

ARTFORUM

Kitnick, Alex. "Shannon Ebner," *Artforum*. September 2017: pp. 325.

Shannon Ebner

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Since its beginnings, Shannon Ebner's practice has investigated language's structures, but where it once sought to make them objective by building words out of cinder blocks (among other things), it has now entered a more poetic, associative phase. Her recent exhibition, "STRAY," contained an LP with readings by poets Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey as well as photographs of verses of poems that had been wheat-pasted onto the gallery's walls. If these elements to some extent called to mind her earlier work, other moments—such as a snapshot-size portrait of Grace Dunham, or a flock of photographs, hung

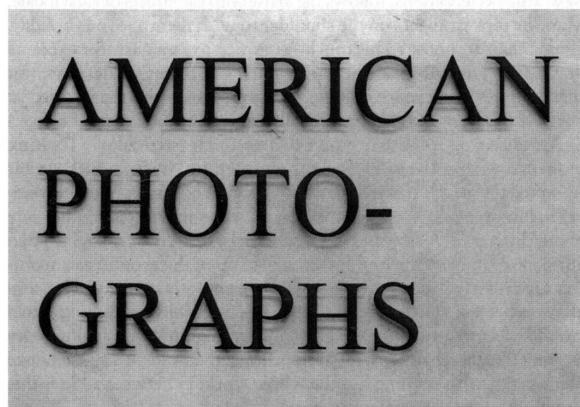
high on the wall, of birds in flight—felt like departures. Recalling a similar image by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the latter works left one with a sense of longing, and yet at the same time the object of desire felt elusive.

Indeed, the show contained a slew of references that were often difficult to stitch together, but photography was clearly a central motif—more so than simply a way of working. A small photo at the gallery entrance displayed the words AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS, lifted from the cover of Walker Evans's eponymous book, and certainly *America* functioned as a keyword, too. (One of the photographs of poetry contained the line: HOPE FOR THE ARTIST IN AMERICA.) At the back of the gallery hung a large black-and-white print, ostensibly introducing a museum exhibit, which spelled out PHOTOGRAPHY in capital letters. All the works marked memory in different ways: One photograph depicted tree roots that also resembled a woman's torso; another showed a roadside memorial made of two branches lashed together to form a cross, and tied up with a bit of fabric. Indeed, photography itself here appeared to be a kind of makeshift monument, a way of prolonging the past. As such, it was also connected to institutions, as in the piece comprising several images of an entranceway to the Friends in Deed House, a homeless shelter in Pasadena, California, which in many ways served as the central work of the exhibition.

But something else was going on here beyond mere depiction. There was a weird and interesting feeling that the exhibition was skeptical of itself, even as it cleverly used the space. (The smart placement of the photographs about photography, or at least the word *photography*, gave the show a kind of faux institutional aura). It was sparsely hung, and the prints themselves were fixed on sheets of aluminum, which undermined their object quality. The LP was probably best listened to at home. A really big poster, which featured reproductions of all the prints in the show, as well as snippets of texts by Howe and Mackey and related notes, was free for the taking at the reception desk. You wanted to get in a corner somewhere, with someone, and look at it.

In her notes for the exhibition, Ebner speaks of the word *stray* as a kind of deviation from the set path. While starting out as a photographer in New York in early 1990s, the artist wandered into a workshop held by the poet Eileen Myles—a stray across disciplines into other media. But the idea of stray in this exhibition goes even further: Ebner seems to want to leave the gallery, perhaps even to get outside of art. Whereas Seth Price once spoke of dispersion as a way for art to crack other cultural forms, Ebner's stray imagines an intervention into imaginaries, into ways of being and forms of life. It has a sway and a swagger to it—it's sexy in that melancholic way that crumpled sheets are. It will be interesting to see where it goes.

—Alex Kitnick



Shannon Ebner, *The Splay Anthem*, 2017, ink-jet print, 10 x 14".