

*Elyn Zimmerman: Reflections*

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For illustrations, go to the artist's website: [elynzimmerman.com](http://elynzimmerman.com)

In her exhibition held at the Gagosian Gallery in late 2001, Elyn Zimmerman showed an extended series of large, black-and-white drawings based on photographs she had taken of the surface of a shallow river flowing under a bridge. Gesturally executed in ink and graphite wash, the drawings translated the overlapping, rhythmic patterns of light and shadow created by the water's movement into graphic terms. For an artist whose work is generally associated with extreme formal control—Zimmerman is best known for outdoor, site-specific installations in which natural and polished rocks and pools or fountains of water are set in carefully studied relationships--these works seemed to signal a departure. While based on studies after nature, they appeared freer and more emotive than her previous work, some even hinting at romantic undertones.

The artist has moved farther in this direction in the new work featured here. The first exhibition devoted to her photography to be held in New York, it presents a series of photographic works that encompasses a range of mood and expression unprecedented in her oeuvre. These are Zimmerman's first photographs in color and her first to take full advantage of new digital technologies. In these works, the artist has again focused her camera upon watery surfaces, although the water is now found the world over in lakes, rivers, oceans, streams and fountains; it also appears as vapors accumulated into clouds and as snow and ice frozen upon the ground. Individual works may be dominated by melting pastel colors, jewel tones or acidic hues, may stand as tone poems in a narrow range of close-valued hues or may feature striking dark-light contrasts. Some are graphic in effect, others "painterly," while still others suggest sculptural relief. The new photographs range in mood from lyrical to dramatic, meditative to passionate and playful to austere.

Rather than presenting the images of water in a single enlarged field, Zimmerman typically assembles nine and occasionally twelve images taken at about the same moment into the form of a grid. The resulting works remain of distinctly human scale, rarely exceeding an arm span in height or width. Zimmerman uses the grid to convey the experience of being at the site, the multiple images seeming to represent the shifting of the eye as it absorbs the changing reflections and patterns of the moving water. At the same time, the grid format asserts the work's identification as a mental construct.

While Zimmerman employs the camera to record real world appearances, places and phenomena, her photographic images are products of her unique vision, sensibility and intellect. From the very beginning of her artistic career, she has regarded photography as a method of art making like any other in the sense that although it relies upon a mechanical/technical process, it is endlessly malleable and adjustable, subject to all manner of alteration, combination and control. She chooses to work with a particular camera or film because of the formal properties she can obtain from them—graininess or crispness of detail, the density of blacks or intensity of colors—much as she would select an ink for its tone and the way it sits on the paper surface. As a demonstration of this notion, one often finds in her work a blurring of the distinction between photography and drawing, the one traditionally held to be an instrument of realism, the other of interpretation.

Zimmerman exploits the camera as a tool both for representation and abstraction. She uses it to document appearance and convey a convincing sense of space and depth as well as to produce lines, marks and patterns on her photographs' surfaces, which cancel the illusionistic effects (in accordance with Modernist demands). Even in her most recent digital works, she remains faithful to the camera's vision and makes use of properties of this vision that are distinct from human sight—the capacity to freeze time, fix patterns and capture effects of light often invisible to the naked eye.

While nothing the artist did previously prepares us for the indulgence in color and range of effects and expression seen here, the new works are

inextricably linked to her earlier photography and installation art. All of Zimmerman's work is elegant both in execution and mind. It is the product of keen perception and of an orientation toward certain concepts of art making that has remained constant over the course of three decades. As Zimmerman recently remarked, "A sensibility emerges when you are young and can stay consistent for thirty years. I can barely remember certain details, but it's like a fingerprint."

Born in Philadelphia in 1945, Zimmerman received an undergraduate degree with majors in art and perceptual psychology from UCLA in 1968. She went on to attend the school's MFA program, studying painting with Richard Diebenkorn and photography with Robert Heineken. While still in graduate school, she became acquainted with James Turrell and Robert Irwin and soon became part of the circle of "Space and Light" artists. These California-based artists created installations for gallery and museum interiors in which the focus was on the immaterial phenomenon of light and perception.

In preparation for her exhibition at Larry Gagosian's Broxton Gallery in Los Angeles in 1973, Zimmerman took a series of grainy black-and-white photographs of the empty gallery. The photographs (*Light Studies--Broxton Gallery*) recorded the passage of reflected light from the skylights across the gallery walls. Parallelograms of white light float across the space, their forms contrasting with the dark immobile wedge of the open door. One of the forms appears to elongate and fold as it turns the corner, like a dancer with a bended knee.

In the exhibition, Zimmerman displayed the photographic prints on one wall and slightly smaller graphite drawings that replicated their forms, tones and appearance on another. The drawings did not merely simulate the photographs, as the photographs had themselves been adjusted in their grain and tone to approximate graphite drawings. The photographs and drawings were therefore mutually dependent, the mechanical and handmade images existing in a

symbiotic relationship. Both types of images, however, relied upon the camera's ability to freeze a moment in time and "materialize" the shafts of light.

Zimmerman extended these ideas in subsequent works, presenting serial photographic and drawn images hung one above the other, which recorded the passage of reflected light across empty studio interiors. In *Equivalent Abstraction: Roma Window* (1975), seven sets of images in each medium traced the path of light from a high mullioned window across and then out of the picture frame, the grid rising as the sun set.

In *Tassajara* (1973), a purely photographic piece, a linear sequence of six vertical photographs presents the same image: a rectangular opening in a wall reflected in a pool of water below. In the first, the water is agitated and the reflected image disturbed; as the series progresses, the water calms and the reflection becomes a placid mirror of what appears above. Zimmerman has said that the piece represents "a metaphor for meditation: the stiller you are, the more you see the world," and indeed, the photographs were taken at a Zen center in the mountains behind Big Sur that has served as a retreat for the artist to the present day. *Tassajara Creek* (2002), a work in the current exhibition notable for its melting pastel tones, is composed of photographs taken on the property last year. The artist has said that *Tassajara* "has a quiet magic quality;" this would be an apt description for *Tassajara Creek* as well.

*Spatial Topography* (1973) is a wall-sized work made up of fifty black-and-white photographs arranged in a grid. The impulse behind the piece was to catalogue the physical aspects of her studio and establish a sense of place through the use of multiple images, shifting points of view and the work's architectural scale. The photographs were arranged into horizontal bands according to certain highly determined formal principles. For example, the top two rows present views into the corners of the room, each image taking the form of a triangular wedge with its apex at the center; the next line features close-ups of a variety of striated elements set parallel to the picture plane. Zimmerman's interest in recording light and the passage of time is evidenced in the next row of photographs devoted to the studio windows, each row organized in a noon to

noon format (i.e., afternoon light, night, morning light). The two final bands present panoramic overviews of the room taken from a central vantage point, the one on the top in day, the bottommost row at night. A discrepancy, however, is found at the extreme right in the bottom row (banks of windows are seen in daylight), the break in the system activating the whole.

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In the late seventies, Zimmerman relocated to New York City from Los Angeles and her art underwent dramatic change. It was at this point that her installation work moved from indoors to out and natural stone and water became her primary materials. Polished stone faces and water held in pools or fountains now served as her reflective surfaces. The reflections united the elements that comprised each piece while embracing the viewer, the changing light and the surrounding environment (the buildings, trees and overhead clouds).

In the series of "Cityscapes" (1979-1983), which began shortly after her arrival in New York, Zimmerman moved from an interest in enclosed gallery and studio spaces to architectural exteriors. Large, single panel works replaced the earlier multipanel formats. The black-and-white prints of this series offer a particular view of New York, one with no people, modes of transportation or billboards. The focus is upon the shadowy masses of the buildings, which stand in shades of black and gray against brilliant white skies, the intensity of the whites owing to the fact that the photographs are printed on matte Mylar.

Each of the "Cityscape" images is softened by the motion of the camera. Zimmerman has explained that when she first began to take pictures of New York, on a few occasions, the camera accidentally moved and the resulting image was blurred. She liked and decided to cultivate the effect, which serves the pictures in a number of ways. In many of the prints, the blurring either seems to suggest that the buildings are in motion or that the photographer is moving, a quasi-cinematic effect that implies the viewer's mobility as well. A further result

of the blurring is that some of the photographs resemble sensitively rendered graphite drawings, as seen in *Cityscape/Untitled 12* (1979).

The camera's movement also generates dislocations and distortions of form. In *Cityscape/Untitled 2* (1979), the light reflecting from a tall office tower bounces off a facing building in such a way that a brilliant square of white light detaches from the building and floats off to the left, the materialized square an heir to the parallelograms in the Braxton Gallery photographs. In a fantastic later piece, *Cityscape 103* (1981-84), a cascade of rectangular prisms runs down the surface of a building. Zigzagging lines resembling pencil squiggles seen on the stacked white buildings to the right demonstrate the artist's almost literal use of the camera as a drawing tool.

After 1980, Zimmerman continued the "Cityscapes," but switched from a 35 millimeter to a larger format camera, seeking, as she has said, "more detail, less grain and a richer range of tones." While the early New York City views tend to feature masonry buildings, the later works present unornamented modern office towers, many of them of glass and steel, dramatically massed and jutting into the sky. They are hardly utilitarian structures, but gridded and striated rectangular volumes that are dematerialized through the camera's movement, as is seen in the transparent, skeletal tower in *Cityscape 217* (1981-1983).

In *Cityscape 99* (1981-1983), the image of the building on the right is reflected in the shiny face of the building to the left, which abuts it at a right angle. Here, displacements of form and reflections work together to produce a unified surface pattern. Black horizontal stripes swoop down along a diagonal from the upper left, while a counter rhythm of white lines extends down from the right; both are set against a dark central spine. The most remarkable aspect of this image is the strong resemblance it bears to any number of the ink-on-paper drawings that Zimmerman executed over fifteen years later based on photographs of a river in Vermont. Although one had its source in the man-made environment and the other in nature, these works not only feature the same surface patterns, but also a similar use of line and play of tones. While Zimmerman had deliberately paired photographic images and drawings in her

early work, these inadvertently linked images demonstrate the consistency of her vision through time and her control over the photographic process.

As the series of black-and-white drawings progressed, Zimmerman became interested in working larger. Finding that the surface of bigger sheets of paper did not hold ink in the manner she required, she began to assemble multiple sheets of smaller paper into grid configurations. The resulting drawings present large fields of fluid, directional strokes in strongly contrasting tones ranging from intense white to dense black. A sense of dynamic, rushing water is conveyed both by the images and their titles (i.e., *Flume*, *Sluice*, *Freefall*, 2002.)

It was while working on this series that Zimmerman began to look with renewed interest at the enlarged, poster-sized contact sheets she had used as the basis for the drawings. In Summer 2002, she began to carry a 35 millimeter camera with her when rowing in the early morning on a lake in rural Massachusetts, taking pictures of the lake's surface. Initially, her intention was to offer the photographs as single images, but soon came to feel, "these images were happening around me, why not have more?" For each work, she would take a series of photographs of the water, recording the lighting conditions, textures and surface patterns seen in that particular time and place. The color negatives were individually scanned and digitized so they could be edited and combined in the computer. The resulting grids were then printed on large seamless sheets of Fuji archival photographic paper using the Lambda process.

Unlike the multipanel drawings in which water flows uniformly, the new photographic works are organized with an eye to divergence; water moving in different directions is set in balanced, asymmetrical arrangements. The new works are composed intuitively rather than in accord with any predetermined system. Only one of the pieces in the exhibition presents a true temporal sequence--*Lake Reflection 7* (2002), which charts the disintegration of a cloud--although the order of the images is scrambled. This piece is also unique among the new works in that it combines two opposing points of view: the clouds as reflected in the water and as seen overhead. While few of Zimmerman's new photographic works are manipulated in this manner, working on the computer

gave her the freedom to orient and adjust the images in myriad ways, opening them up to a remarkable range of form and expression.

In contradistinction to *Lake Reflection 7*, for example, with its dramatic blue-black-white contrasts, figure-ground relationships and quasi-narrative focus, stand *Hudson River* (2002) and *Mediterranean* (2002), both of which present meditative, close-valued images filled with allover patterns. *Hudson River* offers a steely-gray field made up of nine panels featuring subtly different watery rhythms and textures. The sparkling images at the top left and bottom right are closely related, as are the serene images at the bottom left and top right, this crisscrossing of like components serving to unite the composition as a whole.

A distinguishing feature of the new works is their use of color. For an artist who spent almost three decades working in black-and-white or in neutral, self-colored sculptural materials, the move to color presented an array of possibilities. The most astonishing of the new works with regard to its color is *Lake/Reflections 10* (2002), in which the reflection of a tree, turning yellow in late summer, is reflected in a lake's surface. Green and yellow acidic tones, with touches in a rusty brown, sit upon the picture surface like large, gestural brushstrokes, while rippled expanses of blue water highlighted with white, lilac and pink appear to lie a considerable distance behind. The painterliness and high level of abstraction (and seeming artifice) in this work is such that it is jarring for the viewer to note its many crisply rendered realistic details, such as the thousands of tiny leaves that comprise the high color "brushstrokes."

In *Arnold's Mill Creek* (2002), texture is so pronounced as to suggest a sculptural relief. Rendered in off-black and near-white tones, the surface of the water churns in myriad directions, rising and falling, extending into lacey tufts of froth and foam. The silvery foam and dark swells project forward out of the picture space, while the reflections of white light upon the water's surface seem to connote metallic gleam. With its dramatic dark-light contrasts and churning rhythms and swells, this is incontestably Zimmerman's most impassioned and romantic work to date.



*Canal/Amsterdam 2* (2002) is in many ways *Arnold's Mill Creek's* opposite: it is a jewel-toned work, flat and graphic in effect and, depending on one's point of view, either playful or agitated in expression. Composed of photographs the artist took of old row houses reflected in a canal in Amsterdam, it features undulating, interconnecting surface patterns and scribbles reminiscent of the work of Jean Dubuffet. The effect of allover drawing unifies the picture surface.

In a few of the new works, Zimmerman obscures the vertical divisions between individual images so that a horizontal stripe or banding effect occurs. Here, rather than arranging different images within the grid to achieve a balanced design, the artist lines up and repeats like images. In *Canal/Amsterdam 4* (2002), crinkly black lines made by the reflections of trees are arranged in such a way as to hide the seams between the images; the images nevertheless connect visually along vertical axes through the repetition and placement of the wavy lines. Other works featuring horizontal banding are the luminous and sparkling *Fountain/Paris* (2002) as well as *Cornstalks* (2003), one of Zimmerman's most recent works. Here, the broken forms of the cornstalks produce lively linear patterns against the snow, suggesting lines of written text. The photographs that comprise the horizontal bands, however, display a recession into depth unprecedented in the new photographic series.

Another work based on photographs taken during winter 2003 is *Snow/Shadows 2*, the latest and one of the largest works in the exhibition. In a grid composed of sixteen photographs, Zimmerman presents images of the shadows cast by branches and trees on snow-covered ground. If one did not know the subject of this work, it would be difficult to offer a precise identification. The images could well present the lines and folds of the palm of hand or an animal fur or hide, the association with living things stemming from the sensual nature of the closely-observed, textured surface. The directional orientation of the lines in this work recall *Sluice* and similar multi-panel drawings, although one presents immobile shadows of bare trees on snow and the other swiftly running water. The soft shades of black-and-white seen in the photographic work are

such that the piece could well be taken for a graphite drawing, which serves as a further manifestation of the artist's "fingerprint," the lines of continuity that unite her art.

Although Zimmerman's new photographic works often revel in color, such color, as has been seen time and again, is not a quintessential component of these works in the sense that many evoke a vast range of emotions and associations while being fundamentally black-and-white. Two other things are equally important to the realization of these photographs: the sophisticated execution offered by new printing technologies and the freedom of composition, through the grid format, which enabled her to impose order upon the dynamic world of reflections and patterns as perceived through the lens of her camera. For Zimmerman, whose monumental, outdoor installations are typically commissioned works that take years to complete and involve countless meetings with architects, engineers and committees, the immediacy of these works, as well as their more intimate nature, was liberating indeed.