In Local Coordinates, Molly Samsell draws on this grounding. By adopting Modernist formalist techniques, Samsell draws attention to aspects of contemporary urbanism. Taken as a whole, the series rediscovers the fragmented nature of urban perception. Some of her images suggest iconic glimpses of the city, where the corner of a building, glanced while walking to cross the street, is both its visual language and the urban architectural forms and textures she records. Samsell’s grammar is unmistakably Modern.

However, her reductionist formalism continues in contrast to the foundational themes of the Cubo-Futurist period. Modernism’s characteristic dimensions have replaced quarters and cuboids. Whereas earlier artists sought to break with nature as an attempt to represent the dynamic, chaotic reality of city life, Samsell transforms her images to highlight the impossibility of gaining a complete picture of urban life. Does this shift reflect a critique of the Modern psyche? Perhaps.

When read in this way, the series continues as a record that more closely maps our experience of contemporary city life. Photography’s development over the 19th century had meant that reality could visually record with scientific accuracy. Kodak’s popular Brownie cameras were released in 1893, enabling an increasing number of people to take part in this process. Until this time, painting, and other visual arts, had been responsible for creating a visual record of people and events. However, photography could now be achieved cheaply and quickly. Its almost instantaneous nature meant that Samsell’s images offered new ways of capturing the urban spaces that she (and by implication we) are able to see. Her series seeks a new way of seeing urban life.

Local Coordinates is a counter-history of urban space. And it is through Samsell’s images that we can better explore, transcribe, and open an expanded critique of its dominant narratives at the expense of the local surroundings—recognized only by those who traverse these paths of the ever-changing cityscape. Samsell’s abstract façades are replaced with scenes that she (and by implication we) are able to see. Her fragmented narrative offers a new way of seeing urban life.

One of the most significant artists of the period was Paul Cézanne, who pushed the idea of geometry—cubes, cuboids and cylinders—in the depiction of three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface. Cézanne’s technique would in turn influence the work of Picasso and Braque, and what we now define as Cubism. The fractured, faceted forms depicted in their works were intended to describe how objects looked from multiple perspectives simultaneously—a complete representation. In addition to capturing the three-dimensional reality of their subjects, Cubists’ fractured forms also transformed their own physical space. This is evident in the work of Picasso and Braque, who often worked in the same room, sometimes partially sharing the same composition. The act of walking is to the city, what ‘pedestrian speech acts,’ declaring that people navigate culture and urban spaces, Michel De Certeau wrote of the figure of the flaneur. When writing on how people navigate culture and urban spaces, Michel De Certeau wrote of the figure of the flaneur. When writing on

This period saw significant change in the way in which the world was visually recorded and represented. Photography’s development over the 19th century had meant that reality could visually record with scientific accuracy. Kodak’s popular Brownie cameras were released in 1893, enabling an increasing number of people to take part in this process. Until this time, painting, and other visual arts, had been responsible for creating a visual record of people and events. However, photography could now be achieved cheaply and quickly. Its almost instantaneous nature meant that Samsell’s images offer a new way of seeing urban life.

Molly Samsell’s photographic series, Local Coordinates, records the artist’s everyday encounters with urban architectural spaces. Behind an often abstract facade, these images offer a sustained investigation into the interaction with the urban spaces that structure so much of our daily lives. One approach to viewing this work is to consider the development of the experience of city life, photography and artistic Modernism.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution had led to massive growth in the size and density of cities. Urbanism, with its many, endless streets, had become the dominant way of life. The city, and the unique form of society and experience it engendered, was increasingly the subject of sociological analysis. Georg Simmel’s, The Metropolis and Mental Life published in 1903, highlights the impact urban living had on the Modern psyche and social life.

Published on the occasion of Local Coordinates, an exhibition of photographs by Molly Samsell curated by Andrea Bell at the Wellington City Council, Lightboxes, Courtenay Place, 10 August – 3 December 2012.

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