

Luke Stettner's Continuum

Carmen Winant (A '10)

In the summer of 2010, Luke Stettner attended Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture with a plan. He moved into a room in the newly renovated Guston dorm and a studio in the middle of the Reis block (desirable spaces!) and, as do all the participants, set to making the spaces feel like his own. I had arrived with few ideas and even fewer materials and admired Stettner's purposefulness. He wanted, among other things, to make a new urn for his father's ashes and had brought a dozen plastic nesting plates that he had eaten off as a child to do it. One of my first real conversations with Stettner was in the sculpture shop as he drilled holes about three inches in diameter through the brightly colored plates. I asked him if he really intended to put his father's ashes inside of them to which he responded "yes."

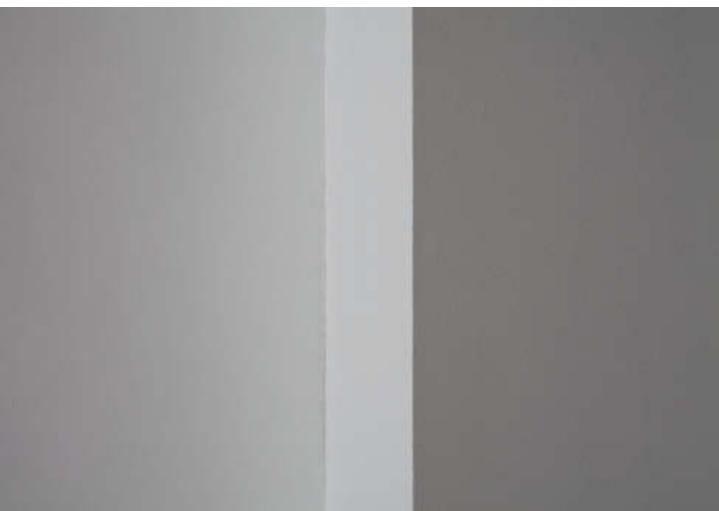
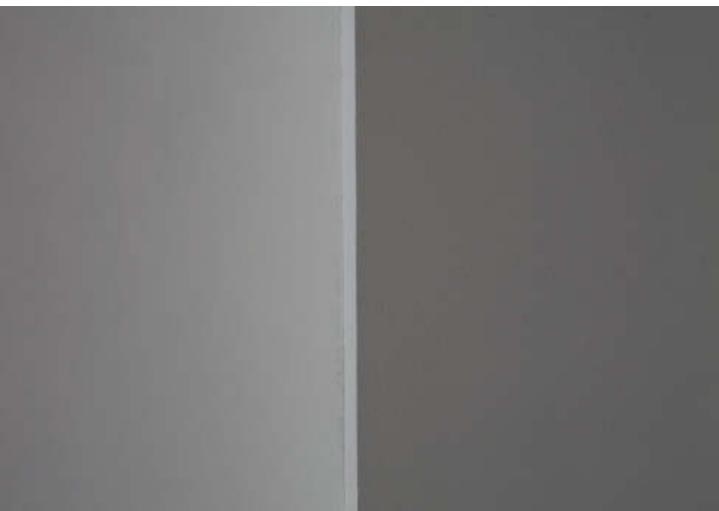
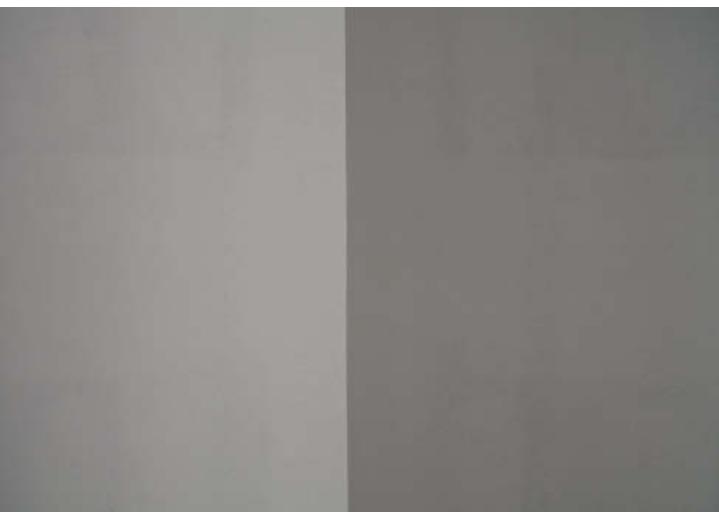
Born in 1979 in Alpine, New Jersey, Stettner grew up in the neighboring city of Tenafly. Both are under twenty minutes from the George Washington Bridge and as a result, he crossed into New York City many times as a teenager, often late at night. Stettner moved to Tucson, Arizona to attend college in the Sonoran desert where there are no allergies (which must have been really nice as he's allergy-prone.) As an undergrad, he worked at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, which contains the full archives of over 2,000 photographers including Edward Weston and Harry Callahan. During that time, Stettner took thousands of photographs on a series of long walks, sometimes from dusk until dawn, recording information about every frame he shot in a journal and ultimately organizing and labeling all of his negatives. He must have thought about the future and its possibilities.

Stettner received his Masters' degree in Photography from the School of Visual Arts, where he made very little photography. By that time, frustrated with the limitations of the medium (having not yet discovered his conceptual forbearers) he turned to object-making. He started with his late father's things, rifling through his small inheritance of objects. Among other projects, Stettner re-pulped his father's papers into new, ghostly "erased" versions of themselves ("What Was, What Wasn't and What Will Never Be") and set all of his leftover belongings in a box on top of a blue carpet that resembled the one in his father's apartment. After letting the weight settle for many months, Stettner lifted it to reveal an impression that itself would be the framed work ("All the Wait I Have Left (232LBS).") It was the beginning, the real beginning, of a sustained practice dedicated to investigating the presence of absence and the relationship of time to loss.

A year after leaving Skowhegan, Stettner had his first solo show in New York City at Kate Werble Gallery, "Eyes that are like two suns"—a luminous title discovered in the muddle of a spam message. The nesting-plate urn was a part of it, along with several other pieces conceived in Maine: a calendar, again pulped and recycled into imageless pages, a series of monochrome white paintings on high density foam, each with a single slit down their front, and a three-channel video of hands configuring an origami cube in different variations. As a grouping, it was a poignant treatise on chance and mourning, which was at points as playful as it was somber. Critic Debbie Kuan wrote for Artforum that the works, which Stettner understood to be a part of a single whole, embodied "the perplexing nature of loss as a kind of laceration" and "enact[s] the anger and futility of mourning." Above all, Stettner's work pointed to the power of empathetic feeling above the importance of empirical fact.

Since that time, Stettner has returned to his early interest in photography, once disavowed. For his upcoming solo exhibitions at Kate Werble Gallery and The Kitchen, in January and February respectively, he is busy mining his own collection of photographs, now over a decade old, as well as his familial archive of images. Stettner's work has long orbited the conditions and effects of mortality, and, while these exhibitions will be no different in that regard, his focus has shifted to the measurement and management of time and record keeping.

Stettner's work is curious and penetrating for these reasons: a concern with the rituals of impermanence (that never feels morbid or melancholic); an unwavering dedication to art as a substantial, singular medium though which real feelings and intentions are channeled; an interest in poetry as a vessel; and an openness to variable material and sensitivity to the demands of a given idea. Skowhegan offered him the space, community, resources, and time to grow into the sensitive artist that he is. I know because I've watched it happen.



In late spring 2013, Luke Stettner (A '10) documented Skowhegan's new space prior to the interior demolition. His work creates an index of the space's history that will begin anew with Skowhegan's presence.

Untitled (2013), Luke Stettner