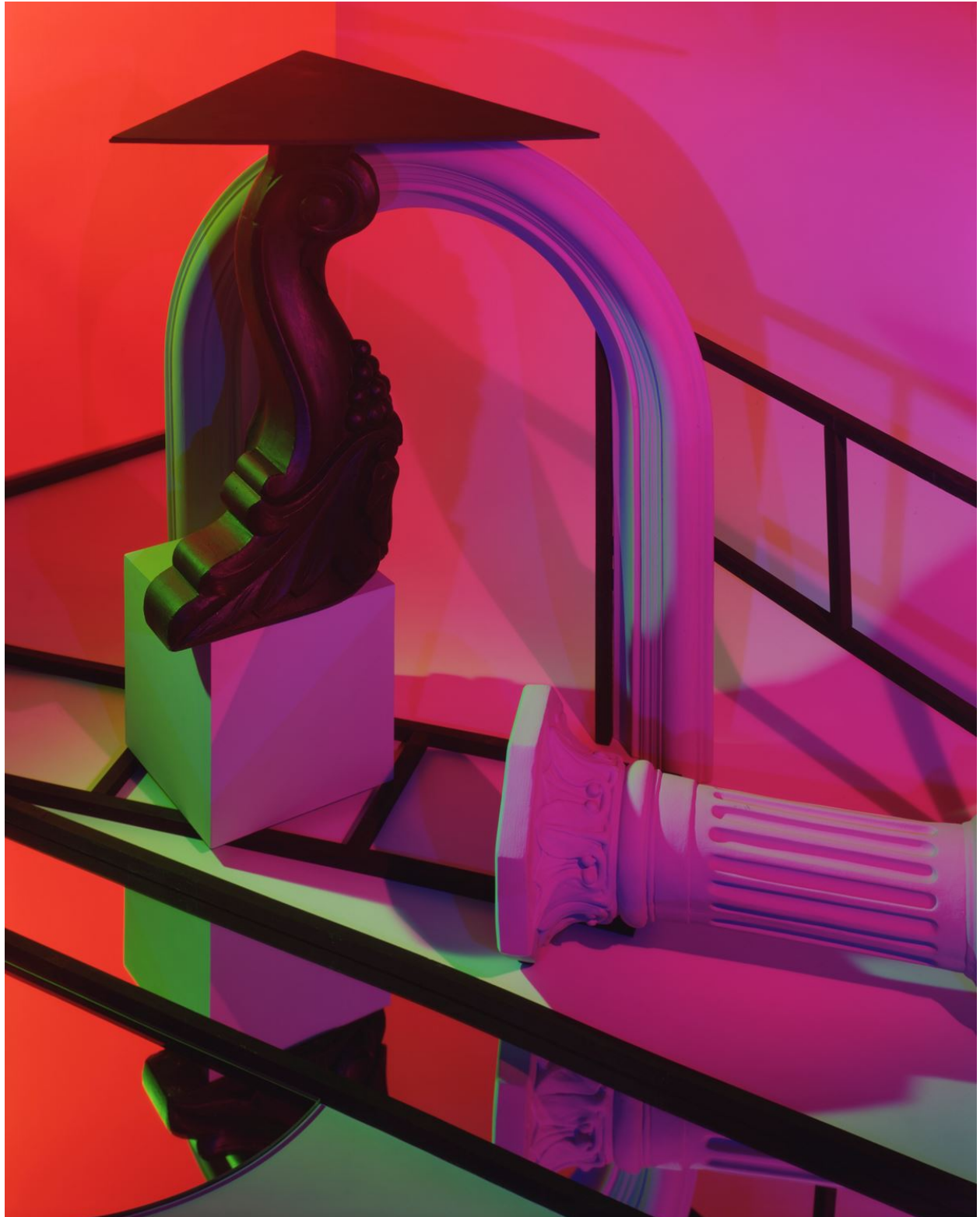
When *Barbara Kasten: Stages* opened in 2015 at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, it was noted how overdue this first major museum survey was. The show unfolded five impressive decades of Kasten's practice, from early 1970s sculptures handwoven from heavy ropes sourced from the ports of Gdańsk, the 'Photogenic Paintings' (1974–1976) photograms that represent her first photographic works, to *Axis* (2015), a 30-foot-high site-specific video installation that projected spinning shapes on the corner walls of a spacious gallery. Five years later, *Barbara Kasten: Works* at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (21 March–8 November 2020) marks Kasten's first museum exhibition in Europe.



Exhibition view: *Barbara Kasten: Stages*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (4 February–16 August 2015). © Barbara Kasten. Courtesy the artist, Institute of Contemporary Art. Photo: Constance Mensh

Some of Kasten's most recognizable images come from the 'Constructs' (1979–1986) series, which were created by building compositions in studio using materials like mirrors, architectural glass blocks, and an array of cones, cubes, and spheres. The arrangement would fit into the view of a set-up camera, and once all components were balanced in place (nothing was ever stuck down), lighting (plus gels and screens) activated shadows, highlights, reflections, and colours.

Caught on film are rich geometric abstractions and surreal dreamscapes built from intersecting perspectives and dimensions. *Construct XI A* (1981) shows a mirror with a circle cut out of it propped up by black trestle frame, its reflection cut up by two parallel mirrors laid out in front of it; while *Construct NYC 12* (1984) feels like a de Chirico-meets-Sottsass acid trip: a landscape bathed in blood orange, acid green, and fuchsia shades, in which a Grecian column lies in front of an elegant arch, before which an ornate, black corbel rests on a white cube sitting on a flat black ladder.



Barbara Kasten, *Construct NYC 12* (1984). Cibachrome. 101.6 x 76.2 cm. © Barbara Kasten. Courtesy the artist, Bortolami Gallery, New York; Thomas Dane Gallery, and Kadel Willborn Gallery, Düsseldorf.

The results are stunning and ahead of their time: images conjuring digital effects with analogue means, blending influences of the Bauhaus, in particular the photographic experiments of László