

HIGHLIGHTS: ERIN SHIRREFF

# TIME LAPSE



Suggesting a contemplative desire for the “middle condition” of the object, New York-based artist ERIN SHIRREFF’s hand-carved sculptures and atmospheric videos exist somewhere between replicas and relics.

words by FIONN MEADE

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### ARTIST'S BIO

ERIN SHIRREFF lives and works in New York City. She holds an MFA from Yale University (2005) and a BFA from the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Recent exhibitions include "Knight's Move" at Sculpture Center in Queens, "Terminus Ante Quem" at Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago, and a two-person show in the Front Room at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis. She is included in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

ERIN SHIRREFF's work is currently on view in "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1, Queens; "Between Here and There" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and "Immaterial" at Ballroom Marfa. She will have a solo show at the ICA Philadelphia in Fall 2010 ("Still, Flat, and Far," 16 September to 5 December 2010).

Previous page:

*Untitled*, 2009

Courtesy: the artist and  
Lisa Cooley, New York

Above:

*UN 2010*, video still, 2010

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*Knife*, 2008

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*Teeth*, 2010

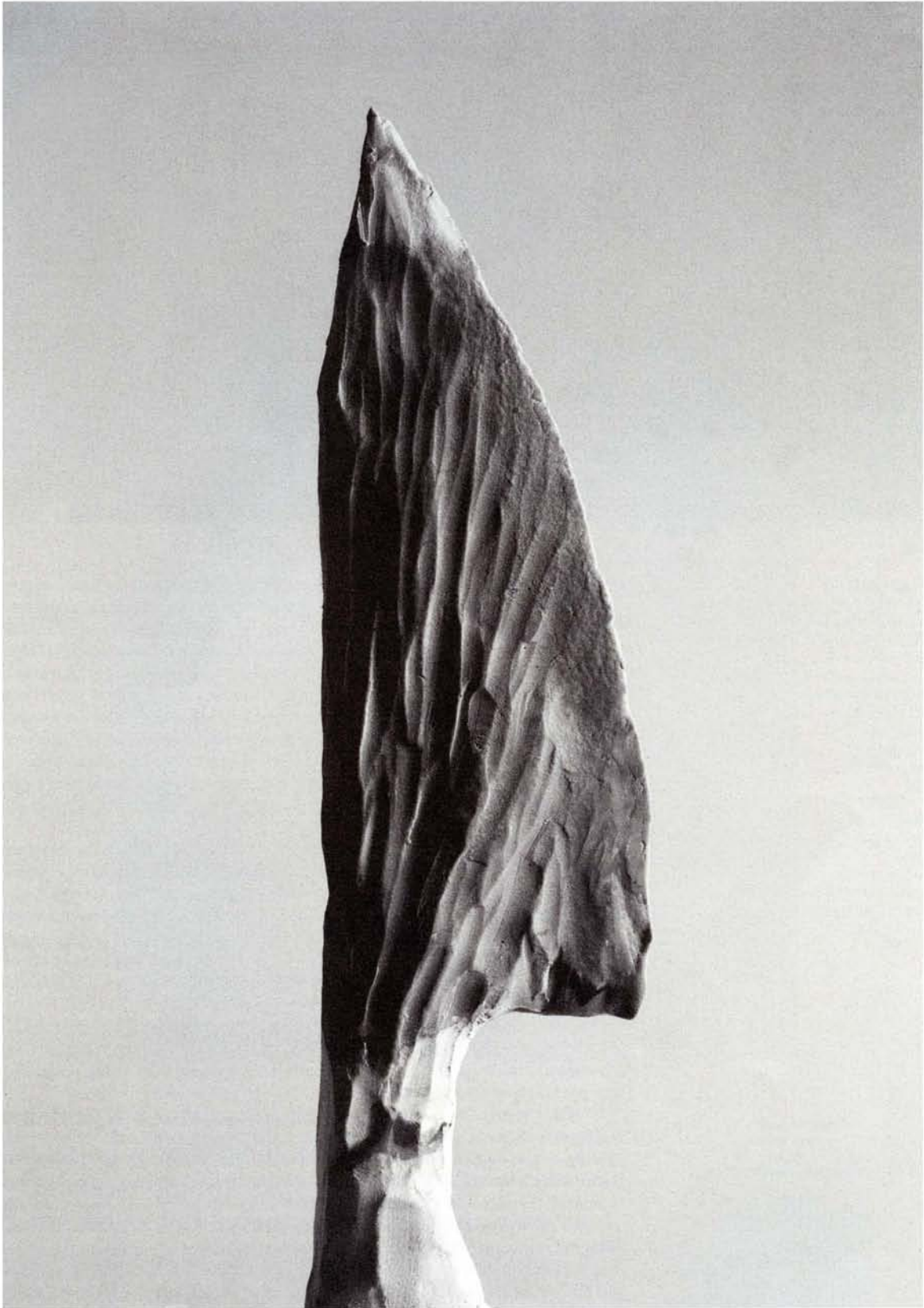
All images courtesy: the artist  
and Lisa Cooley, New York

Perpetually building something up via one technique only to transpose it into another, New York-based artist Erin Shirreff's photographs, videos and sculptures exploit the interval between mediums as a means of destabilizing conventional ways of seeing an object or image. Meticulous hand-carved objects of wax-based clay hover before black backdrops, mimicking evidentiary samplings of bone fragments, fossils or museological artifacts in an ongoing series of black-and-white photos; singular, often appropriated images of iconic landmarks are scrutinized in atmospheric videos; and a series of untitled ash and plaster sculptures are propped up against the wall, folded geometric forms that disallow a privileged vantage point and recall both cast and mold. In short, Shirreff embraces what art historian Pamela Lee has termed "the middle condition"—an engagement with medium as a mode "always already in between," rather than a parameter based primarily on material properties or spatial considerations.<sup>[1]</sup>

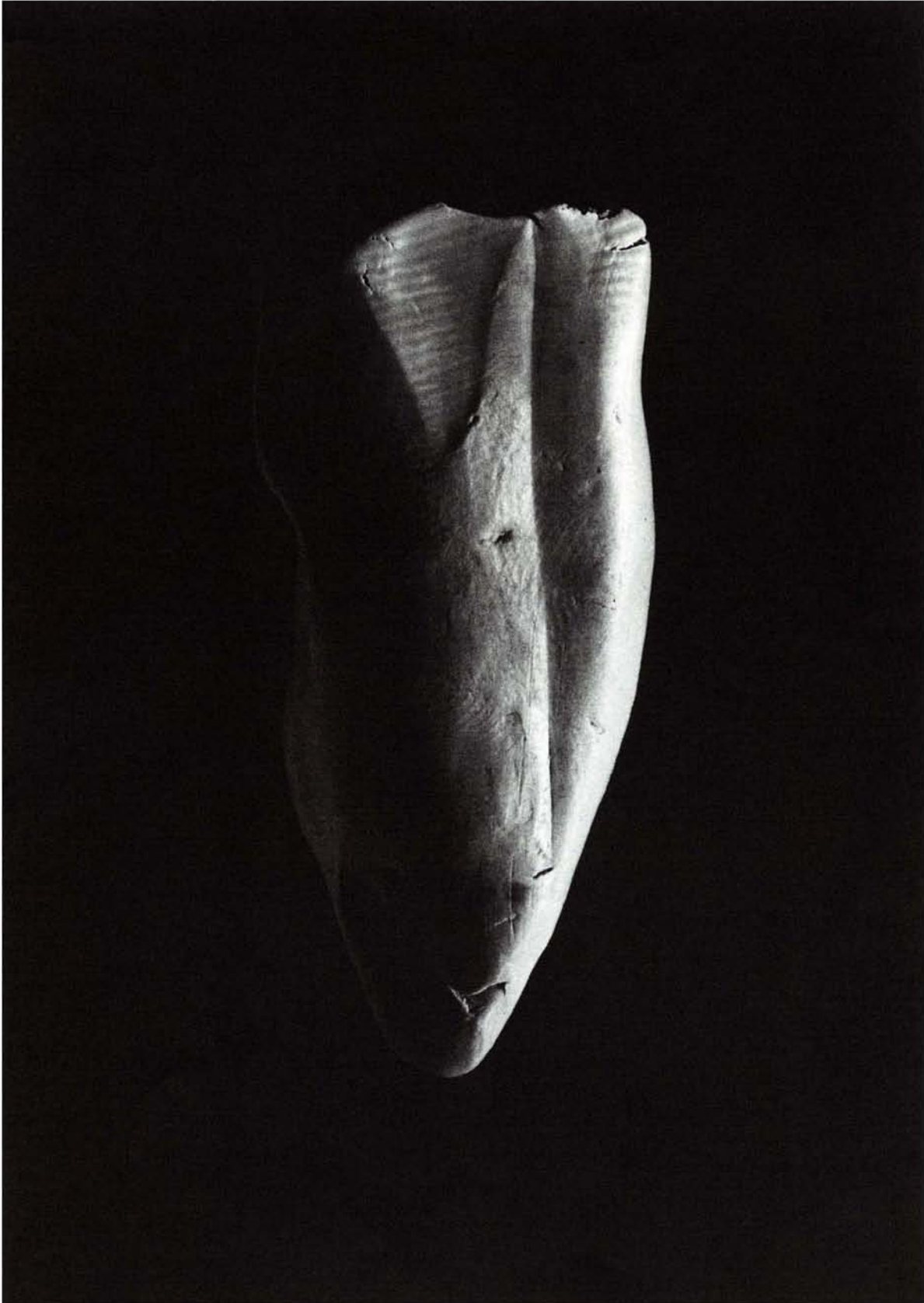
Insistent upon a temporal register in this engagement, Shirreff emphasizes the duration and rhythm of recognition rather than the apprehension of a finite or representative object in her work. A new photo series, "Signature" (2010), for example, achieves a syncopated effect precisely in its mis-registration: Analog photographs of sculptural models crafted in the artist's studio are divided in half and then pieced together to create "whole" compositions. Playing off the conceit of images bound together in the same signature of a book, partial views are extracted from an implied sequence and spliced together, lending each resulting diptych an out-of-step yet intimately linked appearance. The shape of each form is never fully revealed, though the viewer is nevertheless propelled toward a perambulatory imagining of its contour. Indeed, the rupture of the image—both in terms of a literal crease and its depiction of time unfolding—is one of compressed movement, insinuating a contemplative desire to take in the depicted object even as it is riven and withheld from view.

Reminiscent of both Minimalist sculpture and archaic monoliths, the austere anonymity of the severed "Signature" forms—set upon a white ground and shot under stark lighting—elicits an anachronistic, even cultic reading of the object despite the obvious artifice involved, lending the images an outside-of-time quality. A similar effect is achieved in Shirreff's photographs of small-scale sculptures modeled after teeth, knives, prehistoric tools and archeological fragments. Collapsing the two ontologies that predominate in the history of photographing objects, namely, studio stagecraft and indexical or documentary record, Shirreff's enlarged images assume the archival look of a desiccated taxonomy while also borrowing from the seduction tactics of product photography. Brought to a scale that reveals their status as false artifacts—the imprint of fingers is often visible—Shirreff's mode of display conflates the remoteness of the remnant with the immediacy of the copy or imita-

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tion in order to construct an internal dissociation of the time of the work. As such, Shirreff's serial variations produce a formal vocabulary of the remainder, which exists somewhere between replica and relic, evoking parts of a missing whole or erstwhile function but always through the remove of a highly mediated image.

To briefly follow Lee's calibration of medium toward a conditional status, she writes, "Medium foregrounds a liminal stance at its heart, is a vehicle of communication rather than the fact of communication itself... And in this sense medium always internalizes a singular engagement with time. For the act of mediation is a process, and the process (because in the middle of things) is necessarily partial."<sup>[2]</sup> Both passive and mesmeric, just such a liminal incommensurability takes over in Shirreff's deliberate and partial (even parceled) approach, shifting what appears to be legible and staid back into the phenomenological realm of temporal contingency. The compressed movement around a static, monument-like model in the "Signature" series contrasts in scale and implied motion with the mimetic series of Shirreff's diminutive reliquary, underscoring the readily mutable nature of the photographic image but also the artist's attraction and dissembling response to such freighted art historical tropes as artifact, landscape, model and monument.

Far from placing "kinesthetic demands" on the viewer, to use Robert Morris's oft-quoted phrase regarding Minimalist sculpture, including an "awareness of scale [that] is a function of the comparison between the constant, one's body size, and the object,"<sup>[3]</sup> Shirreff invokes a durational condition within her images that is, to reiterate, a dissociation of the time of the work. Telescoping between scales, in fact, it is rather the insistence on a schism or lapse in time that remains constant across all of her work and obliges the viewer to slow down. Take, for instance, her recent videos, *Ansel Adams, RCA Building, circa 1940* (2009) and *Roden Crater* (2009), in which Shirreff puts still images in motion by taking hundreds of photographs of a single image under subtly changing light conditions. Edited together into large-scale HD video projections, a time-lapse effect of suggestive detail and presence results from her overlaying of simple effects of natural phenomena on the still image.

*Roden Crater*, for example, proffers an appropriated view of the eponymous crater silhouetted into two slopes on a desert horizon, one serried before the other, the lower slope a dark gray and the upper ridge of the crater sienna red. Only the work's title suggests the elaborate engineering that inhabits the actual site, referring as it does to James Turrell's massive and ongoing earthwork within the crater's basin, while Shirreff's portrait, in a manner not unlike Robert Smithson's mirror displacements, conveys the melancholy of a timeless geological indifference through highly artificial yet hypnotic insertions. Here, Shirreff induces the sun's slow rise over a desert ridge and its gradual ascent to midday blindness before a sepia-like descent into anonymous darkness. Encapsulating the impression of a day spent in close observation, but also a hallucination before such a desolate landscape, the 15-minute loop includes a closing sequence that reveals increasingly the glare of the camera's repeated flash upon the found image. Pulled from the mesmerizing spell of animation, the glare simulates stop-motion footage of the sun itself moving overhead. Yet the repeated flare of the apparatus simultaneously undoes any illusion of viewing actual on-site footage and returns to the viewer an acute awareness of the "vehicle of communication" itself—the mediated image. Similarly, the receding vertigo of an Ansel Adams photograph is elongated by the impression of overcast shadows and striated rainsqualls moving across the image of a Manhattan skyscraper (today, the RCA building is known as 30 Rockefeller Plaza); tilted away from the viewer's perspective, the building appears like a



From top:  
*Ansel Adams, RCA Building, circa 1940*, video still, 2009  
*Signature*, 2010  
All images courtesy: the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York

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grand cutout ready to topple backwards as the atmospheric gloom of a blustery day scrolls intermittently from left to right. De-authored from both the celestial and spiritual connotations of Turrell's project and the poise of Ansel Adams's compositional edicts, Shirreff nevertheless manages to saturate the still image with gradation and increment as her light treatment reinvests the facsimile with auratic depth.

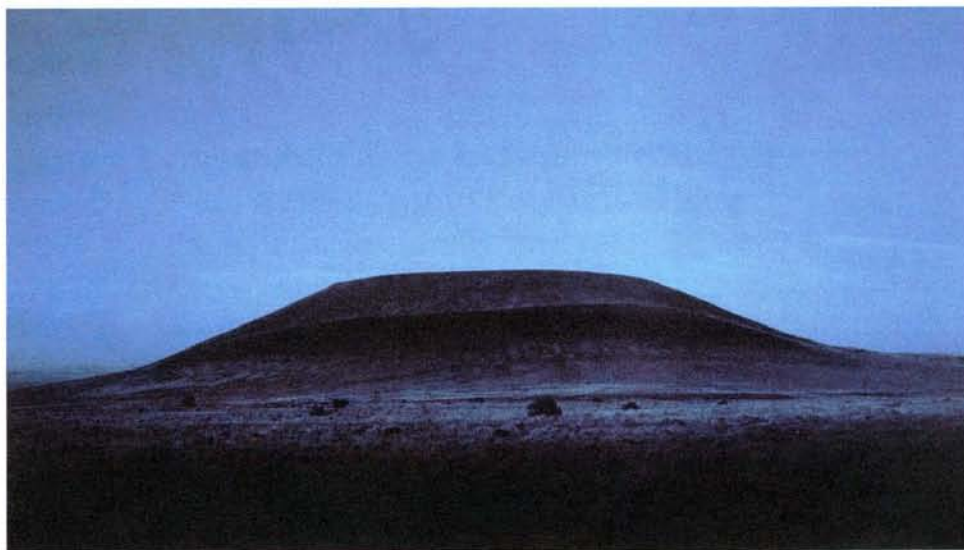
Adopting a similar approach, *UN 2010* (2010) takes up the iconic status of the United Nations Secretariat building as rendered and reanimated by Shirreff from across the East River in Long Island City. The portrait gains its strength from distance and remove, which emphasize the blank regard of the structure's sheer face, rather than its obvious political import or architectural significance (the building was designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer and is considered the first example of International Style architecture in New York). Framed precisely front and center by the artist—a departure in that Shirreff composed the sequence using three images she herself had taken rather than appropriated images—the building's two-dimensional flatness is greatly enhanced. The diminutive General Assembly Hall and the United Nations visitor's center lie before the looming presence of the Secretariat as the rest of the Manhattan skyline unfolds into three-dimensional visual cacophony and seeming irrelevance on both sides. Occupied by the silent effrontery of a monolith, day passes into night and the still image endures its displacement back into time. ◊

### AUTHOR

FIONN MEADE is curator at SculptureCenter, NY. Recent curatorial projects also include "Nachleben," at Goethe Institute, New York, and "Entr'acte" at CCS Bard. His writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Bomb*, *Bidouin* and *Parkett*, among other publications, and he received a 2009 Arts Writer Grant from Creative Capital and the Andy Warhol Foundation.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 51–52.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," in: *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 13.



*Roden Crater*, video stills, 2009  
Courtesy: the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York