

In “The Study of Two Pears,” the American poet Wallace Stevens wrote that, “The pears are not viols, Nudes or bottles. They resemble nothing else.” This poem, like much of Stevens’s oeuvre, quietly declares the essential qualities of things in the world. Erin Shirreff’s diverse body of photographs, videos, and sculptures is united in its singular focus on objects by turns extraordinary and banal. She is compelled not by their cultural meanings, but by their resolute objecthood, their very “blankness.” As Stevens’s poem concludes, “The pears are not seen as the observer wills.”

There is a constant dialogue in Shirreff’s work between “the thing itself,” as Stevens would describe it, and photographic representations of the thing. Her silent videos about the moon, or the UN building in New York, or Arizona’s Roden Crater, are based on photographs, both her own and those found on the Internet and in books. In the studio, Shirreff repeatedly reshoots these photographs under different lighting conditions and generates not-so-seamless montages that gradually reveal their constructed nature – whether seen in the moon’s illogical orbit, the erratic dance of lens flare over photographs’ textured surfaces, or the irreconcilable mix of natural and artificial light sources.

If Shirreff’s videos seem, at first take, to encourage hypnotic absorption in objects, the gaps and tics in her montages work to discourage it. They move from the deep space of the film to the surface of the photographic print and back again, in capricious rhythms. That Michael Snow’s film *Wavelength* (1967) is a major influence on Shirreff comes as no surprise. As Snow said, “The main problem with narrative in film is that when you become emotionally involved, it becomes difficult to see the picture as picture.” Despite their intense focus on specific objects, Shirreff’s videos are really about the act of looking at the picture itself.

Erin Shirreff has for several years fashioned modest objects from wax-based clay, which she photographs in the studio and then destroys. Although the mysterious forms that are the subject of *Untitled (Series 1)* retain the literal traces of her hands, her photographs of them employ the standardized framing used to document museum specimens. Walker Evans’s 1935 commission to photograph African sculptures at the Metropolitan Museum resulted

in portfolios used as teaching aids across the United States. His tightly cropped images of the sculptures, set against blank backdrops and evenly lit, were born of modernist confidence in autonomous objects and their ability to communicate across time and cultures, and in the power of photographs to act as surrogates for objects.

Shirreff’s forthright photographs play on this confidence. Her ephemeral objects, made only for the camera, have no inherent value and her photographs of them are tinged with the melancholy attendant on the provisional nature of the photographic enterprise. The result is static, flat, subjective, and partial representations of things, whether African sculptures or abstract forms. Yet it is the distance inherent in photographs, as she has pointed out, that creates space for “wondering and the potential and pleasures of ambiguity.”

Erin Shirreff’s delicate, hand-formed sculptures of compressed ash, her *Monograph (no. 1)* photographs, and *Sculpture for Snow*, an outdoor commission in Brooklyn, are informed by her interest in our encounters with the enigmatic, unyielding forms of classic 20th-century minimalist sculpture. Robert Storr has said that Tony Smith’s shape-shifting sculptures, a particular influence on Shirreff, “have places to go, and yet they stay.” This tension between dynamism and stasis is fundamental to the experience of Shirreff’s sculptures, especially *Untitled* (2011) and *Sculpture for Snow*, which sometimes present dense planes, other times narrow edges.

Monograph (no. 1) is animated by other kinds of movement – namely the oscillation between photography and sculpture, two and three dimensions, and purely visual and bodily perception. Each framed work imitates the form of a book, opened to a two-page spread of photographs of modernist sculptures (in fact diminutive painted cardboard maquettes made by Shirreff). The overt disjunctions between the paired images point to the contingent experience of looking at sculpture and, by extension, to looking at objects in the world, whether in person or through photographs. Things meanwhile endure, in blank disregard. They are not seen, as Wallace Stevens wrote, “as the observer wills.” They merely are.

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