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## Artists on Artists | Michelle Grabner on Christopher Williams's Vivid, Exacting Photographs

CULTURE

By CAROL KINO

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*Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne* Christopher Williams's "Erratum."

Earlier this year, [Michelle Grabner](#) became the first artist to co-curate the [Whitney Biennial](#) since Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the museum's founder. The floor she organized was the popular favorite, lauded for its emphasis on mature female painters, like Amy Sillman and Louise Fishman, and lushly handmade objects, including several works by the textile artist Sheila Hicks. Grabner also runs two galleries with her husband, the artist Brad Killam: [The Suburban](#), housed in two sheds in their Oak Park, Ill., backyard, and the [Poor Farm](#), a larger space in rural Wisconsin.

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But Grabner is most celebrated for her own artwork, which includes abstract paintings and drawings that suggest gingham oilcloths or metallic textiles and large sculptural mobiles collaged with bits of cutting boards, tablecloths and other objects drawn from her home life. Her first career survey, “I Work From Home,” ran through mid-February at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. More shows are upcoming, at [Gallery 16](#) in San Francisco, opening May 16, and at [Anne Mosseri-Marlio](#) in Basel, Switzerland, starting June 13.

Lately, Grabner has rediscovered the conceptual photographer Christopher Williams, whose sublimely good-looking works question the conventions of the genre, as can be seen in his first retrospective, “[The Production Line of Happiness](#),” at the Art Institute of Chicago through May 18. (A new version of the show opens July 27 at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York and another at the [Whitechapel Gallery](#) in London in spring 2015.) Williams usually pairs an image of a model, say, or a dishwasher or a stack of Ritter chocolate bars, with a lengthy title delineating the picture’s back story, from the objects depicted to the place they were photographed to the type of film stock used. Although his work is known for being intellectually dense, Grabner says she finds herself increasingly drawn to its gorgeous aesthetics.



*From left: Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; Howard Agriesti, courtesy of MOCA Cleveland. At left, Williams’s “Cutaway model Nikon EM.” At right, an installation view of Michelle Grabner’s “Work From Home.”*

*Here, Grabner on Williams:*

“I came to know Williams’s work when I was in graduate school in the late 1980s. He had just come out of Cal Arts. Back then we had a lot of photographic practices that were

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almost anti-photo, with artists using photography to create signs or advertisements, like Barbara Kruger. It was photography, but it was undercutting photography. Being stuck in the Midwest, his work came to me via reproductions in magazines and conversations with postmodern critics, who framed it up in very intellectual ways.

“Only in the 1990s, when I started getting out, did I start seeing Williams’s work in person. By the 2000s, it seemed all-present, popping up in group shows. Then in 2009, I saw his solo show at [Galerie Gisela Capitain](#) in Cologne, and my understanding of his work changed. It went from seeming abstract and theoretical to being about a kind of desire for quality. Suddenly, I felt seduced.

“Within our consumer society, everything seems to be pitched to us. We distrust images. We don’t know how to identify quality in a product or in an artwork. But there is something about these images that reaffirms it, not just the quality of the product, but also the quality of the photograph itself.

“A lot of Williams’s work deals with Cold War products. It’s the ‘Mad Men’ phenomenon: you’re looking at sexy, iconic material things. There’s also a sense of nostalgia. His dishwasher images seem so familiar, because they look like your dishwasher, but they also look like a picture of a dishwasher.

“Then there are his pictures of hands holding cameras. What’s great about them is the resolution of the fingerprints. When you’re in front of them, you really get a sense of the topography of the skin. The image presents more than the eye can see, unless we hold our thumb very close to our eyes. It’s something that only the camera can see, that only photography can document. There’s something so interesting about being able to capture that kind of detail, while the fingers are manipulating the tool that’s supposed to do the capturing.

“Also, each photograph is clearly a studio production, rather than a selfie or an Instagram. It’s about the setting up, the lighting, the choice of objects. And he attributes everything. In this culture we take pictures, and we send them out into the digital world via social media. We don’t value who made them or where they come from. But these photographs do.”

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*