

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Shannon Ebner

Hammer Museum

By Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



Los Angeles X marks the spot. X emotes as a kiss, an expression of affection. X forbids, blocks and negates. X represents some unknown, a numeric variable in an equation to be solved. Symmetrical across both axes, X brings the graphic and the linguistic into remarkable alignment.

X was repeated four times in a row across two walls of Shannon Ebner’s first solo museum show in her adopted city of Los Angeles. Each X spanned a lush black-and-white photograph at approximately human scale. Ebner found two of the Xs on the street—crisscrossed lines of glue on plywood, and black spray paint on a police-car door—and two were constructed in her studio, one with cinder blocks hung on rebar stuck into white Peg-Board, and the other with cardboard painted black and adhered to that impaled surface. The grid of rebar exaggerates perspectival depth, giving the shallow space of the shots a subtle but gripping vertiginous quality.

Four double-height lightbox photographs that hung in the windows on the exterior of the gallery also employed this stark formal template, spelling out “ASTER/SK” in cinder blocks. Ebner breaks down language into discrete and emphatically concrete building blocks—what she calls her “STRIKE alphabet,” suggesting a relationship to protest and aggression of some kind—making us feel the weight of the text in the heft of her utilitarian materials. Her cinder-block letters have a jagged, angular bulk that conveys both the manual, bodily effort behind their arrangement and the now-retro, boxy look of low-resolution digital bytes and pixels. The graphic letters manage to stir glamour and romance, seeming on the one hand monumental and iconic like the nearby Hollywood sign, and on the other cinematic, recalling stills of title cards from a Godard film.

Much of the work on view is part of a larger body based on Ebner’s poem—or, as she puts it, “photographic sentence”—titled “The Electric Comma,” an ode to the photographic condition as an ecstatic experience plugged into the electrifying power of the pauses, delays and suspensions (or,

in textual terms, the commas) that help punctuate and define perception and expression. Electricity literally coursed through the lightbox photographs outside, making them flash and pop continually in pulses. Inside, similar luminous combustion was evidenced by Ebner’s “Incendiary Distress Signals” (2011), a series of seven street photographs picturing the remains of emergency flare sticks whose fire has burned out. Each ashen remnant resembles a hieroglyph, a linguistic element falling just short of legibility and beyond comprehension. Throughout the show, Ebner beautifully materialized language by applying a sentencelike logic to her images as multivalent syntactical units, effectively creating both grammatical photographs and photographic grammars. [Ebner’s first public art project in Los Angeles, *and, per se and*, was on view concurrently with the Hammer exhibition in a vacant lot in Culver City. It was organized by LAXART.]

Photo: Shannon Ebner: XSYST, EKS and XIS, all 2011, C-prints, 63 by 48 inches each; at the Hammer Museum.