

A Conversation with Sylvia Lavin

0158, 2006

SYLVIA LAVIN

From the first moment I saw your photographs of the Glass House, I was totally entranced. It was like seeing a friend after a make-over with a new haircut, a familiar visage suddenly looking better, refreshed, and as popular discourse is wont to put it, "different." The trance was produced not just by the visually intoxicating qualities of the dense color field that suddenly landed in New Canaan, but by the quizzical nature of the architectural analysis implicit in the images. Unlike faces, which change often, not merely over a lifetime but every moment of every day, buildings are generally understood as more durable, persistent, and unchanging. To feel free to so radically update an architectural face, as you have done, is a liberty that could not have been imagined by someone more constrained by architectural habits. Particularly today, when mid-century houses are being restored to within an inch of their historical lives, I found your promiscuous transformation of this icon especially potent. So, to paraphrase Richard Hamilton's title for a painting made a few years after the Glass House was completed, just what was it that made this home so different, so appealing, so intoxicating for you that you would become fixated on its image and in turn fixate me?

Los Angeles, February 28, 2010

JAMES WELLING

Thanks! You were one of the first people to see these pictures in 2006, and your enthusiasm for them was a big boost to me in the beginning.

So why the Glass House?

I had a very indirect route to the Glass House. In the early 1980s, I worked in the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, first as an art handler, then as a photographer. I helped wrap the entire collection to move it out for the Cesar Pelli renovation. When Arthur Drexler, director of the department, found out I was a photographer, he asked me shoot design objects, furniture, and drawings that were housed in the museum's Mies van der Rohe Archive. So I got to know the collection and the Mies archive extremely well. From time to time, Philip Johnson would wander in and talk to Drexler. Of course I knew who Johnson was, but since I wasn't part of the architecture community, I had no reason to talk to him.

0469, 2009

If I am understanding you correctly, you first came to look at Modern architecture through images, rather than through buildings.

Yes. When I started working at MoMA, I was making abstract photographs. But I was looking at lots of architectural photographs in the files and learning about architecture from the collection. A few years later, in 1986, I did a show at Feature in Chicago, and made a pilgrimage out to Mies's IIT campus. After working at MoMA, I was very, very interested in Mies. A few years later, I did begin an architectural project, but not about Mies. Probably in reaction to my time at MoMA, I made an extensive photographic survey of buildings by H. H. Richardson. Then, jumping forward eighteen years, in 2006 I did a show at Donald Young in Chicago and made another pilgrimage, this time to see Mies's Farnsworth House. When I saw it, I completely fell for it. I went back a month later and took photographs. At the time, I was making multiple exposure photographs using six colored filters (red, green, blue, cyan, magenta, and yellow) and I photographed Farnsworth this way. I showed these pictures to Jody Quon, the photo editor at *New York Magazine*, and she asked me to do something similar with Johnson's Glass House.

This project, then, has a long history that can be said to begin at the Museum of Modern Art as you were packing up the Mies archive, putting shrink wrap and bubble wrap and other sorts of semi-transparent things around these objects. You were already producing a filtering system through which you would see these works. But while you started with the Farnsworth House, which is where it is often said that Johnson's Glass House began, the Mies having been for decades understood as the original from which Johnson made a copy, you ultimately ended up with the Glass House as your subject. How do you explain the shift?

You approach the Farnsworth House through the woods. It's completely magical to arrive at this glowing, transparent house that you've glimpsed through the trees, with a big travertine deck, the beautiful stairs, and the incredible interior. I remember taking a slew of pictures at Farnsworth because it was *just so beautiful* sitting there in this green landscape. I didn't want to leave it. At the time, I thought that it was a perfect building in the landscape. Three months later, I visited the Glass House. For some reason, I never bothered to look at photographs of the Glass House before

I got there. I thought of it as a very *conceptual* house; I knew it was just a glass box. When you first see the Glass House, it looks almost crude. There's no beautiful deck as there is at Farnsworth. The Glass House, which is much bigger than it appears, sits directly on a brick base on the earth. And right behind you, as you look at the Glass House from the classic viewpoint, is the Brick House, a completely windowless facade that stands like a brutal, impenetrable structure in contrast to the Glass House. As I worked on the property, I began to appreciate the simplicity and brutality of these two buildings, and became hooked on the Glass House over the sophistication of Farnsworth. As I have been thinking about the Glass House recently, I see it as a lens sitting in the landscape animating or activating all the other buildings on the property. You always look back to the Glass House from wherever you're standing.

Your ultimate preference for the Glass House is strikingly in keeping with the postmodernist pleasure in the copy rather than admiration for the original. Not only do you seem to understand the Glass House as a kind of reproduction of the Farnsworth House, you also seem to get close to describing it as a photographic reproduction in particular,

as a lens that produces a potentially infinite series of images. In your analysis, the Glass House becomes a proleptic James Welling or James Welling becomes a retroactive manifesto for the Glass House. In this scenario, the Farnsworth House is not a digression, rather it is embedded in a productively critical reading of the Glass House, which is why I'm so interested in hearing you describe the difference between them.

Well, I came to the Glass House via Farnsworth, but I quickly saw the Glass House as a complex of structures. Farnsworth is a single pavilion. The Glass House starts out as a pair of buildings, and these multiply into over a dozen structures over time. Still, the Glass House is always the focus when you are in the other buildings.

The Farnsworth House entered the cultural imaginary as a perfect object, so perfect that it could not withstand human habitation. Edith Farnsworth, the woman who commissioned Mies to design it for her, was never comfortable in the house. She found herself to be a kind of smudge on its perfection. The Glass House, on the other hand, has until recently been thought of as somehow lacking. But I wonder if this very imperfection is what invites you to intervene.

4531, 2007

Yes, there's something a little off about the Glass House, and that's what is fascinating about it.

One of the things that is "off" about the Glass House is that it is both a copy of the Farnsworth House, the design of which long predated Johnson's, and also an original, since it was completed as a building before Farnsworth. This strange doubleness upsets our typical assumptions about how the culture of the copy works. Generally, we think of the copy as an image that has a loose, if not arbitrary, relation to some original object, and this notion, on the one hand, is certainly present in your photographs. On the other hand, your photographs are profoundly indexical. Your process emphasizes the directness of the images, both in terms of the lack of Photoshop postproduction work and in terms of the primacy of the way it records the experience of taking the pictures, the event of the shoot, as it were.

This "doubleness" is something that has long interested me. In the aluminum foil photographs of the 1980s, you have straightforward representations of foil and very metaphoric images.

You focus on the Glass House and the Lake Pavilion, but what about the other buildings?

In my initial visit, I spent two days making conventional pictures of all the dozen or so buildings on the property. On the third day, the only thing that interested me was the Glass House, and I began to photograph it with colored filters. On my next visit a month later, I discovered the 1962 Lake Pavilion, which now interests me almost as much as the Glass House. It's such a strange, ghostly structure. A friend of mine called it an "unfinished mausoleum." The other buildings—the Painting Gallery, the Sculpture Gallery, the Library/Study, Da Monsta—were conventional and did not yield much photographically.

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What does that mean? What is an object that doesn't yield anything photographically?

The views I gravitate toward are views through buildings. I want to look through the arches of the Pavilion, I want to look through the panes of glass, I needed those passages.

So certain elements work more like a Claude glass than others?

Right. I am repeating the history of the Claude glass by putting colored filters in front of my lens. The house and the Lake Pavilion allow me to filter the view by organizing it into a picture.

Yes, I suppose it makes the landscape into a picture.

The Claude glass frames it and simplifies the color.

So let's move from the house as subject to your photographs. If the first obvious question to ask of this body of work is why the Glass House, then the second obvious question is why color?

As an artist, I always take the particular skills I've developed for the previous project into the next one. When I went to Farnsworth, I was thinking about color from a previous project, *Hexachromes* (2005). I was very interested in making visible trichromaticity, in demonstrating how we see with red, green, and blue receptors in our eyes. I teach a seminar on color, and I like to emphasize this foundational idea of trichromatic vision. And it's an intense problem in photography. Very few people make work about it, because it's built into the nature of the photographic emulsion and it's nearly impossible to separate it out. So I was working on how to do something where I would see trichromatic filtering in both human vision, and in photographic practice. I made a group of color photographs using multiple exposures as shadows moved across succulent plants to create brilliant color. When I got to the Glass House, it was a spectacular October day, but there was no air movement to give me the moving shadows I used in *Hexachromes*. I quickly rethought the project and decided to put the multiple colored filters in front of the lens, not sequentially as before, but overlapping.

30 Can you describe the actual apparatus you construct?

My camera is mounted on a tripod, and I have a couple of dozen small square filters that I cut from large cinema gels. I hold them in front of the lens. It's extremely simple and spontaneous. I'll take many exposures and work through groups of filters.

Since they are not made in postproduction, these images are actually what you saw through the camera lens at any one moment, is that correct?

Yes. I look through the viewfinder and then I shoot to my laptop so I can see it a moment later on the screen.

The images themselves are so clean and quasi-modernist, but the process seems full of jerry-rigging, bricolage rather than design, more Bruce Goff than Mies. You're not entirely sure of what you're going to get until you've taken it?

Right. But I keep experimenting, putting different things in front of the lens.

But you're transforming or reinventing or expanding the actual photographic apparatus.

I tried putting a matte box in front of the camera to hold the filters more professionally, but the results are more exciting when I am holding the filters in my hand.

Because?

The filters are more random when I hold them in my hand; they're almost in motion. I work with up to twenty different combinations for each view. So it is a bricolage effect, as you say. In *8067* (2008), I had a red filter and a piece of glass at an angle, which acts like a mirror so I can see what's behind me. And in *5912* (2008), where I placed a piece of glass at a 45-degree angle below the lens, I brought the sun, which was behind my back, into the picture. In *8046* (2008), I had a piece of clear glass at a 45-degree angle pointing down. In other pictures, I used a diffraction grating, which is a filter that breaks light into the spectrum. In these pictures, you can see a horizontal blurring.

0696, 2008

4559, 2007

Those little rainbows ... ?

Spectral effects.

If you look at the images as a series, you have increased the amount of visual interference you allow to enter the pictures over time.

The pictures became more complicated and layered as I visited the Glass House. In *4559* (2007), I piled up all sorts of clear plastic and diffraction gratings in front of the lens. Actually, there are a few pictures in which I made Photoshop interventions. The negative pictures are of course inverted in Photoshop. And there are a few other pictures that have two images stacked on top of each other to improve image clarity. The reason that I print straight from the camera most of the time is that I'm getting all that I need when I take the picture in terms of color filtration and saturation using the filters.

Is that like a first principle, do you think?

No, not at all. Initially I tried to just take a straight color photograph and add the color in Photoshop. This didn't work. The color never looked as vibrant as what I got at the Glass House using filters. Maybe you told me this? You never forget visiting the Glass House. So when I'm there, I am keenly aware that just being there is an event. The filters in a strange way amplify and double that "being there." They intensify the act that takes place during the camera exposure. When I tried adding color using a color enlarger in the darkroom, the pictures were completely uninteresting. They looked like photographs with gels over them, rather than the intense events that these pictures became.

Do you think this emphasis on the event-hood of the photograph, its live-ness, is intrinsic to all your work as a photographer, or is this emphasis something that was solicited by the Glass House as photographic subject in particular?

The quick answer is that the process is unique to the Glass House. I invented it there and I don't really plan to use it anywhere else.

So you invented a process that emerges from your understanding of this house in particular as a kind of camera.

Yes.

We were discussing that the house was never properly lived in. It was not a house to live in, in the sense that sleeping, for example, generally happened elsewhere. But it was, and still is, a house to be seen, to be seen in, to be disseminated through images, photographs, texts, and TV. When Johnson wrote about the house, he described the design as a montage of various historic precedents, like the picturesque landscape, which was not only composed of framed views of the landscape, but was also a producer of the history of architecture in which visitors found Gothic ruins, or Roman temples, or Turkish tents here and there as they promenaded around. The Glass House, too, provides a pictorial understanding of the history of architecture and of the building's place in that history. Johnson's Glass House formulates itself as belonging to that history of apparatus-like glass houses, from Chareau's Maison de Verre to Le Corbusier's Beistegui apartment, which understand architecture less as providing places to live and more as the structure through which we view the world.

The Glass House is a 360-degree panorama. It frames the view for you. Even at night, with the trees illuminated and the lights inside very dim, you have a nocturnal panorama. In my frontal views, I line up both doorways. I survey the house to find the precise spot to create these perfectly symmetrical frontal views.

But your view of this viewing-machine is less machinic than these historic examples, and more affective. This seems strongly expressed through the dominance of color. Rather than pretend to see more clearly, the pictures are overwhelmed by the artifice of the color. For example, in this image *6075 (2008)*, the change in color from top to bottom is completely independent of the image. In other words, it would have been easy to change the color of the sky, or the building, or the grass, but your color changes are autonomous from the formal or compositional logic of the setting.

I was holding a purple filter halfway up the picture and I had an orange filter sitting on top of it. Then behind both of these filters, I placed the diffraction grating. So the camera was looking through two different layers.

6063, 2008

The color has its own logic that is almost entirely free from the logic of the image's manifest content.

I am totally interested in arbitrary colors.

We keep coming back to the idea of the double, the thing that is both copy and original, image and producer of images, the live event and the memory, a theme which is symptomatically expressed in the series of photographs that are "diptychs," that is, one image divided into two color zones. But the most extreme manifestation of doubling—and of the ease and even pleasure you take in the oxymoron—is the way the photographs combine evidence of the presence of the actual object and of your experience during the moment of taking the picture with artificial colors (the manipulated and manipulating apparatus) in complete disobedience of the formal logic of the house in the landscape. The effect is to produce for the viewer an almost unthinkable and incredibly intense experience of the inauthentic. From the point of view of the history of painting, it's as though you had used the camera to merge the painterly atmospheres of Turner with the analytic precision of Poussin, providing the viewer

with the intellectual and affective effects of the colorists as well as the sharp acumen of those who believed in the supremacy of content.

That's a great description of the project. It's about the primacy of experience, and I double the experience by adding colors and reflections. So, to answer the question "couldn't you do all this in Photoshop?"—the answer is no. I could not see what is behind me or experience the intense color I added. So the pictures are a charged experience of standing at the Glass House.

But what you produce is more intense than the image that the house produces alone. Just looking at the house, and particularly looking at it through conventional architectural photography, seems banal—if not boring—in comparison with looking at your photographs. So your images, which record an actual experience or seek to convey the force of authentic experience, provide more intensity than the real view. It's a fantastic irony that the reproduction of the experience is more concentrated than actually being there, right?

Right.

8101, 2008

Or perhaps it's more *déjà vu* than ironic, since that's exactly what Johnson did to Mies: he took the original thing and made it, through the processes of reproduction, into something more than Farnsworth.

I was amazed at the experience of being there: not just the experience of the house and the guest house, but the incredible landscape and all the other buildings. The Glass House frames a landscape that has been completely handcrafted.

We've talked about the genealogy of this project, both in terms of the history of painting and the history of architecture, but where does it go with respect to the future of photography?

I have no idea where these images are going to take me. They are the result of fifteen years of thinking about the camera and about color. For me, photography that is based on a camera model, that is, a model dependent on the laws of perspective produced by a lens, has become less compelling than photography based on the idea of sensitized surfaces, shadows, impressions, layers, and the whole idea of layering. So these ideas of mine about a non-camera-based

photography, or a photography where the lens isn't the only player, coalesce in the *Glass House* photographs. It seems that I've found this perfect mid-century moment in architecture on which I'm able to perform my experiments. Give or take a few years, the Glass House is my age.

Well, it's more than a product of your biography, because this work participates in and belongs to a broader spectrum of research. If Philip Johnson was striving for the lightness of visual experience, as it existed in the 1950s, your work produces instead a super dense visual experience. And this density of visual sensation is closer to the things that interest architects today than architects at mid-century. I would argue that you belong to a formidable — and contemporary — family of artists and architects who are interested in thickening visual experience.

The confluence that you describe, this density, is one of the implications of the so-called digital revolution. That is, with digital means you can detach certain parts of technology that were previously completely stuck together. Working with inkjet printers revolutionizes

how color pictures are made, and as a result, influences how the world will be colored. For me, digital technology does not so much result in losing the photographic trace, but rather in gaining a different kind of control. As the old technology closes down, another opens up.

You also have to have the appetite to do what the technology permits, and there certainly seems to be an appetite for more color. Your reproduction of Johnson contains more color than his world; his reproduction of Mies can be said to have contained more color, more texture, and more animation than Mies. The shift from white steel to brick was as radical a change as the shift from the perpendicular to the diagonal in De Stijl. You have described 1949 as a kind of "easy" year, but it was also a really complicated year. This was not only the moment in which Modernism as defined by the likes of Clement Greenberg was achieving hegemony, but also the moment when the totality and exclusiveness of that view of modernity initiated its own demise. Johnson's brick pressed

irregularity into the very ground of Modernism's perfection, and hence must be seen as the beginning of the critique of utopia. And once you have irregular bricks sitting on the damp ground, you are just a few historical moments from the creeping up of smells, and the rise of temperature, and the hue of color, and before you know it, rather than hygienic perfection, utopia has been transformed into a sensorially filled environment. Your work belongs to and is helping create this environment; it also belongs to an intellectual climate in which critical intelligence rather than sentimentality of experience is the central force. Speaking of experience, did you go to the Brick House and take off all your clothes the way Andy Warhol did?

Oh, no. It was being restored all the times I was there.

Were you there when Philip Johnson was still alive?

No, I first went to the house about twenty months after he died. But James, his dog, is alive. And James still runs the property. It's a dog's house.