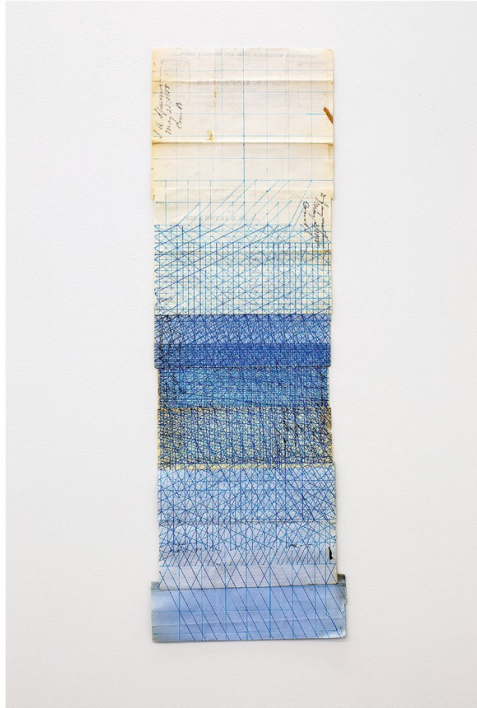


On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



Laura Battle, *Ledger Drawing* (2018)



Installation views of *The Secret Life Of Objects*



Mieko Meguro, *Shopping Bags* (2019)

Barbara Ess *The Secret Life Of Objects*

Magenta Plains, New York, US

When the artist and musician Barbara Ess passed away suddenly in March of this year, the show she was organising at the Magenta Plains gallery on New York's Lower East Side was left without a curator. Ess's friend and collaborator, film maker and digital artist Peggy Ahwesh has laudably stepped in to bring *The Secret Life Of Objects* to the space this autumn.

The exhibition's 25 pieces are culled from ten artists – friends and colleagues extending back to Ess's earliest days in the protean weirdness of New York's late 1970s no wave scene. Noted among these names are the late experimental composer Glenn Branca, Ess's former partner, and the conceptual artist Dan Graham.

The incongruousness and the melancholic slightness of the works gathered in *The Secret Life Of Objects* evoke a flea market stall's romance

and chaos. The coarse meticulousness of a pair of Branca's geometric line drawings folds strangely into patchy, frantic scrawls by Laura Battle. The desiccated flowers at the centre of Les LeVeque's autotelic video sculpture and book pressings share a family resemblance with the paper drugstore bags crumpled into box frames, flecked with incense burns, by Mieko Meguro.

Perusing the gallery's small two-storey space, one is free to follow this or any other slack circuit that binds these works to one another, and to their larger world milieu: that of a gnomic, personal art practice, endlessly curious, but shy of offering complete statements. Such is one legacy of no wave's defiantly independent, not to say doomed outlook on expression. A collection of miniature stonework staircases by Battle, shaded as though for a marionette stage, is puzzling, sad and (our face briefly lights) leads nowhere. Graham's slide-puzzle,

of decals that read only "ONE" glued awkwardly to each tile, seems to draw on a constant tension between tedium and play for its existence. As Ess sang with Y Pants, the pioneering primitive girl group on their 1982 debut, "*Don't be afraid to be boring*".

Ess's understated presence in the exhibition is an unfinished statement of its own. Pride of place on the first floor's back wall is given to *The Moon And Its Aura*, a blocky digital print on aluminium which depicts a telephoto effect separating the moon from its light. Near the entrance, *Keep Out*, a multimedia piece from her *Surveillance* series, unpacks a literal dossier of trespass notices and security camera stills from a stint as a digital deputy remotely monitoring the US-Mexican border. It's one of the exhibition's few works (along with Heidi Schlatter's *Boom/Bust*) that reflect contemporary headlines, but Ess's captivation with the border's liminal

space, and with its bold, self-referential signage, leave the violence and paranoia of the border as such to hang like vapour in the air, just another lens that focuses as much as it obscures.

From the late 80s onward, Ess concerned herself increasingly with photography – chiefly with the rediscovery of the pinhole camera, with which she made haunting and uncanny images that seemed plucked from the distant past and the dystopian future in the same blow. Those most famous works have not been included in *The Secret Life*. But the installation of *Radio/Guitar*, her collaborative sound performance with Ahwesh, over the gallery's speakers – a clarion burst of raucous, affected, experimental energy – served as a reminder of Ess the innovator, the iconoclast, and the time-traveler, that a future retrospective will undoubtedly take on in full.

Ryan Meehan