

# Willa Nasatir



*Boy, 2017*

**Albright-Knox Art Gallery  
February 18–June 18, 2017**

In her first solo museum exhibition, Willa Nasatir (American, born 1990) presents evocative new photographs that capture her unique approach to staging, photographing, and rephotographing elaborate sculptural landscapes of her own creation. Her still lifes share something of the intimacy and magical illusion of a diorama or tabletop theater, marking them as distinct from the computer-manipulated digital photography practiced by many of her predecessors and peers. To make these works, which sometimes resemble reliquaries, Nasatir first assembles objects both common and unusual: copper tubing, a pair of broken eyeglasses, a champagne muselet, a motorcycle helmet, a baseball cap, a door handle, a child's chair, a rubber snake. In the space between her constructions and camera she then props mirrors, bends mylar, and deploys scrim of extruded Plexiglas and other intermediaries in order to complicate or obfuscate the camera's address of these tableaux. Shadows and reflections resulting from this elaborate set-up create the illusion that the artist has used more conventional postproduction photographic filters.

Nasatir's process allows her to create nonspecific story lines from materials associated with the literal depiction of things in traditional still lifes. It also opens her work up to accidents and happenstance. This welcoming of chance, her choice of objects, and the overall affect of her photographs prompt comparisons with Surrealist photography, such as the work of Man Ray. In addition, the way she handles these commonplace objects, as if they possess unusual importance and otherworldly power, links her practice to artists as diverse as photographer Sarah Charlesworth or filmmaker Jack Smith. Each of Nasatir's individual photographs is sourced from a

memory or a narrative, whether something she experienced or a powerful scene in an artwork or a film. However, they do not tell stories. Rather, her cobbling and filtering is a sleight of hand that unmoors her subjects from their origins. The resulting photographs call on us to create our own story lines. Five of the twelve works in the exhibition belong to one large multi-panel grouping, a connection that makes it easier to draw narrative associations between the individual images.

Although Nasatir's images are abstractions, none are abstract; the everyday lingers in each. In fact, the window that can be glimpsed in the background of nearly every photograph in the exhibition is a reflection of one in the artist's Brooklyn studio. No matter how surreal, every image is grounded in Nasatir's studio-based practice and the city of New York. *Gatekeeper* and *Gatekeeper #2* explore this connection most explicitly. Their wood blocks, broken mirrors, glass fragments, swords, and tongues read as a vacated and damaged anthropomorphic cityscape. Like many New Yorkers, Nasatir follows *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*, a blog by Jeremiah Moss that features acerbic commentary on and photographic evidence of the rapid pace of gentrification and horror vacui that characterizes contemporary New York. If the central object in Nasatir's *Gatekeeper* photographs does indeed evoke a building, it is one in mourning, weeping comically oversized tears.

The *Gatekeeper* images are just two of the many works in Nasatir's exhibition that seem to use layers and visual barriers to evoke the distance between the present day and the past, specifically in relationship to places that have been lost. Although Nasatir does not take actual locations as her subject, her work nonetheless may be related to that of other artists who pictured the city as a vulnerable rather than heroic subject. For example, Nasatir is an admirer of Alvin Baltrop's explicit and romantic images of the uninhibited gay culture of New York's Hudson River Piers, created in the 1970s and 1980s when the West Side's waterfront edges were a postindustrial no-man's-land and when overt homosexuality still risked censure, loss of housing, and



*Red Room, 2017*

violence. Randal Wilcox, a friend of Baltrop's, speculated that recent posthumous interest in his work cannot be separated from a kind of nostalgia for an urban landscape that permitted space for resistance as well as non-commercialized zones: "Sometimes it feels like there is an overwhelming sameness to everything now, whether that's in art or just walking around in New York, where neighborhoods seem more and more alike. People want something different."<sup>1</sup> Baltrop could not have known how swiftly the subculture of sexual freedom that flourished at the piers would be obliterated by urban redevelopment and the rising toll of AIDS, and his works only retrospectively became inseparable from mourning and nostalgia. The possible influence of Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* on Nasatir's project is similarly broadly conceptual, rather than visual. Leonard self-consciously framed the 412 photographs of that series as an elegiac document of the rapidly changing and increasingly

professionalized street market culture that she observed replacing the small “mom and pop” stores of her Lower East Side neighborhood, and then traced this phenomenon’s ties to the effects of globalization outside the United States. These two unlikely historical references could help situate Nasatir’s practice in relation to two very different ways that photography can approach mourning—to begin as affirmative and coincidentally become about loss, as in the case of Baltrop’s images, or to purposefully use photography for the preservation of urban memory, as in the case of Leonard’s project.

In a recent interview, Nasatir described what she sees as photography’s relationship to death through her fascination with the nineteenth-century genre of spiritualist photography. Designed to prove the existence of ghosts and an afterlife, these staged images were often constructed using a mixture of real props, such as gauze and smoke, and photographic manipulation, such as burning and double exposures. The results were magical and revelatory, a perfect blend of photography’s claims to scientific exactitude and humans’ bottomless capacity for deception. Whether we turn to it seeking documentary proof that an absent person or place once existed or for hope that they may yet be with us, photography is an inevitable part of the grieving process. “I’m less interested in photography as a medium for depicting the ‘real’ than I am in its capacity to display the otherworldly,” Nasatir said.<sup>2</sup> These historical images, designed to hide and deceive, nonetheless uncover a great deal about those who constructed them. According to Nasatir:

I am interested in them as a record of a transaction, where people were contracting amateur photographers to provide them with material proof of some mental discomfort that they felt, whether depression, schizophrenia, mania that couldn’t be explained in their waking life. Oftentimes, people were complicit in these staged portraits, meaning they were aware of the mechanics behind the pictures and yet they suspended disbelief. Our collective desire for a visualization of psychological unrest is incredibly compelling to me.<sup>3</sup>

When reflecting on the general mood and experience of *reading through* that Nasatir constructs in the photographs on view at the Albright-Knox, it is difficult to escape references to film noir. Her images speak to the portentousness of masterpieces of the genre from the 1930s and 1940s, like 1941's *Maltese Falcon*, but perhaps even more to the films of the dystopian neo-noir revival of the 1980s and 1990s, like *Strange Days*, 1995, and *Blade Runner*, 1982. It is not simply that Nasatir's reflection-addled photographs seem to riff on those films' slick and fog-laden black, red, and blue-tinted palette. There is also a kind of structural affinity; after all, *Blade Runner*, a film that remarkably embodies or anticipates many of the aesthetics we associate with the 1980s, was nonetheless an attempt to imagine the Los Angeles of 2019 by turning the lens of 1940s melodrama on a 1968 novel by Philip K. Dick.

This sort of chronological soup seems to inspire Nasatir, perhaps because it provides a useful pretext to consider the instability of memory and the way that, despite its apparently factual nature, photography is inseparable from that fallibility. Just as Nasatir recasts simple still-life objects as talismans both sacred and foreign in her photographic constructions, our memories are constantly being rewritten in light of new experiences; this malleability in turn transforms the way we see the present. What connects Nasatir's works on view at the Albright-Knox may be the artist's fascination with the power of photography in the face of such loss. While photography seems to fix people and places as constants in memory's shifting terrain, Nasatir's photographs reveal the extent to which this power is always a partial one, subject to its own endless cycles of revision and fragmentation.

1. Grace Dunham, "The Overlooked Brilliance of Alvin Baltrop, the West Side Piers' Voyeur-in-Chief," *The Village Voice*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/the-overlooked-brilliance-of-alvin-baltrop-the-west-side-piers-voyeur-in-chief-8678282>.
2. Drew Sawyer, "Willa Nasatir's Spectral Images," *Document*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.documentjournal.com/article/willa-nasatir>.
3. Lauren Cornell, "Psychic Junkyards: Willa Nasatir," *Mousse 54* (Summer 2016), <http://moussemagazine.it/willa-nasatir-lauren-cornell-2016/>.

## About the Artist

Willa Nasatir (American, born 1990) lives and works in New York. Select recent solo exhibitions have been held at Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; Chapter NY, New York; and White Columns, New York. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions at Agnes Maybach, Cologne; DREI Gallery, Cologne; Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, the University of Arts, Philadelphia; Company Gallery, New York; and Del Vaz Projects, Los Angeles.

# Works in the Exhibition

*Red # 3 (GSD), 2015*

C-print, edition 1/3 and 1 AP  
28 x 24 inches (71.1 x 61 cm)

*Prospector (Part 1), 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
93<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 x 3 inches (237.1 x  
182.9 x 7.6 cm)

*Periscope (Part 2), 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
93<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 x 3 inches (237.1 x  
182.9 x 7.6 cm)

*Out of the Blue (Part 3), 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
93<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 x 3 inches (237.1 x  
182.9 x 7.6 cm)

*Eric (Part 4), 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
93<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 x 3 inches (237.1 x  
182.9 x 7.6 cm)

*Two Headed Snake (Part 5), 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
93<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 x 3 inches (237.1 x  
182.9 x 7.6 cm)

*Boy, 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
82 x 67 x 2 inches (208.3 x 170.2  
x 5.1 cm)

*Gatekeeper, 2017*

C-print, edition 1/3 and 1 AP  
43 x 35 inches (109.2 x 88.9 cm)

*Gatekeeper #2, 2017*

C-print, edition 1/3 and 1 AP  
26<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches (67.3 x 54.6 cm)

*Rat King Escape, 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
82 x 67 x 2 inches (208.3 x 170.2  
x 5.1 cm)

*Red Room, 2017*

C-print on panel and tacks  
82 x 67 x 2 inches (208.3 x 170.2  
x 5.1 cm)

*Street Sweeper, 2017*

Silver gelatin print  
26<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 21 inches (66.7 x 53.3 cm)

All works are courtesy of the  
artist and Chapter NY.



**Willa Nasatir**

**Jacob Kassay: OTNY**

**Eric Mack: Vogue Fabrics**

**Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj:  
*Studies for A Minor History of Trembling Matter***

February 18–June 18, 2017

These exhibitions are organized by Senior Curator Cathleen Chaffee.

They were made possible through the generosity of the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo. Additional equipment and technical support for Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj: *Studies for A Minor History of Trembling Matter* was provided by Advantage TI.

All exhibition checklists are accurate as of January 2017.

### **Image credits**

Nasatir: Courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY.



**Albright-Knox  
Art Gallery**

1285 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo, New York 14222  
[albrightknox.org](http://albrightknox.org)

Edited and designed by Emily Mangione, Assistant Editor  
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