

# LUHRING AUGUSTINE

531 WEST 24TH ST NEW YORK, NY 10011  
TEL 212 206 9100 FAX 212 206 9055  
WWW.LUHRINGAUGUSTINE.COM

Pulimood, Steve  
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## INTRODUCING // ELAD LASSRY



BY STEVE PULIMOOD

## Art and Artifice

In photographs and films that tweak reality, Elad Lassry skirts the border of abstraction.

ELAD LASSRY CONFESSES to a fear of seeing things multiply. His apprehension of finding segments inside an orange, the example he uses in conversation during a visit to his studio, seems to translate into a fear that something inevitable will occur. Why would an artist who uses

photography, a medium for capturing and replicating images, be afraid of such a relatively natural phenomenon?

Even by a studio photographer's standards, Lassry's workspace is small and free of camera equipment. Papers, a volume of Paul Outerbridge's photo-

graphs, and test shots that he uses to construct collages clutter folding tables in the center of the room. Except for a few pictures pinned to the walls, the majority of his archive, which he culls from yellowed copies of *Life* magazine and assorted advertising media, is filed in

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FROM LEFT:  
*Herend (Sweet Pea)*,  
2010. C-print,  
11½ x 14½ in.  
Edition of five.

*Eggs*, 2010. C-print,  
14½ x 11½ in.  
Edition of five.

OPPOSITE:  
Elad Lassry.

stacks of boxes. Through an in-depth study of the visual rhetoric of advertising—the construction of desire via artifice—he developed a mastery of image making, and where better to expand on this theme than in L.A.?

A graduate of both CalArts and USC who was born in Tel Aviv in 1977, Lassry is most often compared to such heavy-weight L.A. artists as Christopher Williams and Jack Goldstein. His choice of subjects seems at first to be quaintly nostalgic: fruit and vegetables, animals, people, figurines, found footage. But the moment he has settled into a neat grammar of presentation, he shifts strategies, peppering the same type of image with unfamiliar elements. The result often ruptures the staid confines of a genre: A portrait becomes a still life, a still life becomes a collage of superimposed images, and vice versa.

Lassry is not a technical photographer, nor one who fusses over process-oriented problems. Using a 4 x 5 camera and minimal digital editing, he generally completes a new composition, from setup to execution, in just one morning. He creates “fluid impositions, multiple exposures, or forced perspectives” that flirt, somewhat perversely, he explains, with “abstraction in the sense that the subject sometimes disappears into the backdrop,” the colorful quicksand of its compositional whole.

Identifying a dominant hue inside the composition and matching it to the physical frame blurs the liminal space between image and viewer. This color coordination reinforces the objectness of

the image, be it a carton of pearly eggs surrounded by a saturation of cerulean blue or the top of a rose-toned hat set against a bright Pepto Bismol-pink background. By also delineating the view, cropping the subject from any context, the colored frame creates the impression that the usual aspect ratio of his editioned photographs (14 by 11 inches) could be enlarged like an aperture in front of the subject to reveal what is missing from its full form.

As tempting as it may be to label Lassry a Conceptual photographer, he is more preoccupied with issues familiar to abstract painting. He is, for one thing, a brilliant colorist, a talent more regularly associated with painters, and his photographs’ compositions are highly attuned to the painterly concerns of light, shape, and form. Lassry himself acknowledges his ambiguous position in explaining his recent decision to join the stable of artists at Luhring Augustine, which includes Christopher Wool, Albert Oehlen, and Josh Smith: “I thought it would be interesting to occupy a fucked-up place in their roster between the abstract painters and straight photographers.”

A recent series of images depicting hand-cut jigsaw puzzles are oddly engorged and desirable. The impulse to handle—puzzles beg to be touched—such psychically obtuse compositions is a classic side effect of the vacuum of abstract painting, identified by Kirk Varnedoe: “The less there is to look at, the more you have to look, the more you have to be in the picture.” As with all Lassry’s pictures, these images’ small

scale, which belies their potency, heightens their presence as three-dimensional objects that can be manipulated. By cultivating this temptation in viewers to interact with the image, Lassry entices them to contemplate the never fully discernable subject.

Lassry’s concurrent practice of filmmaking also displays his signature slippage between what is present and what is supposed to be represented. *Passacaglia*, 2010, his latest Super 16-millimeter film, opens with a sequence that pans over the surface of a vibrant Delaunay-like painting, but it never provides a view of the whole canvas. It concludes with a segment in which dancers move in counterpoint to the camera’s movement over the painting. Thus the camera is never wholly revealing; the record is deliberately incomplete.

The tautness of his photographic objects and 16-millimeter fictions sustains a paradox. Lassry’s curious fear of multiplication may manifest itself in his uncanny ability to imbue a still object with the sense that it is going to fall; that the struggling actor among his head shots, though smiling, is going to fail; that the dancer appearing in his films in all her balletic refinement will eventually stop moving; that an image seemingly impossible to construct is somehow, in its seamlessness, present and handsome and clear, even if only for a moment. Although the viewer does not see the next frame, an inescapable sense of vulnerability, of disappointment and failure, of dissolution into abstraction, vivifies the best of Lassry’s work. MP