

Erin Shirreff (b. 1975, Kelowna, British Columbia; lives Brooklyn, New York) received an MFA in Sculpture from Yale University and a BFA from the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Her recent and upcoming exhibitions include a two-person show in the Front Room at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, *Knight's Move* at Sculpture Center in Queens, *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1, *Between Here and There* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and *Immaterial* at Ballroom Marfa.

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Front cover: *Untitled*, 2010; *Moon*, 2010

Inside: installation view

Back cover: *Markers* (detail), 2010



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PROJECT SPACE: SEPTEMBER 15 – DECEMBER 5, 2010

Erin Shirreff: Still, Flat, and Far



“[W]e get to think of life as an inexhaustible well, yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really.... How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.”

—Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

Looking up into the night sky at the shape of the moon formed by the Earth's own shadow, or out across the horizon at a barren peak of land beyond grassy meadows, we become dramatically aware of our role as viewers. Through the light, haze, and umbra, we read objects and landscape through the perceived passage of time. In this exhibition, Erin Shirreff explores how images of extraordinary landmarks and relics become seared into cultural memory through their persistent reproduction, and how our vision of them is shaped as much by their reproduction as by our own experience.

Trained as a sculptor, Shirreff works in multiple media, including photography and video, and her work suggests evocations as diverse as the proliferation of printed images in the news media, the observation of celestial matter through telescopic devices, and the hulking presence of 1970s Minimalist sculpture in the landscape. *Erin Shirreff: Still, Flat, and Far*—the artist's first solo museum exhibition—consists entirely of new work including pigment prints (*Markers*), a video work that plays with images of our lunar neighbor (*Moon*), and four sculptures molded from compressed ash.

A Fourth Dimension

Shirreff combined multiple still images to generate the video projection *Moon*, on view in the exhibition. Watching the looped

Shirreff's other recent series of works on paper have included silver gelatin photographs that taken together evoke the archeological cataloging of ancient tools (*Knives*, 2008), as well as pigment prints whose central folds bear resemblance to the pages of a classic broadsheet (*Signatures*, 2010). Often presented against a blank or neutral ground, the objects in these photographic images might be interpreted as deserving of continued and considered examination. Like André Malraux's collection of images for the *Museum without Walls*, the photographic representation of sculptural details or clay objects has set them free from their “original” contexts and surroundings. At the same time, a nostalgic hint remains.

The intimation of an object's history or the depicted scenes of past events in these images brings to mind Roland Barthes's discussion of the punctum: the touching attribute that causes a stirring of emotion or a personal reaction to a photograph. Perhaps this nostalgic quality of Shirreff's photographs, suggestive of another era or of archaic methodology, lends itself to such a discussion. Indeed, Barthes found this poignant characteristic to be particularly conspicuous in examples of early photography: “This punctum, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photography, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them.”⁴ In this exhibition Shirreff conjures familiar objects, sites, and recollections to reveal the subtle and inescapable role of the camera's eye.

—Lucy Gallun, 2009-10 Whitney-Lauder Curatorial Fellow

In some photographs of sculpture, dependent perhaps on the placement of the object within the composition, the viewer feels invited to cross the threshold into the spatial field of the sculpture. Given Minimalism's insistence on experiencing sculpture in the round, sharing a presence between the physical sculpture and the viewer's body in space and time, the sensation of seeing the sculpture from a particular side or angle in photographs of Minimalist sculpture is of utmost consequence to the viewer's perception of the whole object. Shirreff exploits this phenomenon in multiple dimensions. Her sculptures explore the possibility that the impression of viewing a physical mass from one perspective might be utterly distinct from the impression from another vantage. The photograph of the sculpture captures but one viewpoint.³

Flat Files

Shirreff's work in two-dimensional media elegantly mines the terrain of mediation and representation. The series of intimately-sized pigment prints in this exhibition (*Markers*) appear as though they've been cut from a newspaper and pinned carefully within their frames, emphasizing the artist's archival interest. The images in the prints are culled from Shirreff's own snapshots, found photographs printed in books, and the artist's collection of reproductions amassed over several years. In one image, a smartly dressed couple turn their backs on a sculpture by Tony Smith, apparently indifferent, while in another image, the proud edifices of a modernist housing project stand isolated in New Haven, Connecticut. In a third image, a white orb glows, complete and pure, mirroring itself through a grainy shadow.

history textbook, *Spiral Jetty*, has suffered the fate that is at the heart of Shirreff's examination: the consistent reprinting of an identical overhead shot has virtually eclipsed the reproduction of other views of that work. In Shirreff's *Moon*, a ubiquitous still image has been animated through changing light and shadow, transforming it into another strain of reality.

A Third Dimension

Shirreff's interest in 1960s and 1970s-era sculpture extends to her three-dimensional work. This exhibition includes sculptures molded from compressed ash, whose forms might recall the sharp angles and planes of minimalist sculpture, though their hollow frames and seemingly fragile construction belie this association. The sculptures' surfaces appear creased and crumbling, but their solidity is testament to their assembly from clumps of packed ash mixed with a cement hardener. One sculpture hovers close to the poured concrete floor of the gallery while another rises as a narrow tower, an obelisk, or a chimney. These forms suggest the distortion of the boundaries between architectural and sculptural experiences. As the sculptor Robert Morris described in “The Present Tense of Space,” these experiences are usually quite distinct: “In perceiving an object one occupies a separate space—one's own space. In perceiving architectural space, one's own space is not separate but coexistent with what is perceived. In the first case one surrounds; in the second, one is surrounded.”² Shirreff's sculptures in this exhibition, together with the three-dimensional planar projection structure for *Moon*, hover between both spatial modes. They paradoxically fluctuate between forms and planes; between tables, corners, and walls.

video, the images seem at once familiar and slightly uncanny, with the growing sensation that the course of the moon here is not identical to the signs of waxing and waning that have become so embedded in our mind's eye—whether through nightly observation or through reproduction. The transmuting colors and shadows in *Moon* intensify steadily and then shift swiftly, from gray to blue to brown, and many tones in between. In an earlier work, *Roden Crater* (2009), Shirreff used a similar method to examine the artist James Turrell's long-under-construction opus of land art. Turrell purchased an extinct volcano's cinder cone and its land and has been transforming it into an open-air observatory for the last several years. Like Shirreff's *Moon*, the *Crater* video underscores the artist's interest in the act of observing the night sky and entities outside our terrestrial landscape. The crater has achieved revered status, though few people have actually been in physical proximity to it. The photograph that was Shirreff's starting point for the video might have been one that would accompany a brief blurb in an art history survey textbook. In such a case, an image becomes so privileged that, within the viewer's imagination, it effectively stands in for the work of art itself.

The artist Robert Smithson recognized this fact in writings such as “The Camera's Eye.” With an avid interest in photography, Smithson was a proponent of the documentation of his finished works and processes with numerous quick snapshots from a variety of views. As art historian Alex Potts has noted, Smithson's “deconstructive interest in the ‘camera's eye’ was posited on the potential for generating a multiplicity of photographic images that would undo the framing closures of a single privileged view.”¹ Tellingly, Smithson's own masterpiece and mainstay of the art

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Markers, 2010, 6 pigment prints on newsprint (ongoing series), framed: 11 x 14 inches each

Moon, 2010, HD video, color, 32 minutes, continuous loop

Untitled, 2010, compressed ash, Hydrocal, and armature, 96 x 30 x 21 inches

Untitled, 2010, compressed ash, Hydrocal, and armature, 19 x 64 x 41 inches

Untitled, 2010, compressed ash, Hydrocal, and armature, 59 x 40 x 16 inches

Untitled, 2010, compressed ash, Hydrocal, and armature, 52 x 20 x 26 inches

All works courtesy the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York

NOTES

¹ Alex Potts, “The Minimalist Object and the Photographic Image,” in Geraldine A. Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 184.

² Robert Morris, “The Present Tense of Space,” in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 182.

³ Erin Shirreff's graceful explorations of the relationships between photography and sculpture emerge amidst an abundance of work—academic, artistic, and otherwise—circling around the subject. See, for example, the exhibitions *Photodimensional* (curated by Karen Irvine, February 13 – April 19, 2009, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago) and *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today* (curated by Roxana Marcoci, August 1 – November 1, 2010, The Museum of Modern Art, New York), together with its superlative catalogue.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 96.