

The New York Public Library will be closed Monday, October 14 in observance of Columbus Day.



## Iliana Ortega: Photographs

Iliana Ortega was born in Mexico City, but she studied at Yale, receiving her MFA degree in painting from that institution in 2011. Since then, she has lived on the Lower East Side in New York City, and she has a studio at El Clemente, a former public school which has now become a local art center. Her current work centers on black-and-white photographs of seascapes and small towns occurring in places well known and not so well known--eastern Long Island and Iceland are among the sites of her images. Ortega also creates more technically complex images, in which photos are embellished and changed by pencil, paint, etc. Her imagery tends toward a deep romanticism, in which the play of light on darkened water and waves suggests a visionary reading of nature, one that looks to an apocalyptic scenario that overwhelms the artist's audience with its drama and high visual contrast. Romanticism, generally speaking, does not fly high in the American art world; we are given to politics and social issues much more than infinite dreams. So it makes sense that Ortega comes from another culture, one

in which an archaic, romantically weighted vision makes itself felt in her own work--even if that work shows no signs of particularity as Mexican culture or a Mexican artifact of time.

It is a truism that current art avoids cultural and geographical determination; work tends to be centered around the individual, with an emphasis on overt particulars that communicate difference. Ortega's art does not communicate such concerns at all; her body of photographs in particular present an understanding and vision of nature in which human influence and impulse are not referred to. The otherworldly vision of her concerns reflects a utopian preoccupation with nature as a dynamic force of extraordinary power, seconded by the light Ortega captures playing off the surface of the water. It is extremely difficult, indeed close to impossible, to render landscape in all its expansive beauty today; when the great American modernist pictures of nature were taken in the first half of the last century (we remember that Ortega has committed herself to a life and career in New York, rather than returning to Mexico), nature had not been damaged to the extent that it has. In consequence of such history, it is clear that Ortega's deliberate beauty stands apart from the social orientation of much of what we say today. In particular, photos of the sea and sunset must work very hard to distinguish themselves from the kitsch that has overtaken so much of today's popular art addressed to the same theme. In rendering these marvelous images of water, Ortega must be congratulated for her willingness to work within a well-examined field. The truth is that the images possess a remarkable gravity that transcends the weight of earlier art and contemporary scenarios that simply repeat what is seen. Ortega finds a true delight in revisiting scenes we might easily see as exhausted by historical precedents.

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