

# PAPER SEA

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## THE FLATNESS

A CONVERSATION WITH AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER ERIN O'KEEFE  
BY HUDSON BROWN

*Erin O'Keefe is an American photographer who has beautifully translated her two decades experience as an architect into her image making.*





Having worked as an architect for twenty-three years, New York based photographer, Erin O'Keefe, turned an interest in art into her full-time career. Her deft ability to find the parallels between the two fields is evident in her exploration of viewpoint and obscurities.

'I began by taking photographs to document sculptures I was making and I found there was something in these photographs that was interesting above and beyond their documentary role. After that, I became interested in the lightness and relative speed of photography as an instrument to explore ideas about spatial perception.'

Graduating from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Printmaking, Erin soon returned to study, attaining her Masters of Architecture at Columbia University in 1988. Inspired by the likes of Josef Albers, Anne Truitt, John Chamberlain and Franz West, Erin continues to find inspiration within her daily life.

'I do spend a fair amount of time looking at art, and I feel very lucky to be able to do that. But I would say that I feel equally inspired by the natural world - the epic aspect of all of these materials and spaces and systems that are swirling around us all the time.'

My architectural education really stressed design as a kind of rigorous problem solving. I would say that approach, which is less about expression and more about asking questions, is something that shapes my practice as an artist. My interest in the translation of three-dimensional space into a two dimensional image is also a direct result of my experience in architecture.'

Developing an interest in what she describes as the 'fruitful misalignment' between these dimensions, The Flatness series was created with plywood boards, printed pages of Photoshop gradients, and photographs. With the series' title referring 'to both the material flatness of the photograph itself, as well as the perceptual flattening of the still life space,' Erin's work challenges ideas of perspective, photography and spatiality.

'I am interested in ambiguity and misreadings - what happens when we can't quite get a grip on something. The camera's tendency to flatten space amplifies the potential for uncertainty and that is the 'fruitful misalignment' I am talking about. That what we actually see and what we record through the camera are very different, and that gap is a very ripe territory for me as an artist.'

'As a sculptor, you work on the actual thing - the actual art object. But the way I work as a photographer, I am working on a situation that is referenced in a really specific way in the final image - and the work is really about choreographing that distance.'

Finding the separation that exists between staging subjects and the resulting photograph to be one of the most interesting aspects of her work, Erin has repeatedly examined this idea.

'As viewers, we can never fully grasp that distance, so at some point we have to just accept not knowing. Not knowing seems to have more possibility than knowing - that potential sustains my practice.'

