

# Robin Crookall

*Part Fact, Part Aspect*



*Shower Scene* • silver gelatin print, 2020

**January 31 - April 18, 2021**

## About the Exhibition:

Living somewhere between traditional photography and sculpture, Robin Crookall's work creates deceptively simple studies of architectural spaces. Interested in mid-century modernism and the "All-American" archetype, Crookall creates complicated sets out of unsophisticated materials like cardboard, hot glue, and plastic wrap, then photographs these scenes. The resulting black and white images seem like formal exploration of geometry and architecture until the viewer takes a closer look to see the truth of the image.

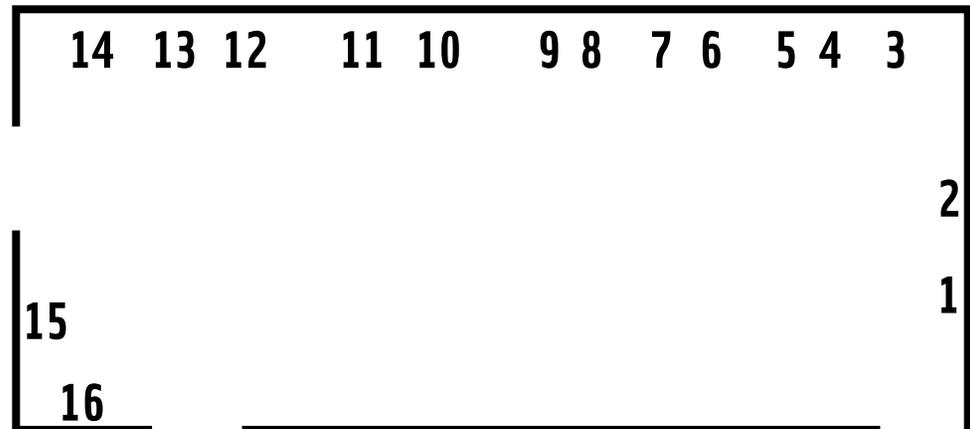
## About the Artist

Robin Crookall is a 2021 finalist in The Print Centers, 95th Annual International Competition. In fall 2020 she completed a residency and solos show at Penumbra Foundation in New York City. Crookall is a 2019 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow in photography from The New York Foundation for the Arts. In 2016, Crookall received her MFA from New York University. In 2015 she completed a solo show at Seattle's 4Culture Gallery and her post bacc at University of Montana. Crookall is currently living in Brooklyn and working on a self published book of images.

## About the Real Art Awards:

The Real Art Awards are a juried competition open at no cost to emerging artists from the six New England states, New York and New Jersey. The Real Art Awards are intended to give a boost of recognition and opportunity to the six selected artists. In addition to the cash prize and a solo exhibition, each artist receives logistical and curatorial support throughout the exhibition process. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

# Gallery Map



All works are available for sale. For purchase inquiries, please contact Neil Daigle Orians at [norians@realartways.org](mailto:norians@realartways.org)

1. *Inside Looking Out*, (Part 2 of Diptych), 2020, Pigment Print

2. *Outside Looking In*, (Part 1 of Diptych) 2020, Pigment Print

3. *Close Enough*, 2020, Silver Gelatin print

4. *Plant Show*, 2019, Silver Gelatin print

5. *Shower Scene*, 2020, Silver Gelatin print

6. *My Eye in Brooklyn*, 2019, Silver Gelatin print

7. *Interior Shadows*, 2019, Silver Gelatin print

8. *Split*, 2017, Silver Gelatin print

9. *Split from Outside*, 2017, Silver Gelatin print

10. *Mirror mirror*, 2018, Silver Gelatin print

11. *Curbed Couch*, 2018, Silver Gelatin print

12. *Back Door*, 2020, Silver Gelatin print

13. *Cactus and Lamp*, 2019, Silver Gelatin print

14. *Lamp Shade*, 2020, Silver Gelatin print

15. *Ranch House*, 2016, Pigment Print

16. *Mirror and Table*, 2018, Silver Gelatin print

# Exhibition Introduction

Aude Jomini



Above: *Outside Looking In, Inside Looking Out*, archival inkjet prints, diptych, 2020

## ***Not-Quite-Right Modern***

Upon entry, *Outside Looking In, Inside looking Out* casts a directive. This scene of a modern home at night, framed to highlight the blurring between inside and outside, is reminiscent of architectural photography of 1940's California Modernism. Such photographs project a certain ideal of utopian living, classically elegant and remote.<sup>1</sup> While the journal *Arts and Architecture* promoted case-study homes as models of spatial ease, cleanliness and efficiency easily assembled from industrial materials, it is this imagery's surface aesthetic which became the mass appeal of modernism. Stark frames in interaction with natural settings promoted a luxurious, open lifestyle as a vision for middle class families, however its promise of low cost and mass-democratization never truly materialized.

Through its promotion, architectural photography became a discipline, epitomized in Julius Shulman's depictions of *case-study* houses by architects such as Richard Neutra, John Lautner, or Craig Ellwood. The architectural photographer's methods became well-refined in artifice. Controlled lighting and maximal cropping, with emphasis on vanishing lines and poised in Mondrian-like balance<sup>2</sup>, pictured living spaces hanging on impossible structural feats to conquer valleys, nocturnal voids, or wild groves. While these depictions inextricably elicit nostalgia now, their propagation in the pages of *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Better Homes and Garden* lured an entire generation into a semi-

conscious desire for endless floor plates and reflective pools.<sup>3</sup> These houses carried fantasies of a world yet to materialize. While every form of architecture is a snapshot of an era, domestic space also connects layers of history for its inhabitants as they weather decades of change in place. From the perceived safety of our homes, we may find ourselves intruders within our desires, searching for a promised denouement lacking any real anchor.

Robin Crookall's photographs do not retouch our misplaced voyeurism. Her pictures slow us down, halting into the *not quite real* through decoys capable of sending a stir of vertigo. While Modernism was sublimated in its control of nature and reframing of surrounding landscape, Crookall's works portray contemporary surroundings no longer natural nor reliable enough to function as a common source of understanding. While Crookall creates the object, stage, and exact angle of how her sculptures are to be viewed,<sup>4</sup> her work makes plain that we, as viewers, stand on the maquettes of our skewed fantasies. Any shared reality is far from grasp. Something is not quite right here. Cardboard, tape, and hot glue hold these images together, *retaining a certain cogency and drabness*<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, in *Outside Looking In, Inside looking Out*, an odd smoke screen of reflections emanates from dubious shadows. A vaguely skewed overhang promises no shelter, promising only a plastic life in some knock-off Hollywood Hills, set under weak surveillance lights directed at stuffed rocks. Look again, as winking inanimate objects may be the dwelling's only true inhabitants. The life seems to have gone out in parts of the composition, yet this modernism is remade of dead zones, drained. The perspective is out of time, removed from hour of day, exact year, or material provenance. Achieving its ultimate desired transcendence, the glass no longer even exists. The view changed into night; it got better. We overstayed our welcome in this utopia.

Crookall's work creates tension within the bounds of the discipline of photography. By substituting a hand-crafted scale model for the real in her photographs, she unravels an inheritance of limitations.

Crookall approaches photography like a painter, building a physical picture onto a superficial foundation. Through the process, she explores contemporary proliferation of incomprehensible digital fabrications,

1 Ethington, Philip J. *The Master of Modern*, in *Julius Shulman: Modernism Rediscovered*, TASCHEN, 2007

2 Owen Edwards notes in *Julius Shulman: Modernism Rediscovered* that architectural elements served as a frame within the intrinsic frame of the camera, with the "precise equipoise of a Mondrian canvas." Implying that a photographer's role is to edit reality to make it look inevitable.

3 *Stahl House* by Pierre Koenig, known as *Case Study House 22*, was an icon of postwar living, a prototype for a new optimism in domesticity that continues to define California. Open-plan living, by Koenig's design, was defined by floor-to-ceiling glass windows and a life more modular. Shulman's photograph of Koenig's Stahl house at night is still reported to be the most published architectural image.

4 Crookall, Robin. Phantom Modeler, Interview with Wenxin Zhang, Indiephoto, Tuchong, July 6th, 2016, <https://indiefoto.tuchong.com/t/13261367/>

5 Crookall, Robin. *Artist Statement*, 2020 from website at <http://www.robincrookall.com/statement.html>



Left: *Lampshade*, gelatin silver print, 2020



Right: *Ranch House*, gelatin silver print, 2020

unbridled replication, and degradation of resolution. To recreate a mental image as physical act becomes a provocation of reality. Her remakes become a gentler ode to the malleable forgiveness inherent in fading memory. The specificity of uneven, Play-Doh-like surface conjures up pitted glazes, dusty macramé and grime too well remembered. Vague recognition denies the embalmed structure of a photographer's *mental model*.

The space outside Crookall's windows does not fare better. Modeled after Robert Adams' 1968 *Colorado Springs*, Crookall's *Ranch House*<sup>6</sup> pushes the discomfort of the original to a logical end point. At first glance, it almost passes. A simple suburban house built quickly by standard modern methods will indeed feel paper thin; its sense of protective domesticity eroded in delaminated surfaces. Robert Adams's sleight of hand also aimed to show the American outdoors as unnatural: the impure accident, the leftover artifact, the electric pole, the untrimmed bush. Easy to miss crumbs of real context keenly spoiled any pure vision<sup>7</sup>. In Crookall's version, symbolic depth is accreted only on accessory elements: the garage door, the front steps. Fuzzball specks floats towards the scratched plastic of an opening in the skewed siding. A void to enter: it is no thing; its depth is fully collapsed. While Adams's *Ranch House* served the purpose of framing a lone silhouette, the absence of human subjects in Crookall's photography places the viewer in more vivid interlocation with its setting. Presence is injected only as interruption, seams undone or back-of-curtain mistakes; this is paper-shred architecture made of the fallen stuff of magazines. Measure is a constant adjustment to a state of repose never settled. *Let me tell you a secret*, Crookall admits, *not one thing is to scale*.<sup>8</sup>

6 Modeled after Robert Adams's *Colorado Springs*, Colorado 1968

7 Adams, Robert. *Along some Rivers*

8 Writer's conversation with Robin Crookall, January 2021



Above: *Split*, gelatin silver print, diptych, 2020



### ***Distorting the Poor Image***

In the slow process of finding the fit and scale of the model in the lens of her viewfinder, Crookall plays up tensions inherent in photography's flattening. Through hand craft and back again to the picture plane, Crookall creates scenes that are *part fact and part aspect*.<sup>9</sup> There is absurdity in her remaking. Crookall sees little value in preserving objects, destroying maquettes once they are photographed. Her sculptures, mundane and unoriginal, become acts of anticipation, playing their part only in a mindscape of half-recollected pictures where anything could still happen. The temporary comfort of a recognized image is disassembled, along with any preexisting notions of reality, memory, and place,<sup>10</sup> to be imbued with mystery again. A photograph can simultaneously depict and deceive, traveling outside tangible timescales.

In a prestidigitation of historical time, Crookall's *Split*<sup>11</sup> recreates the well-known photo documenting Gordon Matta Clark's 1974 *house-split*, materially posing the Instagram-worthy question of which came first: the conceptualization of the act as image, or the performance of the act itself. Existing solely as performance documentation, the split house no longer stands in New Jersey. However, Matta-Clark's act still holds power. Artists and architects alike still look to it for interdisciplinary lessons.

9 Crookall, Robin. *Artist Statement*, 2020 from website at <http://www.robincrookall.com/statement.html>

10 Crookall, Robin. *Artist Statement*

11 Modeled after Gordon Matta Clark's *Splitting*, 1974

Manufacturing rupture after a rupture in a more insidious way, Crookall's model is preconstructed as a broken thing. The absence of an author in Crookall's reverse-engineered image conjures the sense of an act without end, a re-cut, done and undone; the artist who also *split*.

While Matta Clark fissured buildings literally, depictions of torn space and forced perspectival trickery were always inherent tools of architecture. Aggressive skew allowed for magical effects by design, blurring between inside and outside in feats of disappearing walls. John Lautner's *Sheats House* hides the entire bulk of its rooms merely by the perspectival trick of a triangle narrowing to a dining room while the observer is kept completely unaware. *Disappearing space seems to me to be the most durable and enduring and life-giving quality in architecture*,<sup>12</sup> Lautner proclaimed. Geometry is only a servant to this suspense, the *about to become*.<sup>13</sup> While Lautner's effects disappeared in an architecture of *intangibile essences*,<sup>14</sup> many contemporary artists have used the language of spatial tear and distortion as an overt act to reveal a subconscious dimension.

### ***The Drab Uncanny***

To speak of images taking on subconscious life is also to meditate on the power of *the uncanny* in art, architecture and media. John Lautner's modernist houses are mostly known for their appearances in Hollywood movies. Their resulting spectral remoteness further underlines the inaccessibility of modernism's promises of utopia. Lautner's architecture, continuously cropping up in tv-shows, films, cartoons, music videos and even video games, started a Hollywood creep effect which haunted the architect. The blockbusters in which the houses starred, *Diamonds are Forever*, *Body Double*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Less Than Zero* among others, gained Lautner a large following of free-thinking individuals who trespassed to get access to the private houses.<sup>15</sup> The homes were typecast as *bachelor-pads of various flamboyant psycho-paths, pornographers or drug-smugglers*,<sup>16</sup> acquiring a nefarious power outside any intended purpose.

According to curator, scholar and theorist Christoph Grunenberg, the ambiguous nature of *the uncanny*, with its *volatile passage between inside and outside, order and chaos, life and death, real and fantasy, present and past* is reflected in the ambivalent emotions it provokes.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, see above reference.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell Lange, Barbara Ann. *John Lautner*, Taschen 1999

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, see above reference.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell Lange, Barbara Ann. *John Lautner*, Taschen 1999

<sup>16</sup> Rackyard, Nicky, A Look at Hollywood's Love Affair with John Lautner, ArchDaily April 20, 2013

<sup>17</sup> Grunenberg, Christoph. *Life in a Dead Circus: The spectacle of the Real*, Essay in *Mike Kelley: The Uncanny*,

For Mike Kelley, *wholeness is something that can only be played with, and the image of wholeness is only a pathetic comment on the lost utopianism of modernism*.<sup>18</sup> Maybe this is why all of Crookall's images retain a sense of play.

In Crookall's *Mirror and Table*, a fleeting vision of the artist's studio is surgically implanted between the extra legs of the furniture, offering up a promise of escape from scathing surroundings. This collaged imposition of another reality into the scene has the viewer stepping back, for want of taking in the extra limb: a kind of prosthetic real. These daily things seem not themselves and, becoming figures, they have more to hide.



Left: *Mirror and Table*, gelatin silver print, 2020 Right: *TV and Lamp*, gelatin silver print, 2020

In *TV and Lamp*,<sup>19</sup> the artist's own eye appears as the only bodily human element in Crookall's entire series. Impersonating as a media image, the single eyeball takes command, obliterating any nostalgia of viewing Lee Friedlander's original. Crookall shows us only the minimum needed to signify the elements of the appropriated content. The known art image must be retrieved from memory, calling to attention any lost resolution. Does it still carry power? Was there something already deeply wrong

Walther König, Köln, 2004

<sup>18</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, Essay in *Mike Kelley: The Uncanny*, Christoph Grunenberg (Editor), Walther König, Köln, 2004

<sup>19</sup> Modeled after Lee Friedlander's, *Washington DC* 1962

with the original? Friedlander indeed framed American domesticity with brutal honesty. While Crookall's TV screen stands in as literal presence, its lack of specificity fogs away in the soft contrast of a mind imperceptibly fallible. Her climax is an action sequence of flat space not gaining any traction, a spatial divide, a slight disconnect as the back of the closet has turned itself inside out unnoticed. A mirror reflecting an alternate present, Crookall's mind model opens doors into dimensions that take us nowhere. The collage object creeps in a swamped space, forcibly distorted by fish-eye lens trickery.

Crookall's *Shower Scene* performs this difficult lack of depth. Its inanimate protagonists are expert actors with the ability to push space. They reveal themselves as unnatural misfits, perverse intruders, half-hidden. Grunenberg and Kelley spoke primarily of the uncanny in relation to the figural. Our fascination with *the real* drives a sophisticated manufacture of semblance through technology. Despite the readiness of our imagination to be deceived, however, there is a limit to how much faithful re-creation we can bear, brandished in the specter of *uncanny valley*.<sup>20</sup>

In a time of immersive irreality, it is the potential of Crookall's shabbier, non-human uncanny, lodged in its drab domesticity, which can reinvigorate the imagination. The full potential of this alien world is a *generic one*<sup>21</sup>, indeterminate and ambiguous. In memory, only a poor stand-in appears, just beyond recognition, already broken, borrowed. Robin Crookall relishes *the sleight of hand, [the] unnoticeable graceful dance of the pickpocket. There is no real magic here.*<sup>22</sup> And yet...

Under a caringly wrapped traffic pole, at the end of a back road lies the shrouded present of a living room, a surprisingly gorgeous trash-scape. It is a tableau for a shining frame leans in disheveled shadows, a lightbox for props crumpled. Expertly crafted to lack visual exactitude, Crookall's *curbed* objects perform a laughing celebration of their own refusal.



Left: *Shower Scene*, gelatin silver print, 2020



Right: *Curbed Couch*, gelatin silver print, 2020



Above: Robin Crookall, *Part Fact, Part Aspect*, installation view, 2021. Photo by John Groo

20 Grunenberg., Christoph. *Life in a Dead Circus: The spectacle of the Real*, Essay in Mike Kelley: *The Uncanny*, Walther König, Köln, 2004

21 Russel, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Verso, 2020. Russel describes the need to refuse bodily definition by opting out of systematic specification and categorization, retaining a purposely "generic" body in order to free expression from subjugation of capitalism or exploitation. Digital worlds allow for this possibility.

22 Crookall, Robin. Artist Statement, 2020 from website at <http://www.robincrookall.com/statement.html>

**Aude Jomini** is a Swiss-American artist and designer pursuing collaborative and cross-disciplinary projects in art and architecture. She holds a BFA in Painting from RISD and a M-ARCH from Yale School of Architecture. She is a Senior Associate at Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, and has served 5 years on Artspace's Curatorial Advisory Board. She has also worked at Printed Matter Inc, Brooklyn Museum, and as a freelance designer.



## About Real Art Ways

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States, with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



56 Arbor Street  
Hartford, CT 06106  
[www.realartways.org](http://www.realartways.org)



*Andy Warhol*

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Support for Real Art Ways Visual Arts Programs provided by:

*The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the New England Foundation for the Arts through the New England Arts Resilience Fund, the Department of Economic and Community Development Office of the Arts, The Edward C. & Ann T. Roberts Foundation, the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Travelers Foundation, J. Walton Bissell Foundation, Sandy and Howard Fromson, and Real Art Ways' members.*