

B. Ingrid Olson

Interview

by

Olesia

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Born 1987

In her omnidimensional work, Chicago-based artist B. Ingrid Olson (born 1987, Denver) engages the reciprocities between photography, sculpture, and architecture. Poetically testing the capacities of the human body in relation to architectural conditions, she calls attention to the ways that gender and power are implicated in the physical and psychological structuring of space.

Olson's work has been the focus of solo exhibitions internationally, most recently at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis; Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany; fluent, Santander, Spain; Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Secession, Vienna. She participated in the 2024 Whitney Biennial and New Photography 2018 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



B. Ingrid Olson's Studio Photography by John Henderson



Physical Decade (Interstice for the Visitors from my eye to my sight which look is mine), 2015-2025, Polyurethane modeling foam, unfired porcelain, tissue paper, ink, plastic, laser print, artist's tape, glue, wax pencil, acrylic paint, 12 x 4.62 x 2 in (30.5 x 11.7 x 5 cm) (front-side) installed in Machines Complex, Croy Nielsen, Vienna



Reservoir (Errata, dry painting), 2013-2025, acrylic paint, acrylic ink, glue, milk paint, wood panel, wood glue, aluminum tape, artist's tape, paper, tissue paper, inkjet print, laser print, transparency, silver gelatin print, vellum, staples, 28.5 x 18 x 2 in (72.4 x 45.7 x 5 cm) installed in Machines Complex, Croy Nielsen, Vienna



Installation view, *Machines Complex*, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, 2025



Installation view, *Machines Complex*, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, 2025



Halt before the chase (Psycho Painting, I), 2015-2025,
(side detail) installed in Machines Complex,
Croy Nielsen, Vienna

Let's start by talking about the exhibition *Machines Complex* at Croy Nielsen gallery, which I visited recently. The space is divided into three rooms, and in your exhibition text, you suggested that it can be understood as the same exhibition performed three times over—that the rooms with the works are not just copies of each other, but repetitions in which small shifts can change meaning. You allude to this idea of reproduction; could you elaborate more on how you work with this idea here?

I was thinking about reproduction—as a technical process, but also metaphorically. The works in this show are made using techniques such as print-making, analog photography, digital printing, and casting. What interested me most was the idea of approaching this through an analogy of biological reproduction, where there is an element of evolution—or possibly de-evolution—depending on which traits are carried forward. This became a way of thinking about repetition: how one idea can take on a new form in a different room, or be re-

peated in the same form but become degraded or enhanced. I wanted to see how something might be lost in translation, or conversely, gained through it.

That makes me wonder about the way you work with archives. The works in the show were created over ten years and draw on and rework your earlier series. The work that shares the exhibition's title, *Machines Complex* features small, note-like papers with abstracted images stapled around the perimeter of the frame, which made me think of a kind of moment of condensation. Could you say more about how you engage with your own archives in your practice?

I've always been interested in reusing images, or in understanding a photograph as a material rather than in the traditional sense, as a finished image. Some images I've printed only once and never again, while others I've printed twenty times or more, taking on different shapes or materials as I rethink them in new contexts. When I prepare a show, I might take new photographs, but then I think about them in relation to things made many years ago, whether it be photographs, drawings or other materials I've collected that all still sit in piles in my studio.

I think that's why many of the titles in the show reference ideas like reservoirs or dams. As I accumulate more images and forms, the process becomes more overwhelming, but photography is related to liquidity and accumulation. There's something really satisfying about letting a lot out in one release and making use of it.

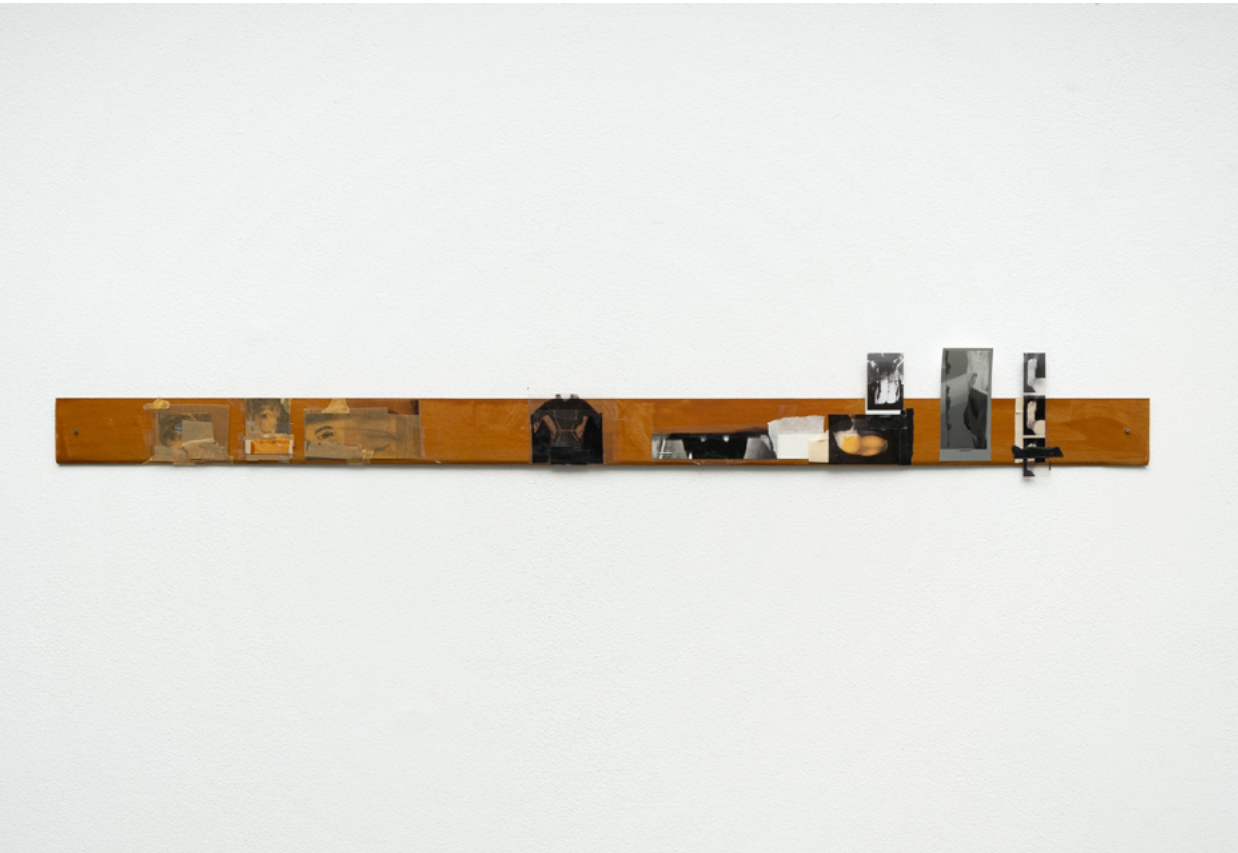
In this regard, it's interesting to talk about how you connect photography with sculpture. Photography can feel very limiting, with its embedded logic of framing and guiding the gaze. When you combine photography with sculpture, the work becomes less direct, less immediately approachable for the viewer. I wonder, how do you work with this tension in your practice?

That's something that's always been of interest to me. For a long time, I didn't like

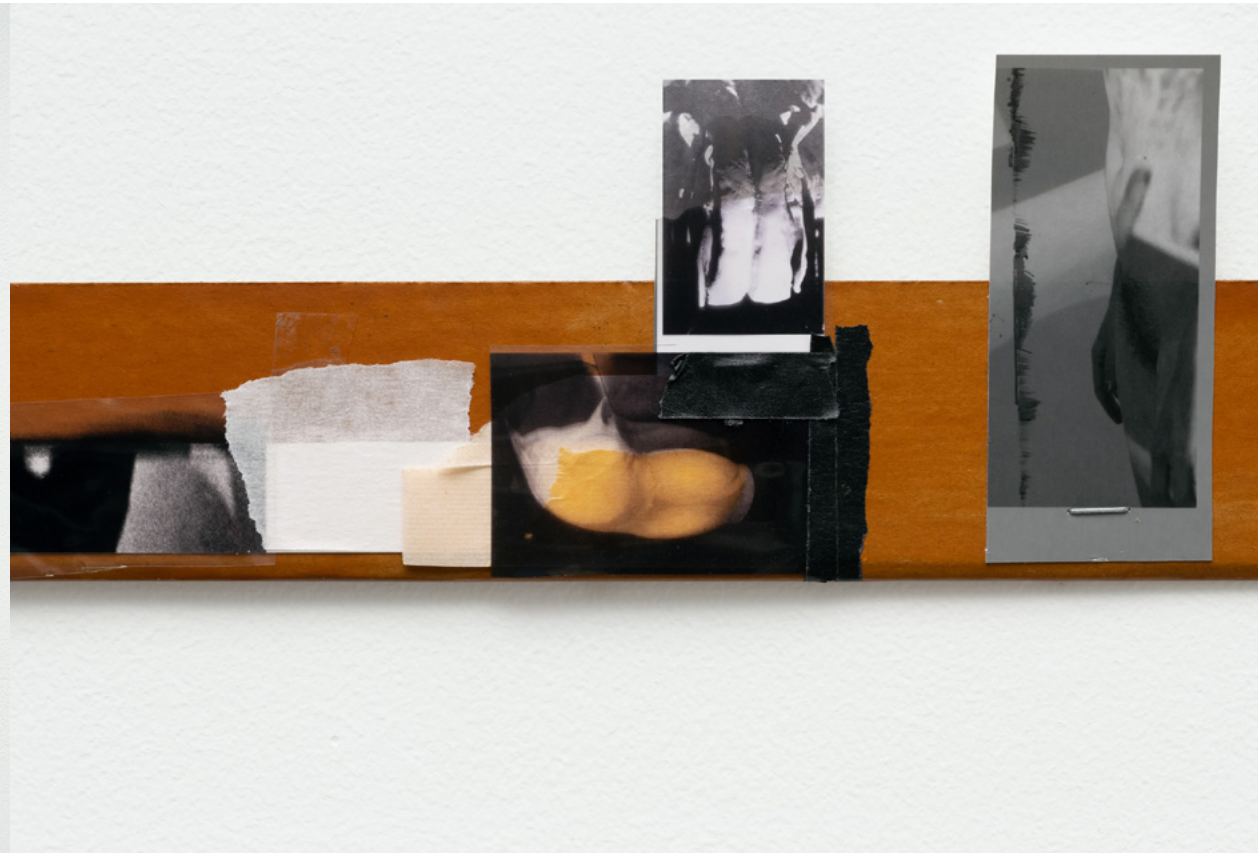


Machines Complex, 2015-2025 gesso, acrylic paint, glue, milk paint, wood panel, wood glue, aluminum tape, artist's tape, paper, tissue paper, inkjet print, laser print, transparency, silver gelatin print, vellum, synthetic fabric, staples, 10.5 x 22 x 1.5 in (26.8 x 56 x 3.8 cm) (side detail)





Psychos Reservoir (Video Strip, Contents III), 2012–2025, paper, plastic sheet, laser print, inkjet print, aluminum tape, chipboard, nails, 89 × 8.3 × 6 cm



Psychos Reservoir (Video Strip, Contents III), 2012–2025, paper, plastic sheet, laser print, inkjet print, aluminum tape, chipboard, nails, 89 × 8.3 × 6 cm (detail)



photography at all, until I saw an exhibition that featured very sculptural, conceptual photographs from the 1970s. It made me realize that photography doesn't have to be an illusionistic image that you enter into. Simple images plopped in a frame never spoke to me in the same way. I saw this possibility of thinking about photographs materially. It became more about letting the image do what it does, but then disrupting the process: the image invites you in, but by treating it sculpturally, emphasizing its materiality, physically blocking it, abstracting it, or degrading it, the illusion is hindered or stopped. Then you think more about yourself as an onlooker rather than as someone who can enter the space.

I'm interested in the speed at which we look at things. Photographic, illusionistic, or representational images are usually perceived more quickly, whereas something minimal, abstract, or even blank requires slowness. That slowness pulls you out of quick recognition and into a feeling that can be meditative or even awkward, as you stand in front of it. This push and pull, in and out of mental or bodily registration when encountering a work, is a mainstay in everything I do. Much of your work is abstract and process-driven, but in recent years you have also introduced elements that are graphic, if not wholly "figurative."

Thinking about what you said regarding pulling the gaze in and out, I wonder whether this connects to notions of subject and object, or the voyeuristic act of looking? In your exhibition *A Feminine Thought*, I remember you covered the windows with vinyl film, blocking the view while still allowing light to enter.

I usually think about how it feels when you walk into a space. When I did the site visit at Kunstverein Braunschweig, the windows were extra-present. The exhibition space is made of a circuit of rooms, with a window in every room, so wherever you are, you can see clearly out of and into the spaces. That's when I started thinking about using privacy film. It sounds like making something private would feel protective, but in

actuality, there's something very uncomfortable about it. When I started experimenting with this material in the studio, it was unnerving not being able to see out.

There's a kind of social contract with windows: you get to see out, so you know what's coming, but at the same time, people can see you doing what you're doing. It becomes a philosophical conundrum: do you want to be seen? And if you aren't seen, you can't see who can't see you.

As you mentioned this moment of entering a space, I thought about the artwork, *[M]others*, (2018-2021), installed in your exhibition *Machines Complex*. The sculptural reliefs allude to absent body parts, and they seem to choreograph the viewer's relation to space—the shadows shift throughout the day, guiding perception. Could you speak more about how you engage with interior architecture in your practice?

My initial engagement with the architecture of an exhibition space usually has more to do with floor plans than actually being in the space. Often, especially when working remotely, I am looking at images, which are never accurate, and floor plans, which don't convey how it really feels to be in a space. I think a lot about the structure of experiences and imagine how someone might encounter something. For example, the idea of splitting the show at Croy Nielsen into three repetitions came from looking at the gallery's floor plan, and its three distinct sections, which you don't always feel consciously. But even when I've physically been to a space, my perception or memory of it changes and is exaggerated. What I do is an amplification of this experience: I imagine different ways to highlight this gut instinct or the first thing I feel when I am in a space.

While I often make relatively small objects, like the components of *[M]others*, the gallery becomes an extended frame and the experience balloons outward. I think about how to condition the space with light, paint, or creating impediments to affect the flow. For example, closing a door can make



Installation view of B. Ingrid Olson, *All Lock No Key*, 2026.
Photo by Bob. (Robert Heishman + Robert Salazar)



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someone walk back through a space to see everything from a different angle and in a different order. These amendments shift the tone and meaning in an encounter.

In your current exhibition *All Lock No Key* at Corbett vs. Dempsey you created an architectural installation that acts as a kind of surrogate for the gallery's video room—a space that is usually hidden and isolated, but which you turned inside out. Could you say more about this gesture?

The video room was originally an actual vault. Vaults have the double-edged meaning of being places where you put something valuable as a protective measure, or where you keep something secret hidden away. The idea came to me as soon as I started working on the exhibition: I wanted to focus on the weight of the vault's capacity to hold things, more than to recreate an enterable facsimile of the space.

I took the dimensions of the shelves where you would normally put money, or other valuable materials and made the interiors into closed boxes that can't be opened. You don't know what's inside of them. They're neatly stacked, and instead of being set within another space, they hint at an enclosure without actually building a room.

In the space between the two rows of stacked containers, a parabolic reflector sits on the floor. The sink-shaped cavity of the reflector holds a ceramic form, a strip of sheer cloth, and a smooth plaster cast with small photographic images pasted to its surface. The concave shape of this mirrored bowl captures reflections of the images and materials, without much of the surroundings. The shape also magnifies and stretches the reflected images, making them unstable, and erratic. The experience is almost cinematic, even though the object does not move.

Could you tell more about how you work with light, both in general and specifically in *All Lock No Key*? How does it shape a visitor's sense of orientation or disorientation within the space?

The exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey re-stages an aspect of an installation that was conceived for XYZcollective in Tokyo. XYZ is in a basement and is usually very brightly lit, but I wanted it to feel like a dark cavern with a tiny, clustered corner. At Corbett vs. Dempsey, I wondered how the space would feel if the lights were just dimmed, rather than removed. The dimming film we used created this really warm glow and created a completely different energy. The low light level also offered a contrast to another element of the space I wanted to accentuate: a corner within the gallery has a large gap where two walls would otherwise meet. Natural light from the office windows leaks into the exhibition space from this opening.

I had started thinking a long time ago about this idea of what is going on outside of the work. One of my favorite books is *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy, where the character builds a sort of theater set to recreate a memory, and it keeps expanding outward from the room, further and further.

I'd like to ask about language, which seems to me to be an underlying element in your practice. Returning to Machines Complex, you describe reproduction as a moment of translation, and one of the works in the exhibition includes a narration or story rather than a simple description of the materials. How does language shape your practice?

It's very important to me. Many of my titles are culled from notes I take while I read, sometimes changed a little, or multiple sources cobbled together, sometimes verbatim. There was a show at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago recently, one of my favorite places. Alex Katz had a show there featuring portraits of poets and cover art for poetry books he'd done. There was an anecdote that he didn't like artists; he only made friends with poets. I do have friends who are visual artists, but I also have a lot of friends who are writers and poets, and I really identify with them. Maybe it's also a kind of jealous admiration. I love what they do, creating something not visual at







A Feminine Thought, 2025 (detail) at Kunstverein Braunschweig



"A Feminine Thought" 2025 (detail) at Kunstverein Braunschweig



Installation view, *A Feminine Thought*, 2007-2025 at Kunstverein Braunschweig

all, and yet it feels so visual. The removal of tactile or physical imagery makes it full-on imagination.

And the work you're referencing, the paragraph-length title came from a dream. I woke up and transcribed it. It was almost filmic. At first, I thought it could have been a video piece, but it worked so well as a text, just as it is. There's a similar logic in another series, called *Enlargers*. They are found objects, steel reamers that have been used in construction work. I like the incidental marks of their previous use; some are worn down, some still very sharp, still functional or potentially violent. However, the titles are more of the point of these works. They become simple markers, or placeholders for more complex language.

Do you often write texts?

I've written a few published texts, and I write many of my press releases. More frequently, I write in my sketchbook. I think artists' writings are always good for posterity, for an artist's archive, but not always necessary to make public. Not everyone can be Anne Truitt. When I read her journals, I can hardly get through a page because there's something so beautiful and transcendent that derails me.

The closest thing I have to a journal is my sketchbooks, where there is a really clear view into a thought, written in the moment. They are like notes for my future self. Otherwise, I don't remember all the things I'm thinking, or the strange analogies that help to make decisions in my work. It's amazing to have that portal, that time-chute into my own mind in the past.

For the last question, I wanted to ask about the feeling you describe in *Machines Complex*—states of explosion and a scattering of information, identity, and even bodies. This seems to appear on multiple levels: in the fragmentation or distortion of bodies in the photographic works and paintings, and in the scattered reliefs on the walls. But it also seems to operate on a psychological level. In the exhibition text, you write, "I feel pulled

apart right now for many reasons. This show is made in that psychic space." Could you elaborate on how this relationship between the psychic and the physical is reflected not only in this show, but perhaps in your practice more broadly?

I'm actually really interested in the Cartesian split between body and mind, which I think most people don't believe in. But somehow this lack of integration is often the way I perceive the world. I feel a real separation. What began mostly as an interest in phenomenological exploration of bodies within spaces at the beginning of my career has transitioned into thinking also about more psychological aspects. I'm very interested in how such interior things—mood or psychology, or even mental illness—can affect your perception of exterior things.

I don't often think of my work through a personal lens, but it's such a strange time, and the world feels like it's falling apart in an exaggerated way. As I was writing about the work, *A Feminine Thought*, I realized there is a neatness to all of the stacks of these things, but actually, they are all little dismembered body parts all over the place. And it started feeling to me like the aftermath of an explosion, of someone laying out all the parts, trying to figure out what, who, and where they belong to.

Also, I had a surgery a few years ago, and I started to think about how you can completely pull all your organs out of your body to fix a problem and then they can all go back in place. Maybe the surgical actually goes back to this archival sensibility. Surgery is a kind of excavation that, even though violent at the time, makes sense of the mess and tries to find order in disorder. I think it's very hard to make artwork in this historical and personal moment. And I think the important thing for me right now is actually being honest about that feeling and the circumstances, which is reflected in the work I am able to make.





"A Feminine Thought" 2025 (detail) at Kunstverein Braunschweig



"A Feminine Thought" 2025 (detail) at Kunstverein Braunschweig



B. Ingrid Olson's Studio Photography by John Henderson

Racheal Crowther
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Racheal Crowther, production image, 2025. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, in partnership with Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin, and Bétonsalon, Paris. Photo: Harry Mitchell. Courtesy of the artist.

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