



The Anatomy of Porcelain: Laura Letinsky, Molosco

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It is this speech between the hand and the clay that makes me think of dialogue. And it is a language far more interesting than the spoken vocabulary which tries to describe it, for it is spoken not by the tongue and lips but by the whole body.

— Mary Caroline Richards¹

For many years now, Laura Letinsky has been making photographs of intimate interiors—of lovers and their lived-in beds, of tabletops messy with the detritus of former repasts. If these images, enlarged to 20 x 24 inches or bigger and printed on watercolor paper, were staged for public viewing, Letinsky's current work—white porcelain dinnerware intended for use and photographs scaled to the size of the 8¼ x 11 inch scanner on which they were made—solicits a different kind of encounter. Originating in Letinsky's desire for the perfect bowl for fish soup, the Molosco dinner service is to function like any other dish set, inscribed with the patina of private life. Albeit, the series of modestly sized pictures, are still to be hung on the gallery wall but their dim lighting and compositional detail invite myopia. Both bodies of work depart from public viewing, but towards what do they turn?

In certain ways, Letinsky's Molosco dinner service is much like her photography. For one, both are reproducible. Though initially Letinsky made the plates and bowls herself, in a ceramics course at the Hyde Park Arts Center in Chicago, they are now fabricated in Guadalajara as part of an uneditioned series. Molds are used to make the bowls, but the plates are crafted by hand in a methodical procedure: patterns are used to standardize the size, a rolling pin to flatten the clay, an oven (or kiln) to bake it. It is like following a recipe. Letinsky has used a similar analogy to describe her photography. Like cooking, she has explained, her pictures are derived from a process of "putting together tastes and sensations....I begin with general sensations and ideas that I wish to explicate, and then... compromise, trying to make material behave in a certain manner."² That both vessels and photographs contain food makes the culinary comparisons intuitive. But Letinsky's description of photography as a process of material compromise also resonates with her ceramics practice. This is, in large part, a function of the medium. Clay shrinks both as it dries and when it is fired, so emerging from the kiln far smaller than it was when shaped. To craft a plate or a bowl thus demands the foresight to anticipate how the object will change after it is formed but before it is finished. The same might be said of the photographs in the Albeit series.

Because Letinsky has made the pictures using an Epson scanner instead of her usual 4x5 large format camera, the images are not captured and bound by the location of the lens. The scanner disrupts perspective's singular position in favor of the flatbed plane. The resulting pictures seem to wonder after what, beyond a good eye, photography entails. If, as its name would literally suggest, photography is a practice of "drawing with light," here the scanner's internal lamp limits Letinsky's control over the lighting conditions, evacuating

the images of the warm glow and acid pastels that have characterize her pictures in the past. But they continue to provoke the perspectival doubt familiar from her photographs of still life scenes in which 3-dimensional objects are paired with cutouts from magazines and, in what amounts to a kind of image cannibalism, her own work. In Albeit, she builds these assemblages directly on the scanner bed, such that the resulting photographs render them in silhouette. Items further from the glass appear less clearly than those closer to it. This not only scrambles the uniform sharpness that typically defines Letinsky's still life pictures, It also hints at how the compositions were arranged. Letinsky leaves further clues as to their construction—a piece of tape visible here, a bit of Fimo there. Flat as they may first appear, the rendered silhouettes suggest the sculptural dimensions of the assemblages from which they were derived.

As the photographs turn to the physicality of form, so too does the porcelain. This is both because these are pieces meant to be touched, and also because they bear traces of gesture left by the hands that made them, once Letinsky's own and now those of the fabricators in Guadalajara. The mold for the bowls and the recipe for the plates are modeled after the artist's original designs but depart, even if only minutely, from her precise forms. A plate's lip dips particularly sharply, the hand painted gold line rimming a bowl clots. These imprecise marks are entirely unique. With the dinner service, reproduction yields singular objects. Certainly this is part of Molosco's appeal, the uneven forms themselves communicating a sense of difference. The mollusks referenced in the name suggests as much. Like the cavernous shells of those invertebrate, the bowls and plates are uniform but not identical. With use they will become even less so, their surfaces staining or chipping over time, pristine white shells made imperfect by the activity of life. Most all of Letinsky's work has explored this "problem of the illusion of perfection."³ But where earlier projects examined the illusion by way of subject (leftovers, after a meal; couples, ambivalent in love) and structure (how photographs construct an ideal through the very act of representing it), Molosco does so by way of material form. This is porcelain to be touched, tasted, smelled and heard, encountered not only by the eye but also with the body.

Even if no longer perfect, still the perfect bowl for fish soup.

— Maggie Taft

¹ Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 9.

² Laura Letinsky, interview by the Smart Museum of Art, *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, edited by Stephanie Smith (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2013), 232, 236.

³ Laura Letinsky, quoted by Christine Haughney, "Giving Leftovers a New Place at the Table," *New York Times*, October 9, 2012.