

# PHOTO OP

Interdisciplinary artist Barbara Kasten takes center stage at Frieze Projects as she installs her imaginative, architectural sculpture *Intervention*.

BY RITA GONZALEZ  
PORTRAIT BY CONSTANCE MENSCH

PHOTO: CONSTANCE MENSCH; COURTESY OF THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

PHOTO: DAVID T. KINDLER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, BORTOLAMI GALLERY, NEW YORK & HANNAH HOFFMAN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

THIS FEBRUARY, CHICAGO-BASED ARTIST Barbara Kasten installs one of the Frieze Projects for the second iteration of the Los Angeles fair, returning to the city where she spent a formative decade in the 1970s. “My time in California was the core of my career,” declares Kasten. Pursuing a graduate degree in Oakland at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now known as the California College of the Arts), Kasten studied textile art with German émigré Trude Guermonprez, who introduced the young artist to the legacies of the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. In 1972, Kasten moved to the City of Angels and credits her 10 years in LA with solidifying her desire to become an artist. “The LA art scene encouraged experimentation,” she says. “Its diverse culture introduced me to unusual materials, from boating hardware to colorful fabrics, mirrors and architectural props, which I used in the setups for my early Polaroid photographs.”

Raised in the Windy City, where she returned for her studio practice and teaching, Kasten has become revered in the photography world. She is predominantly known for her wildly colorful photographs executed through a considered process of building up materials, such as plexiglass, mirror and steel armature. Curators and critics, including Robert A. Sobieszek, the former head of the photography department at LACMA who collected Kasten’s work in depth for the museum, have long championed her interdisciplinary approach. Her earliest works in fiber pushed boundaries by taking colorful weavings and stretching them onto wooden chairs, connecting the woven form to the body. Her experimentation with photograms in the 1970s paid homage to pioneering Bauhaus and Constructivist artists yet was in sync with her contemporaries of the time, including Light and Space artists such as James Turrell and Helen Pashgian.

“The interdisciplinary practices of the artists associated with the Bauhaus have been so important in the development of my work,” says Kasten. “László Moholy-Nagy’s belief in the photogram as the essence of photography inspired my first encounters with photography. He considered light an important and independent medium. That concept is the basis of my installations, in which shadows become integral forms and the light activates the relationship between the real object and the ephemeral.” Since the 1980s, Kasten has combined her interest in the legacy of photographic abstraction and a desire to reproduce architectural forms in her series of staged photography, such as *Constructs* and *Transpositions*.

It is perhaps Kasten’s refusal to conform to the rules of photography that has been most consistent across her five decades of artistic output and has inspired a generation of artists, who engage with photography’s format but push beyond medium specificity. While the practices of such artists as Walead Beshty, Shannon Ebner,

Liz Deschenes and Anthony Pearson have all been influenced by Kasten’s formal and conceptual explorations of light, color, staging and architectural form, the multiple orientations and approaches embedded within her extensive artistic history have not been understood in a broader context until recently.

In 2015, ICA Philadelphia curator Alex Klein’s exhibition “Barbara Kasten: Stages” (which traveled to the Graham Foundation in partnership with the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial and then to LA’s MOCA in 2016) brought together Kasten’s early works in fiber art, sculptures, installation, video and photography and showed the true breadth of her oeuvre. Since that first major survey of her work, Kasten has gained the global exposure that she rightly deserves, and at the age of 83, she is busier than ever. In 2020 she has back-to-back solo museum exhibitions at the Aspen Art Museum and the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in Germany, in addition to her contribution to this year’s Frieze LA.

Frieze Projects is an independently curated platform for artists to showcase ambitious, experimental work beyond the

fair’s tent and gallery booths. Kasten’s *Intervention*, an elaborate installation-scaled sculpture that is a balancing of steel armature and colored plexiglass, will take over a large interior space on the Paramount Pictures Studios’s New York Street Backlot. The roots of *Intervention* come from Kasten’s experience spending summer months working at the Illinois Institute of Technology, inside S. R. Crown Hall, an iconic modernist building designed by Ludwig Mies



*Intervention* (2018), photographed during Hans Ulrich Obrist’s “Creative Chicago: An Interview Marathon” at the Navy Pier

van der Rohe. While there, she created a morphing sculptural installation that eventually became *Intervention* and served as the backdrop for curator Hans Ulrich Obrist’s signature Marathon interview sessions during the 2018 EXPO CHICAGO.

On the backlot, *Intervention* takes on new life and plays off of Kasten’s longstanding practice of working on sets with props and lighting. The sculpture, made up of industrial forms, is a playful depiction of architecture. Its tables balance on each other, defying their own gravity, while transparent acrylic industrial girders project brightly colored photograms on the backdrop of the set. Given Kasten’s interest in the history of architecture and the ways in which her photography and sculpture have reflected stylistic shifts from high modernism to postmodernism, she is enthralled with the pastiche of architectural references that are layered at the film studio. “Theatrical lighting and the staging of other realities are the artifice of Hollywood production and are also evident in my art practice,” she explains. “To show my sculpture on the Paramount Studios Backlot is a unique opportunity to have it coexist within a perfect context”—and a perfect recipe for the artist’s return to LA.