

COLLECTOR DAILY

Amy Finkelstein, If Only @Elizabeth Houston

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Galleries](#) / January 7, 2019

Comments/Context: Amy Finkelstein's brand of photographic abstraction falls into the "constructed" subspecies of the genre, even though she isn't building three-dimensional settings to be photographed or exploring the optical oddness of light cast into a controlled space.

Her works are resolutely two dimensional and fully analog, her compositions built on transparent drafting film that is then photographed and enlarged, without the aid of additional post-production tweaking. The resulting images use strips of tape to generate the hard edges of geometric structure and washes of India ink to generate more organic forms that feel loose and painterly, like petri dish experiments left to run wild. The combined aesthetic oscillates back and forth, never quite allowing the viewer to settle into a sense of visual resolution.

Several of the works use insistent verticals as their dominant motif. Single tape strips in red and yellow recall Barnett Newman's bold zips, as does the spatial balance exercises that take place between a lone thick strip and thinner verticals situated farther away. These primary colored lines are set against a backdrop of watery monochrome black, creating a rich contrast of textures. The darkness ranges from cloudy indeterminate murkiness to more splashing gestural washes, and in one work, the ink seems to have begun to coalesce, with feathery forms like tree branches or creeping decay evoked by the splotchy ink.

Finkelstein then takes these aesthetic ideas and encourages them to go further. The tape verticals are expanded into a parade of stripes in varying widths (some of them now partially transparent), the array turned into a plaid by a weave of horizontals. One work experiments with incremental reductions in size from left to right (the strips getting thinner and more tightly spaced as they march across the surface), while another allows the interlocking latticework to become more gridlike, creating an echo of the jazzy primary-colored energy of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. The ink washes behind the geometries have also become more complex, with puddles encroaching on the

surface of the lines and perhaps dirt or other small natural debris added to the mix to create more variations of blotted form.

Where Finkelstein diverges from the crowd of rigid abstractionists is in her willingness to embrace uncertainty and messiness. Her lines and grids search for systematized rigor and order, but are balanced by the gloppy improvisation of nature, which never allows those strict impulses to win out. Austere geometric precision is undermined by earthy expression, revealing it to be a set of rules imperfectly imposed on a roiling and often uncooperative undercarriage. It is this compositional tension that gives Finkelstein's works their spark – her photographic abstractions revel in the details of their layered processes, but consciously force those competing aesthetics and approaches into an unending battle.

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Jan 23 Art Out: Amy Finkelstein "If Only"

ART OUT

By [Sarah Sunday](#)

For just a few more days, until the near-approaching 26th of January, Amy Finkelstein's *If Only* is being displayed by the Elizabeth Houston Gallery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Housed within the interior of the gallery, five of Finkelstein's experimental photographs have been framed in black and hung upon white walls, awaiting observance.

Artfully reveling in the abstract form, Amy Finkelstein creates complex and earthy grids of color and texture; a structured and deliberate process of mess-making. Blacks, reds, and yellows stand out in bold contrasts, while soft eggshell blues and whites appear more quietly in unassuming lines and backgrounds. Nature runs rampant within the textures of the photographs, and while the specifics of the photographs are up for interpretation, perhaps one can glean the images to be of frozen leaves amidst outdoor icy residue, or even a microscopic view of bacteria against the glass and light of a petri dish.

Finkelstein does not engage in post-production or software editing but rather completes her work in the darkroom. Her chromogenic prints are created using drafting film, a matte-translucent

material, as the canvas. Tape is placed across the film to create the geometric grids, upon which Finkelstein applies her India ink for color. The canvas is backlit from behind and the process is perfected; a photograph is taken of the artwork and it is then finalized.

There is an enveloping facet of entropy and forceful energy present in the gridwork of her pieces; an energy that gives light to organized chaos. As good artwork tends to do, Finkelstein's pieces delve into the sphere of the paradoxical. There is the deliberate intention and there is uncontrollable chaos. There are deep and rich contrasts as well as softly feathered and crawling dribbles. It is, all at once, the natural weaved against the unnatural, and each individual image carries its own connotations and impressions, ranging in tones of light and darkness.

To truly look and see Finkelstein's art is to experience a celebration of the unpredictability of nature and life; there is a natural order that begins with creation and ends in destruction, but in between this opening and closing lies the middle ground that is life, in which Finkelstein so adeptly recounts through her images.

ELIZABETH HOUSTON GALLERY

AMY FINKELSTEIN

IF ONLY

December 12, 2018 – January 26, 2019

It is said you cannot step into the same river twice. It could be countered that photographing it even once proves a greater challenge. The flux and onward flow of all seemingly ordered systems in the world around us do not lend themselves to the static, momentary image. On view at Elizabeth Houston Gallery from December 12 to January 26, *If Only* wrestles headfirst with that conundrum, attempting to capture, as artist Amy Finkelstein puts it, "unpredictable evidence of force and of noise" as only a photograph can.

But ontological success is not really the aim. Finkelstein knows that a photograph can never truly index the complex systems driving the world around us. Instead, she prioritizes meaning-making over image-making; and like others who deal in abstraction, she knows that meaning is generated more by materials than the intention of the artist. In her newest series, Finkelstein works with India ink on drafting film, backlighting her compositions for the camera. The imposed order of grids, lines, and color (red and yellow are a favorite) run like latticework across unruly and unknown debris, evoking the crystallization of ice or the disintegration of mulch. Her process relies purely on the natural photographic process, as all works are entirely analog and created in the darkroom without the use of post-processing or editing software. Yes, Finkelstein knows that a photograph cannot reference organic or mathematical processes; but that does not stop her from using the photograph as an index, albeit a fabricated one.

As viewers, our faith in the medium as a reference to the world sets the tone for Finkelstein's work. Her art is not self-referential in the fashion of Modernism. Rather, Finkelstein's chromogenic prints, point to natural systems regulated by orderly chaos or chaotic order. In short, they are about what is beyond the canvas or drafting film entirely. Their subject matter is that which no photograph can ever properly capture again.

Photographs, after all, are containers; and Finkelstein's contain her process. Her compositions reflect the imposition of order and the uncertainty of chance, traces in the material substrate from which we construct our experience. In that sense, Finkelstein is as much an abstract expressionist behind the camera as is Aaron Siskind, and it is no surprise that she was awarded the Aaron Siskind Individual Photographer's Fellowship in 2015. But Finkelstein's philosophical concerns go beyond the abstraction of the world's material surfaces to its underlying relations and organization.

Taking a page from Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, or Jackie Winsor, Finkelstein is a post-minimalist, pairing grids and seriality, line and proportionality, with organic form. There is a human, hand-crafted element to her photographs that bring them beyond simple notions of essence and reducibility. Life is messy, and so is the art that contains it. Like Martin, Finkelstein is able to convey abstract emotions through form. Her abstractions are not emptied of phenomenology, but rather prioritize and provoke our experience as viewers. Like Hesse and Winsor, she eschews industrial sterility, pulling strong organic associations from what appear to be wholly ordinary materials. Finkelstein's work is something of a feminist counterpoint to the notion that art is higher than reality.

If Only is more than beautiful pictures or experiments in form. Rather, it is a wholehearted attempt to make work that is both of the world and affects it in turn, if only one could.

– Robyn Day

Robyn Day is a freelance art writer, photographer, and former art critic at *The ARTery* at WBUR, Boston's NPR news station; *Art New England*; and Boston-based blog *Big Red & Shiny*. She received her MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago and her BA in philosophy from Wellesley College. Robyn manages communications at the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation and marketing at Pivot Arts.