

CHRISTINE ISTAD

TEN YEARS

PHOTOGRAPHY 2005 - 2015

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Christine Istad's repertoire can be described as multi-medialistic in the sense that painting, photography and video are used alternatively. Similarly, painterly characteristics can be found in Istad's abstract photographs, which underlines how Istad is inspired by the different media she uses and combines them into a unified and complex whole both thematically and technically. Built up layer by layer, the pictures contain subtle motifs that are hard to define. The works pose a perceptual challenge when it comes to discerning their hidden motifs, but the observer is thereby offered different possibilities of interpretation. The photographs are straight photography taken as you see them.

MADE IN HONG KONG

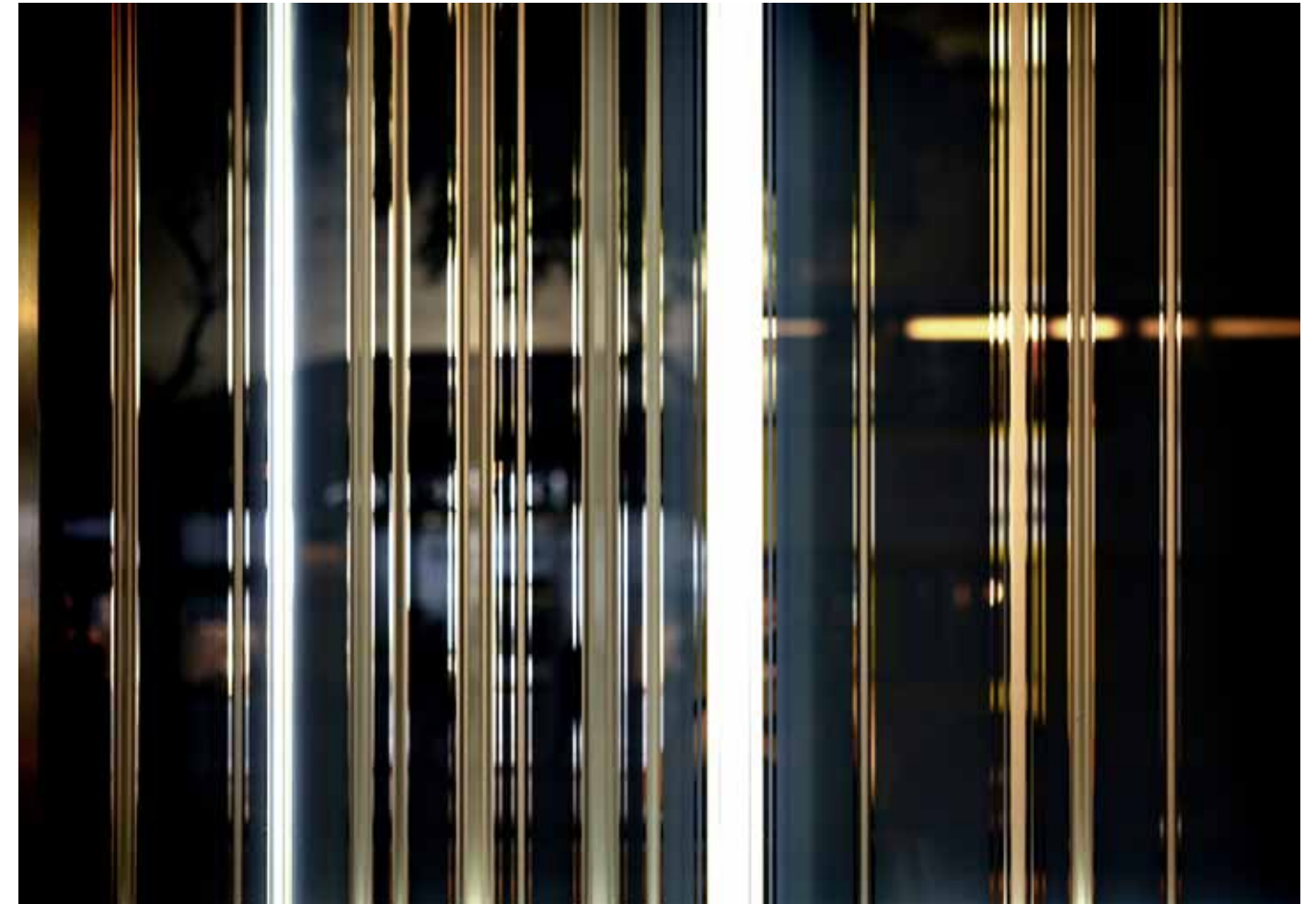
This exhibition presents Christine Istad's latest photographs and video works, which all derive from her long study trip to Hong Kong in 2014. The themes of the works focus on the contrasts currently found in some of Asia's most modern and innovative metropolises, where tradition and technology are thrown into sharp relief.

Istad's close-up photographic studies of Hong Kong's towering architecture and densely packed urbanity implicitly reveal her interest in investigating mankind's capacity to confront and adapt to alienation. What happens to inherited traditions and fundamental values when high technology and efficiency become the defining powers in our lives? And how is the balance between man and nature maintained when the individual is increasingly defined as a "mechanical figure"?

The contrasts between modern trends and traditions are also reflected in Istad's choice of technique. While the photographs refer to momentary incidents occurring in hypermodern and hectic city life, several of the video works are a harmonious counterbalance to this by depicting for example Tai Chi concentration exercises, symbolising the close contact between body and mind.

The exhibition comprises eight large-format C-print* photographs on aluminium and three new video works. Both the photographs and the video works are analogue and refer to the real time and place in which they were taken. The motifs are not manipulated, yet appear abstract in form due to their detailed sections and optical effects.

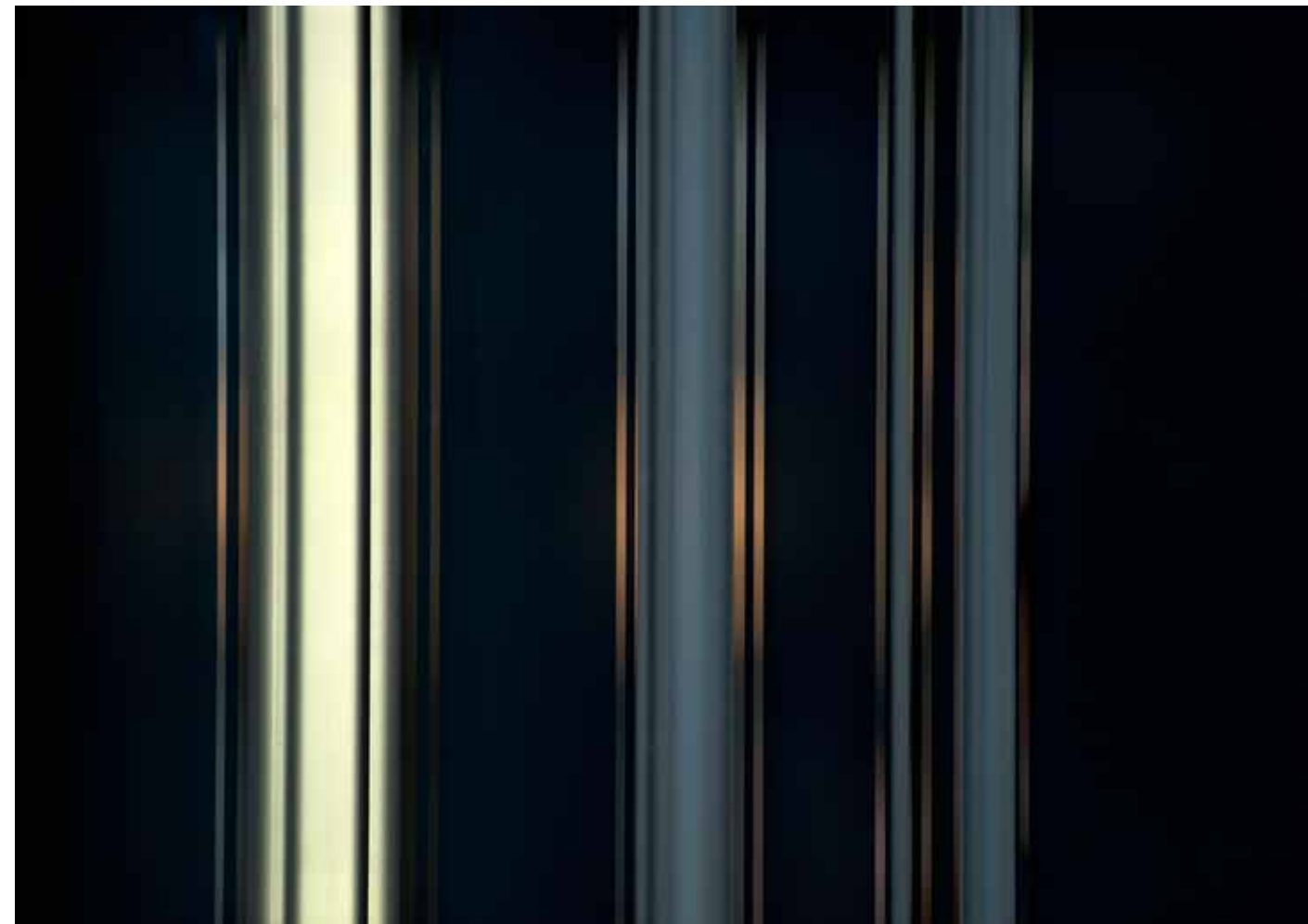
Janicke Iversen, art historian



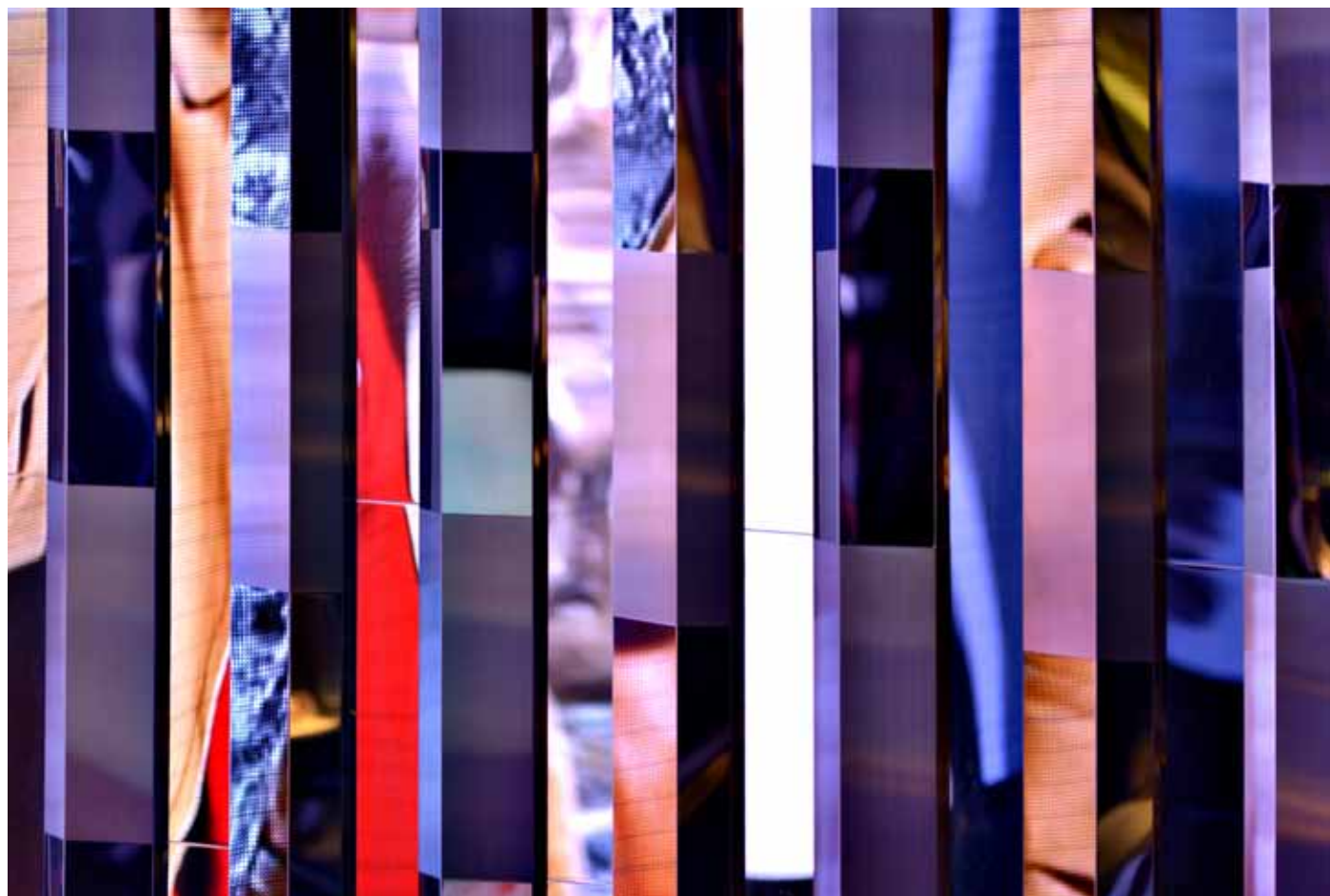
*Colour photographic print which has at least three emulsion layers of light-sensitive silver salts.



Hong Kong #10, 70x100 cm, 2014



Hong Kong #01, 70x100 cm, 2014



Hong Kong #15, 100x150 cm, 2014



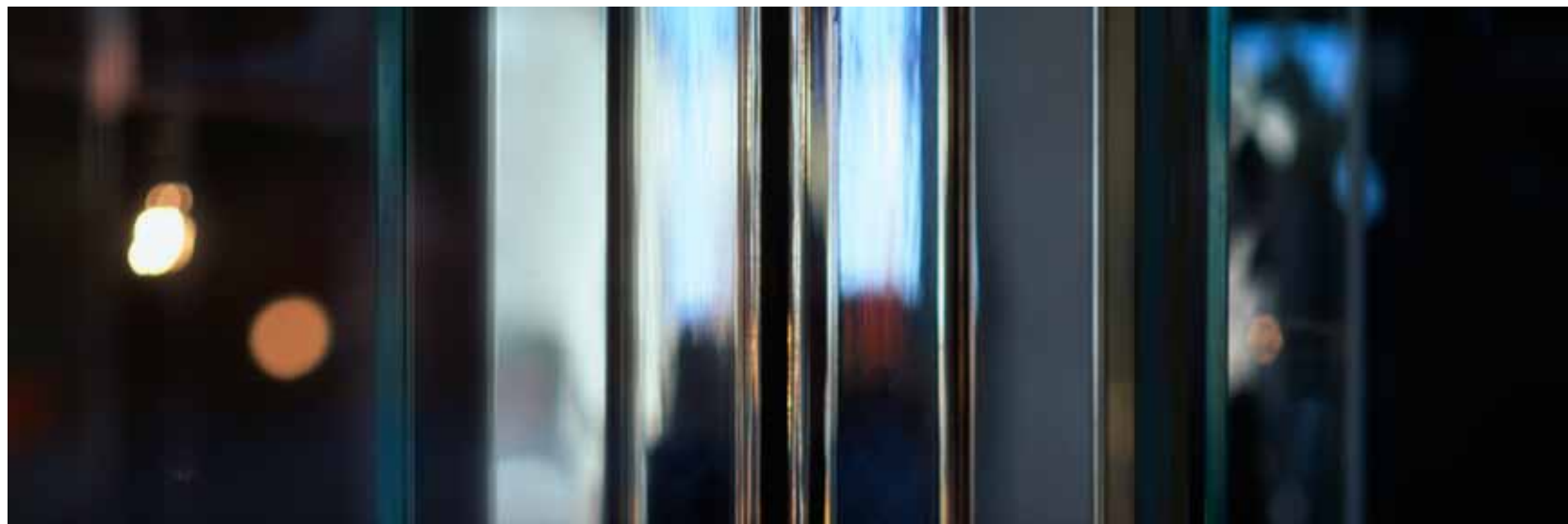
Hong Kong #04, 100x150 cm, 2014



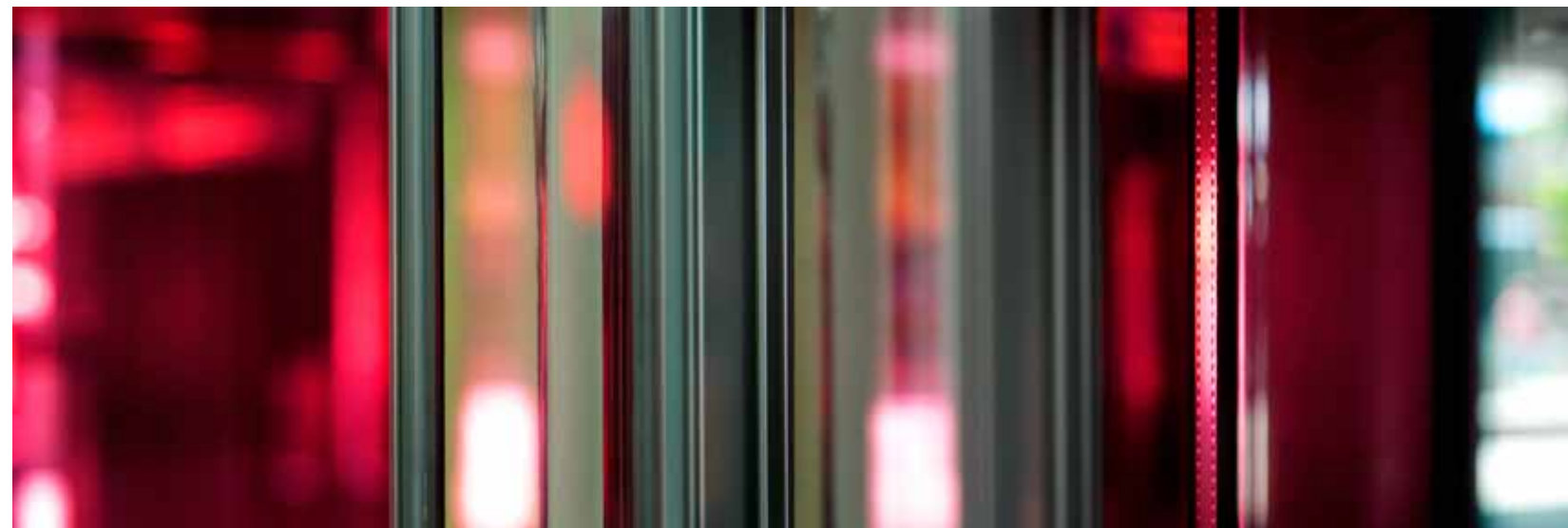
DUO PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography developed for installation works. Two or three photographs are put together. The photos are from several trips to Tokyo, London, Berlin and New York. The works pose a perceptual challenge when it comes to discerning their hidden motifs, but the observer is thereby offered different possibilities of interpretation.

The camera is my tool for finding painterly motifs: I like the fact that they are based on reality. That's the difference between painting and photography: in the photo, painterly aspects can be discovered in the reality, in the excerpts. You just need to discover them. My pictures often spring from a discovery of something striking in my immediate surroundings. I search for rhythm, depth, light, surface, colour and the balance between forms.



Tokyo duo #03, 56x170 cm, 2011



Station duo #13, 56x170 cm, 2011



London duo #01, 56x170 cm, 2014



Tokyo duo #11, 56x170 cm, 2011



Berlin #04, 56x170 cm, 2014



Oslo duo #01, 56x170 cm, 2014

VILLA GRANDE

The Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities

After a visit to Villa Grande, Istad was inspired to create these photographic works. When using the camera, she tries to capture the mood of the house with that particular story, once Quisling's residence, today HL Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities. The search for interesting details is the basis of the visualized material. The camera lens is used as a magnifying glass, where fragments, light and detail is in focus. The photographs are printed on brushed aluminum to emphasize the raw underlying mood that Villa Grande represents.



Villa Grande #01, 80x120 cm, 2013



Villa Grande #02, 80x120 cm, 2013



Villa Grande #04, 80x120 cm, 2013

HYPER MODERN ABSTRACTIONS

KUNSTFORUM André Gali, September 2010

“I was born into art. My father works with painting and woodcuts, so art has always been there. Ever since I was a child I felt I should be an artist, but it took many years and many detours before I decided it would be my career.”

Istad is perhaps best known for creating colourful photographs with short focal ranges. Her motifs are often based on tight architectural structures. In all her works, vertical lines cut through the surfaces, and between these, colour harmonies can be seen and landscapes and architecture can be sensed. The pictures might call to mind abstract paintings composed with diffuse, geometrical forms.

The camera is her tool for finding painterly motifs: “I like the fact that they are based on reality,” she says. “That’s the difference between painting and photography: in the photo, painterly aspects can be discovered in the reality, in the excerpts. You just need to discover them.”

Her pictures often spring from a discovery of something striking in her immediate surroundings.

“Recently I was out walking and came across a container filled with water. The light glinting off the water refracted into rainbow colours and patterns. And in the same moment, along with the nature and the structure, painterly elements emerged. It was like everything all in one. A real kick. That’s me in a nutshell. When I’m out with my camera, I’m extremely sensitive and looking for things. This is often how my artworks emerge.”

Art historian Janicke Iversen has called Istad’s pictures “optical poetry”, describing the viewer’s encounter and consequent attempts to analyse them as “exercises in perception”. Truth be told – it is impossible to decipher the motif, but it is abundantly clear that the photographs show details of concrete landscapes, often-times urban.

Istad has worked with this type of imagery for the last fourteen years. It all started when she attended a workshop in Can Serrat, Spain, and began photographing vertical lines.

“In Can Serrat I became more goal-oriented in relation to what I wanted to work with, and I resolved to focus on art as a career.” Yet now with hindsight, the foundation for her practice, she realizes, extends farther back.

“My father paints monumental landscapes. Perspectives. When I was a child and we went to the beach, he would stand on a hillock and paint what he saw. All the while, I was engrossed in the details of seashells and tide pools and digging in the sand. The little fragments fascinated me. And the details are still what I hunt for; structures in nature and architecture, in light and colour. The theme of my pictures is the interaction between nature and architecture, or nature and construction. I feel these things are closely connected.”

In recent years Istad has held several exhibitions of photographs from her travels in Japan. The galleries hosting these exhibitions include Gallery Semmingsen in Oslo (2009), KUBE Museum in Ålesund (2009), and the Art Centre of Møre and Romsdal (2008),

when she served as guest artist for Molde Jazz Festival. The works from these exhibitions reveal a kinship between her melange of concrete and abstract expression and the Japanese culture’s synthesis of hyper-modernity and traditional religiosity.

The idea for the Japanese project emerged after an exhibition she held entitled Elevator at Henie Onstad Art Centre in 2005. She had been preparing for the exhibition for two years and had taken 700 photographs of one elevator (lift). Through a stringent selection process, she selected thirteen pictures. Working on something for such a long time engendered fascination, and she found she wanted to challenge herself by traveling somewhere to develop the concept further:

“I wanted to learn more. I also thought that with my expression, which is reductive and minimalistic, or reductive and meditative, Japan might be a good place to go. The Far East already has this kind of aesthetic. It was the ideas underlying the aesthetic that I wanted to learn more about.”

Istad drew up a work schedule. She would travel back and forth to Japan for three years. While there, she would visit the large cities in order to concentrate on urban Japan. At the same time, she wanted to connect with the traditional spiritual life of the country. “I had heard about Buddhist pilgrimages, going from temple to temple. Part of the project was to take that journey and get under the skin of Japanese culture and philosophy. This is hard to do in only one trip.”

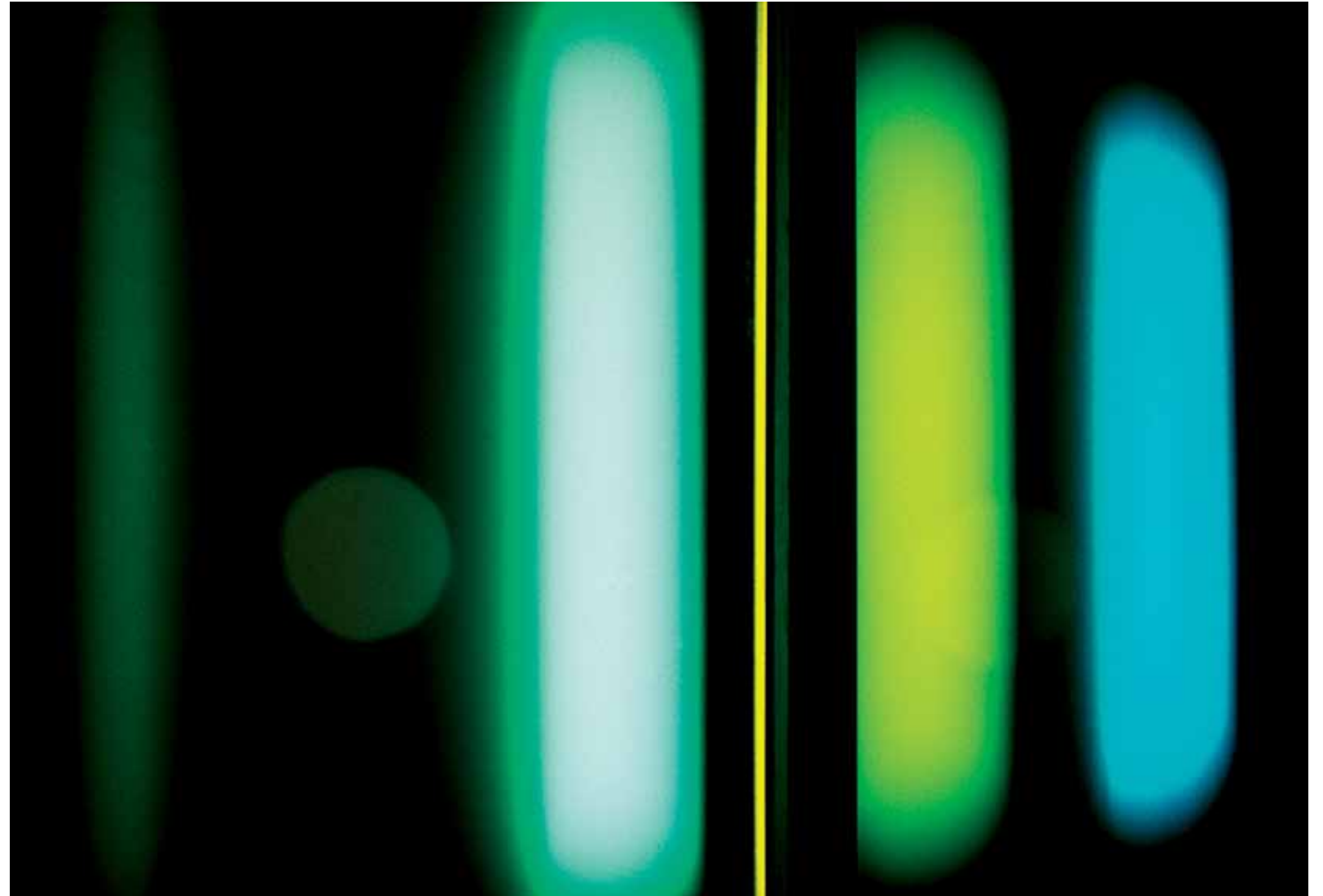
After receiving a grant there was no way back. Between 2006 and 2009 she took several trips to Japan.

The East has been put on a shelf while Istad prepares for her exhibition at Gallery Trafo in Asker. Here she presents new works – both photographs and videos. The motifs are from Oslo, Berlin and the USA. She has hunted diligently to find her motifs, and the selection process has been stringent.

“I select the motifs according to how they are mounted in relation to each other in the gallery. But it’s also important for them to function as individual artworks. They must have the qualities I seek. My thinking is probably much the same as that of a painter. The important things are rhythm, depth, surface, colour harmony and the balance between forms. And I always try to move on and not repeat myself. My goal is to find the optimal motif.”



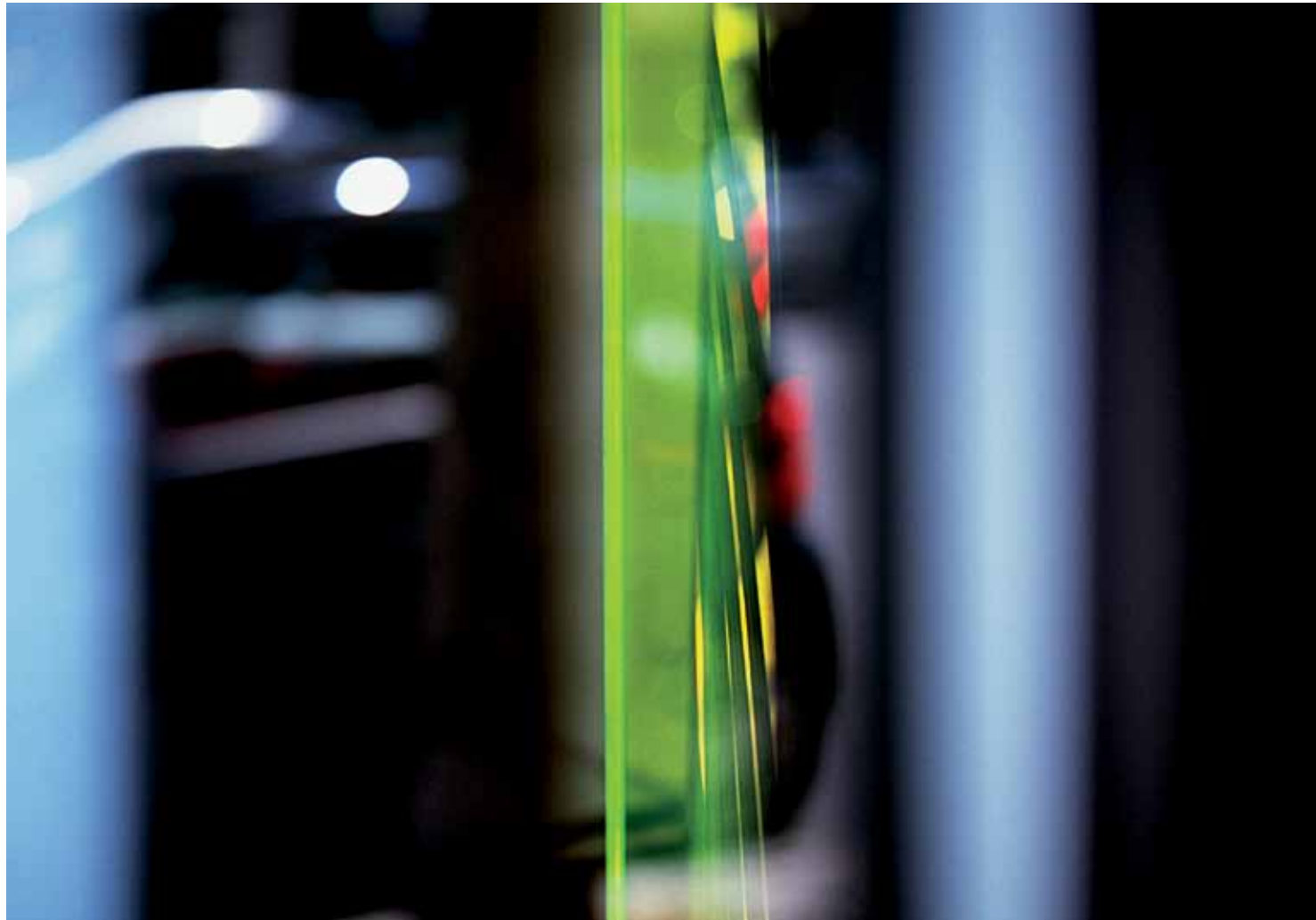
Gothenburg #01, 110x160 cm, 2015



Berlin #07, 110x160 cm, 2010



Berlin #02, 110x160 cm, 2010



Madison Ave #02, 110x160 cm, 2010



Madison Ave #01, 110x160 cm, 2010

“THE OTHERS” – TRAVELS IN TIME AND SPACE

Curator Janicke Iversen, art historian
Festival exhibitor 2008: Christine Istad

TOKI - TIME

Throughout the period of art history from the end of the 19th century onwards, artists have been interested in investigating cultures and phenomena outside the sphere of their own lives. Not only ethnographic and sociological studies, but also visual arts have made a major contribution to conveying and interpreting encounters with “the others”. The resulting art movement is termed exoticism; for Europeans this has been synonymous with studying areas of Africa and Asia.

EXOTICISM OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Paul Gauguin was one of the first modern painters who broke with motif conventions when he travelled to Tahiti at the beginning of the 1890s. His meeting with the “simple” and “primitive” culture there inspired him as a painter and led to his famous allegory *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* But at home in France, his pictures met with opposition and were regarded as irrelevant. German and Danish painters at the beginning of the 19th century met with a similar reaction when they went to West Norway to seek out the dramatic landscape along the fjords. For them, the “exotic” meant conquering the forces of nature in harsh, northern climes in order to document what was considered at the time as wild, inhospitable and crude nature. Manifestations of encounters with “the others” have in other words often met with scepticism and a negative reception.

In the 19th century, expeditions to far-away places were a hazardous business, but today, most destinations are easily accessible. For this reason, you might think that a curiosity for “the others” would have dwindled, especially since information about alien places is easily available via the internet and TV. But no: easy travel has on the contrary opened up opportunities for exploring unfamiliar cul-

tures – also in artistic terms. Two examples of Norwegian artists whose work has clearly been shaped through meetings with “the others” are Mette Tronvoll and Vegard Moen. Whereas Tronvoll’s photographic art studies human lives and folklore in Greenland and Mongolia, Moen’s photographs question China’s transformation and rapid expansion from an unbending communist regime to flourishing, westernised commercialism. Eline Mugaas and Knut Åsdam are two further artists who base their works on encounters with other societies. Though their works consist of European and American urban landscapes, the different social codes and cultural conventions they depict challenge our perception of our own self-understanding.

The concept of exoticism has therefore taken on a different meaning today; it is no longer only distant cultures that are the object of artistic investigation. The two concept artists Gardar Eide Einarsson and Matias Faldbakken are two cases in point. For them studying “the others” means examining sub-cultural phenomena within Western culture, i.e. a closer look at our own, regulated social conditions. By scraping at the surface of conventional society, they reveal cultural deviations that appear just as alien as Gauguin’s Tahiti paintings did for Frenchmen at that time.

Encounters with “the others” have changed in character and method throughout history. Whereas the first artists who sought out alien cultures were mostly interested in studying nature and living conditions from a romantic and symbolic perspective, contemporary artists tend to take a more critical angle. Herein lies a paradox: whereas exotic art in the past was regarded with scepticism as degenerate or vulgar at home, contemporary projects incorporating impulses from abroad are considered interesting and stimulating and the messages they convey have an increasingly critical sting to their tail. Artists no longer travel abroad to document romanticised

and sublimated perceptions of “ the others “ lives and society, but to criticise international developments. In this way, exoticism has more and more in common with what can be termed “universal, sociopolitical art”, which looks at our own social conditions in relation to the global situation. But not all artistic projects are directly related to specific political, social or cultural issues. Today’s art may well employ poetic effects, but at the heart of most works lies a criticism or other serious questions about our self-perception in the light of different social and cultural contexts.

MEETING JAPANESE CULTURE

Christine Istad’s latest project belongs to this diverse field of artistic investigation. Through her repeated visits to Japan, she has made this country and its culture the subject of her artistic research. She has even learnt Japanese in order to deepen her understanding of the Japanese people and their social conventions.

Like a modern-day archaeologist, Istad uses the camera lens to dig deep into Japan’s cultural history. She has made long journeys by train and on foot within Japan’s borders; she has followed the routes of pilgrims’ wanderings from temple to temple and studied religious rituals and mystic traditions. Other layers of history have been unveiled by means of tea ceremonies, gastronomy and language. She has also examined and documented the aftermath of the atom bomb at Hiroshima through processed photographs of the famous Atomic Bomb Dome. These have been developed as a room installation in which sound recordings from the square by the dome constitute an essential part of the work. The sounds of people and birdsong point to the will to live that defied the ultimate attempt at extermination in 1945.

Istad’s art focuses on current Japanese culture by depicting modern urban structures where hi-tech developments and almost synthetic social conditions create a society that seems alien to our western eyes. Whereas Istad uses a conceptual approach, other artists employ different means to convey similar themes. A case in point is Sofia Coppola’s film “Lost in Translation” from 2003, which uses

narrative structures to analyse the disillusioned and restless lifestyle of Tokyo citizens. Both Coppola and Istad expose the state of mental unrest arising from this frenzied society and both employ a form of aesthetic dilatoriness in their iconic presentation of these hectic phenomena. Both Coppola’s film and Istad’s photographs circle around eternal questions of identity and existentialism.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA

Different media and strategic techniques are used to convey interest in “ the others “ as a form of artistic expression. At the Molde Jazz festival exhibition, Istad uses photographs and video works, including installations and audio effects. The photographs’ wealth of detail can be perceived as a close look at Japan’s hypermodern urban structures, while the video works present a more subtle depiction of nature’s inherent and charged atmospheres. Several of the video works can be interpreted as meditative and heavily symbolic references to religion and mysticism. This mythical atmosphere is reinforced by a musical soundtrack inspired by Japanese music traditions. Composed by the trumpeter Arve Henriksen, the sound creates an almost seamless transition between the musical and visual imagery.

Istad takes the concept of “study” seriously by presenting close-ups and sections; in other words, she uses the camera lens as a magnifying glass in order to highlight fragments and details, comparable to the minute findings of an archaeologist. The motifs examine ephemeral and often tiny fragments of landscapes and urban societies; phenomena that are usually regarded as insignificant are presented by Istad as an essential documentation of history or momentary incidents. Both her photographs and video works are analogue and refer in real time to the place depicted. The motifs are not manipulated but nevertheless appear abstracted due to their detailed form. It is not immediately obvious what the pictures are about and the observer is free to choose from the associations that arise from the works’ titles and visual appearance. Istad’s long-standing and meticulous methods of revelation can be regarded as an interpretation of Japanese cultural history per se.

Those familiar with the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami’s dream-like narratives may recognise a parallel world in Istad’s pictures. Just as Murakami conjures up strange series of events in relatively everyday lives, Istad’s visual studies have a similar effect. The pictures are concrete but at the same time intangible. They contain layered structures, but also visual obstacles that give “the story” a new direction. Just as Murakami’s narrative style creates mental pictures that are gradually revealed, Istad’s photographs become easier to understand as the observer allows herself time to study them.

TOKI - TIME

At the cutting edge between culture, nature and history, Istad introduces “time” as a navigational tool. The title of the exhibition, TOKI, is the sound of the Japanese word for time and is a key to interpreting both her video and photographic works. The concept of time is also a key aspect of her approach to Japanese heritage, where complex cultural traditions are blended with modern, urbanised societies. A nation that most people today connect with enormous buildings and efficient technology is at the same time the bearer of a rich cultural heritage that is still kept alive. In this way, history runs side by side with a futuristic social order. The term “time” also refers to the artist’s approach to her own project and her acceptance of a foreign culture. Istad has stated that it took weeks before she found her feet amongst “ the others “ and their unfamiliar habits and customs. Istad’s artistic project demands a particularly critical eye, but also humility and respect – and in a similar way to Gauguin, she asks difficult questions on behalf of us and the Japanese: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

ART AND THE FESTIVAL

As in previous years, parts of the festival exhibition have been taken out of the gallery and into the Molde Jazz arena. In Romsdal Museum, one of Istad’s video works is on exhibition in the old chapel. In the midst of the commotion of the festival, it seems appropriate to show a spiritual, zen-like experience in this historical, sacred place. We and “ the others “ come face to face; the past and present come

together and bridge cultural differences in an apparently uncomplicated harmony. However, under the aesthetic and soothing visual and auditive surface, there smoulder grave questions that neither Gauguin nor Istad can answer; instead, they encourage us to ponder on our own existence.



Aoyama #01, 110x160 cm, 2008



Hiroshima #01, 110x160 cm, 2008



Tokyo #14, 110x160 cm, 2008



Tokyo #18, 110x160 cm, 2008



Ginza, Tokyo #08, 55x80 cm, 2008

ELEVATOR

HENIE ONSTAD ART CENTER, NORWAY, 2005

Curator Benedicte Sunde, art historian

... it's as if a room emanates from me, the zero point of spaciality. I don't see the room from the point of view of its outer extremities, rather I live and breathe it from the inside; I am engulfed by it. When all is said and done, the world is around me, not in front of me.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT MOTIF

Christine Istad's exhibition "Elevator" is a project of many facets. Istad's approach to photography touches on a number of issues central to art history: form, sensuousness, abstraction, serial art, architecture and the effects of light. These issues are present in the 13 photographs which form the core of the exhibition. Istad investigates the painterly potential of the photograph from conceptual points of view and searches for the optimum abstract motif, with the exploratory eye as a key factor. Istad has in fact been hunting for the perfect motif since the beginning of the 1990s, from the Saudi Arabian desert to the simple frame of a window. Gradually she realised that the most challenging motif was to be found in her own neighbourhood. In the very centre of the buildings of the Henie Onstad Art Centre there exists an architectural feature which constitutes a "room" that incorporates all the challenges that Istad had been searching for for over a decade. The original motif that is the point of departure for the photographs is veiled and hidden from the eye of the observer, but it is still part of the architecture of the Art Centre. Through detailed studies of

this motif, Istad manages to combine her painterly ambitions with the wide potential of the photograph. She has taken over 700 photographs of this "object" and has experimented with pictures taken at different times of the day in order to discover the various reflections and effects of depth that occur. She has also used different perspectives and heights before selecting the 13 photographs which sum up her search for the intangible, yet optimum framework for spacial geometry.

BODY AND SPIRIT

Istad, then, examines the effects of light, including its potential for creating depth; her interest in architecture and elements creating space is closely related to light. Istad mediates her own physical experience of spacial issues and her subjective experience of a motif is a key feature of her oeuvre. She reproduces her experiences and reactions to the motif as an expression of her own self as a sensuous subject in the world. She penetrates the motif she chooses to reproduce and is therefore both with it and in it. In this way, her painterly photographs present a picture of an artist who is attempting to get through and beyond the visual part of the world. The French philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes in his book, *The Eye and the Spirit* from 1960, the very approaches and methods that Istad uses in her investigation into the world around her. Merleau-Ponty describes how the painter grasps the world with her body and spirit. He maintains that the artist does not just observe the world, but is an integral part of it and is actually united with it through her body: The phenomena of light, colours and depth only appear to be out there in front of us because they strike a familiar chord in the body, because the body is there to receive them. Merleau-Ponty goes on to define depth as a significant phenomenon and tries to explain why we can see depth in something that is actually flat: The proof is that I can see depth when I look at a painting which everyone

can see has no depth and which presents me with an illusion of an illusion... This two-dimensional object, which makes me see a third dimension, is, as they said in the Renaissance, an object with a hole in it, a window... But the window actually only opens out on a *partes extra partes*, out onto a height and width as seen only from another side, onto the absolute positiveness of existence. This is the very point of view from which Istad addresses her motifs. In her photographs, she interprets and transforms the inherent qualities that she finds in light, colours and depth into her own form of expression.

A MINIMUM OF MEANS

Apart from underlining the sensuous and contemplative aspect of her motifs, another key element of Istad's work is the way she treats space and depth by the use of formal perspective techniques. She zooms in on her motif in order to clarify vertical and horizontal lines. By means of these lines and the symbiotic network they create, she reproduces a painterly form of architecture, which has particularly close references to the minimalists' investigation into simple effects, especially geometry. However, Istad differs from the minimalism that emerged in the 1960s due to her tendency towards Gestalt psychology and spirituality. In this respect she has stronger links to the Canadian artist Agnes Martin, who was quick to reject a minimalist stamp since she regarded her works as primarily spiritual, Taoist reflections. Istad makes no attempt to hide her recognition of Agnes Martin's reflective, personal investigations, clearly expressed in one of Martin's statements about the role of art: When I think of art, I think of beauty, and furthermore: Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye, it is in the mind. This line of thinking reveals that Istad and Martin have much in common, not only on a spiritual level, but also as regards their interest in texture. Istad strives to create an additional materiality in her works. By means of meticulous trials and experiments,

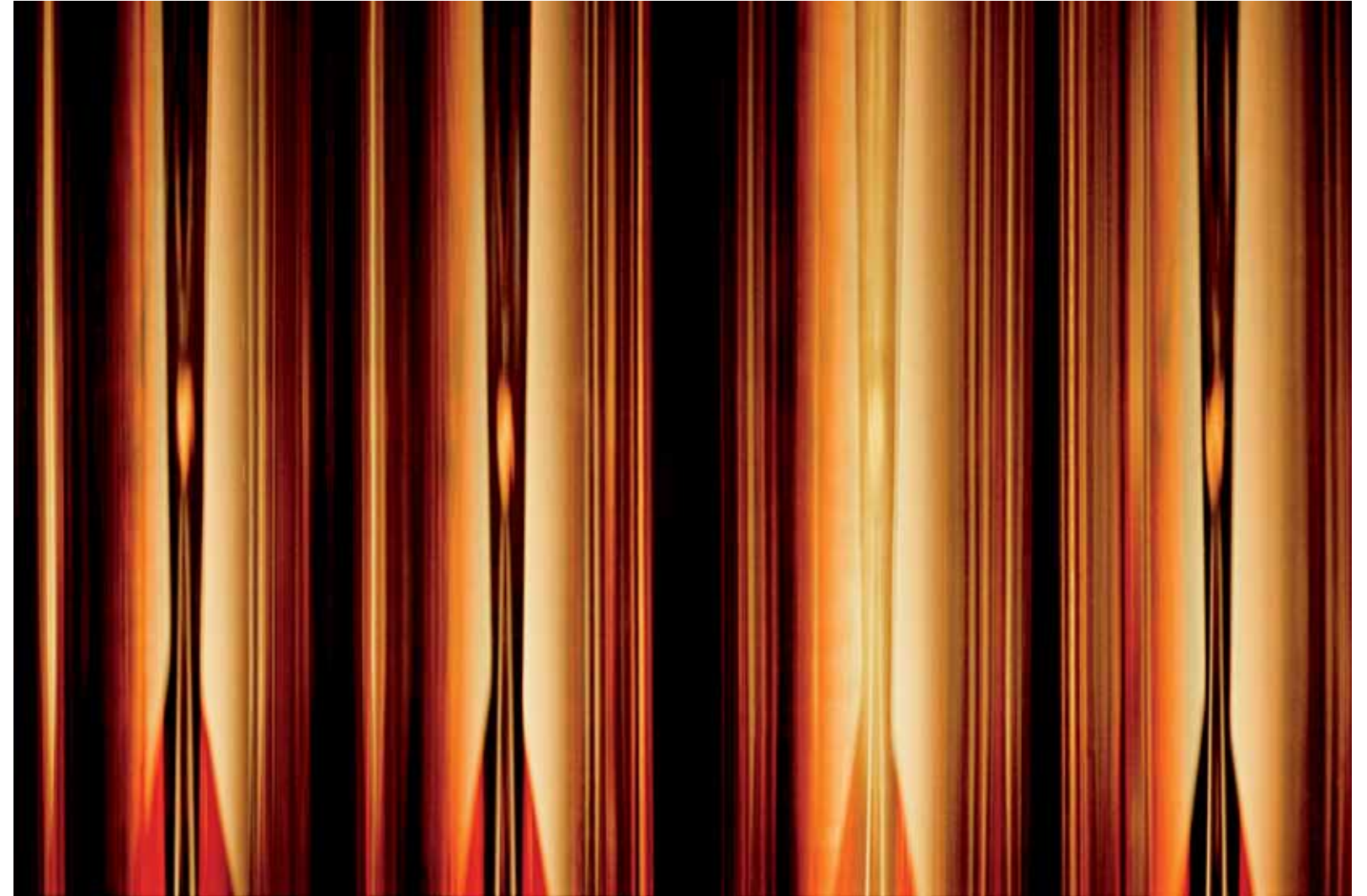
she tries to create a vibrant surface which helps to emphasise the contemplative atmosphere of her works. In addition, Istad has points in common with other artists such as Jean Scully and March Rothko, who also employ a purely geometrical approach. Through her search for geometrical lines and networks, Istad firms up her compositions and finds a balance in her search for the various different perspectives provided by the architecture's spaces and effects of depth.

SUPPLEMENTARY AUDIO FRAMEWORK

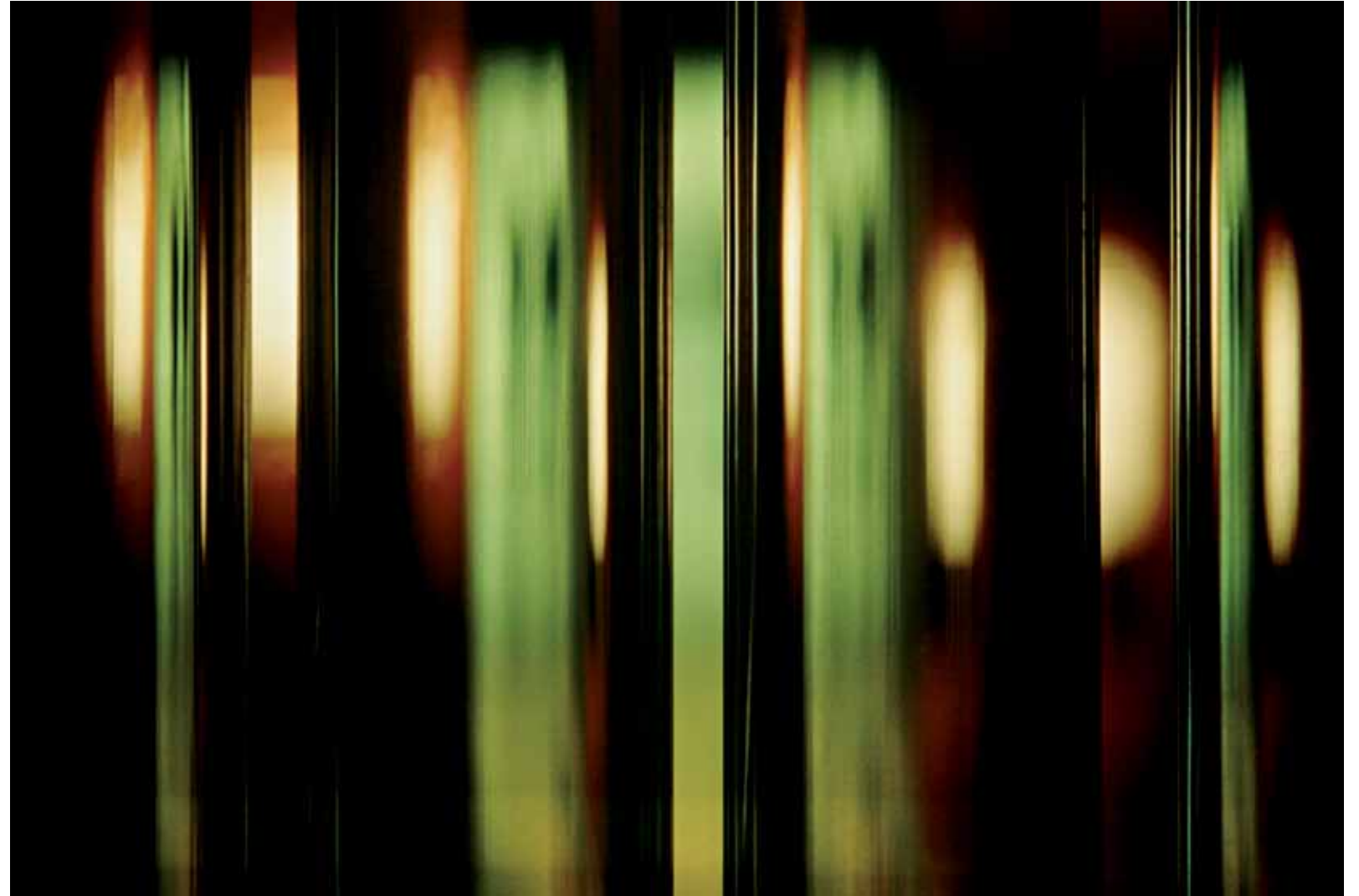
In collaboration with the composer Erik Wøllo, Istad has created a sound installation in which the sounds derive from the same construction that Istad has photographed. The sound material consists of recordings from this "room" and are processed further by Wøllo without the addition of any other sound elements. The sounds are designed to lend an extra dimension to the photographs. By means of its multi-channel system, the sound installation produces a 20-minute, looped sound program that surrounds the listener and observer from all sides. Based on an abstract sound expression, this audio experience provides a supplementary framework around the abstract photographs. The audio program consists of four sections based on the themes Space, Takeoffs, Drones and Panning Percussions and aims to evoke primarily abstract associations. The sound is built up of several different layers, of which a few dominate and come to the fore. In this way, the sound both reflects and supplements Istad's photographic investigation into issues concerning space, movement and transcendentality, where form enters into an alliance with spirituality.



Elevator #35, 120x180 cm, 2005



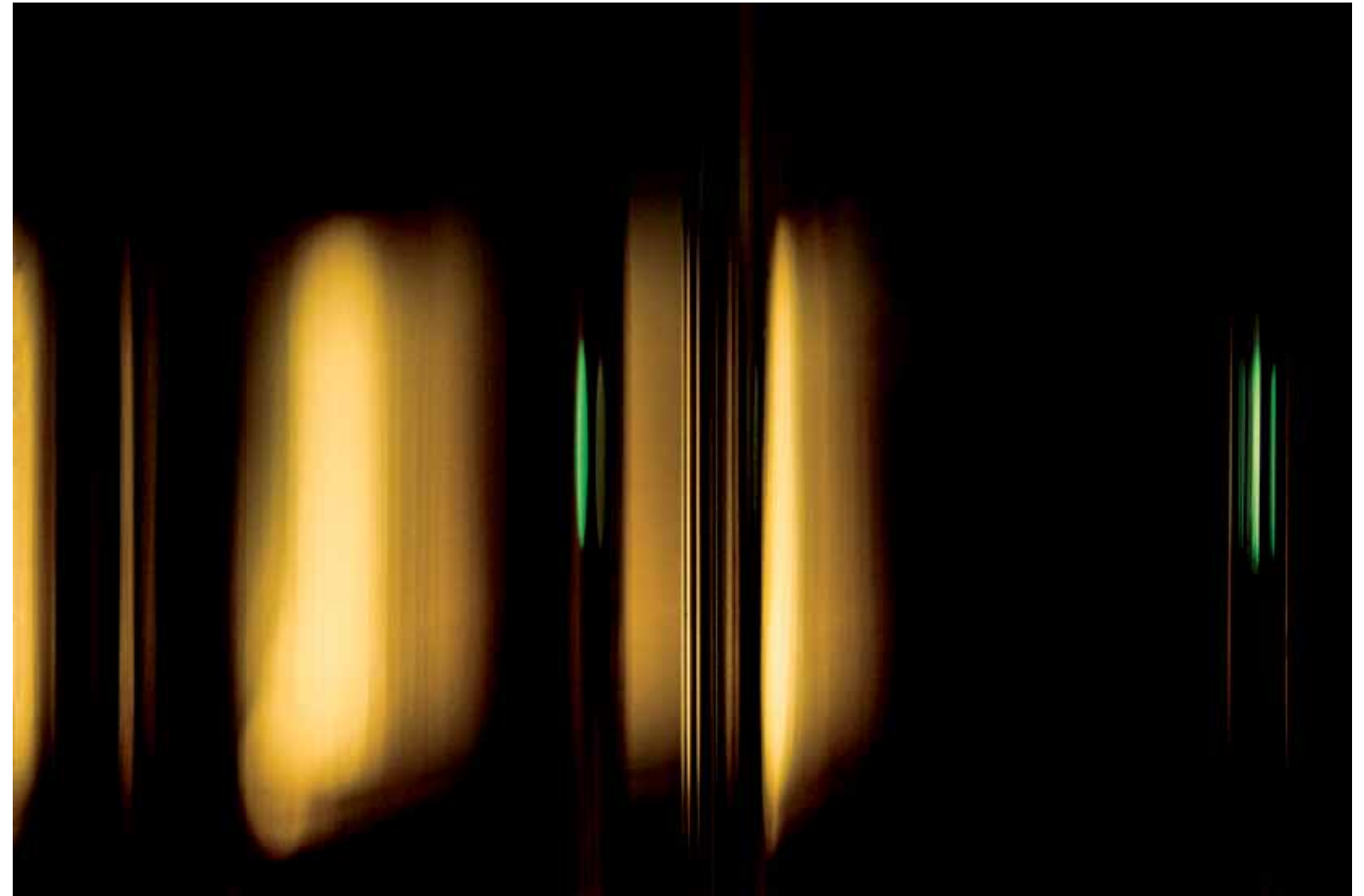
Elevator #38, 120x180 cm, 2005



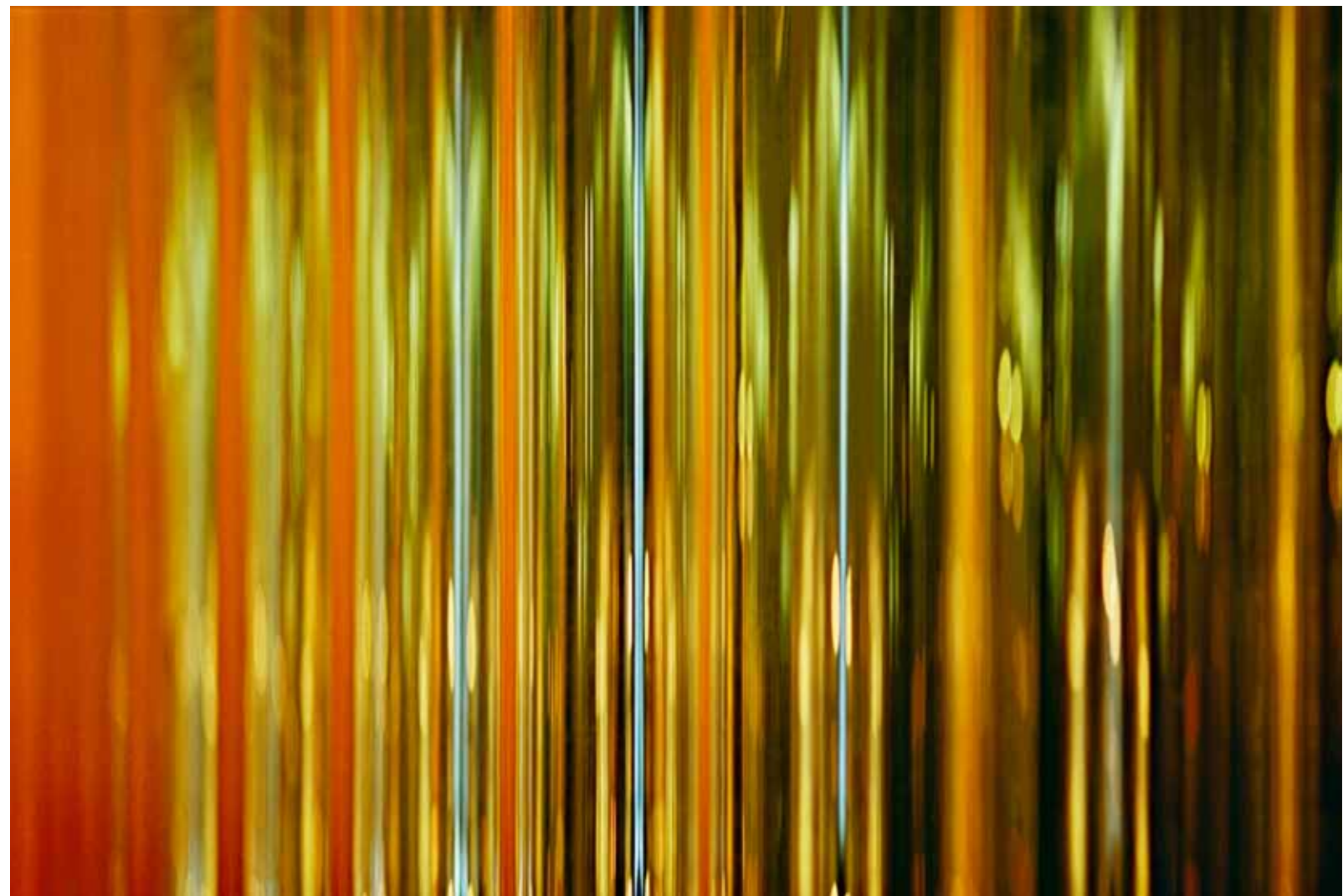
Elevator #14, 120x180 cm, 2005



Elevator #15, 120x180 cm, 2005



Elevator #44, 120x180 cm, 2005



Elevator #33, 120x180 cm, 2007

CHRISTINE ISTAD

is working with photography, video art and installations.

She has participated in several solo and group exhibitions in both Norway and abroad. She has exhibited at a.o. KUBE Art Museum, Henie Onstad Art Center, Tromsø and Oslo Assosiation of Art, Bergen Art Hall, Marres Maastricht and Zoellner Art Center, PA USA.

She has participated at the regional exhibitions and her works have been purchased by a.o. KUBE Art Museum and LUAG Collection, PA USA, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Education, University of Oslo, St. Olavs Hospital, the Municipality of Baerum Art Collections, Gjensidige Insurance, The Norwegian Central Securities Depository and The REC Group. She has received her education from Strykejernet School of Art, Westerdals School of Communication and Parsons School of Design in New York. Istad has received a series of project grants and artist support from the government of Norway.

The art photos are printed on C-print, archival photographic material paper. Produced by FotoPhono Imaging.

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