

OSMOS

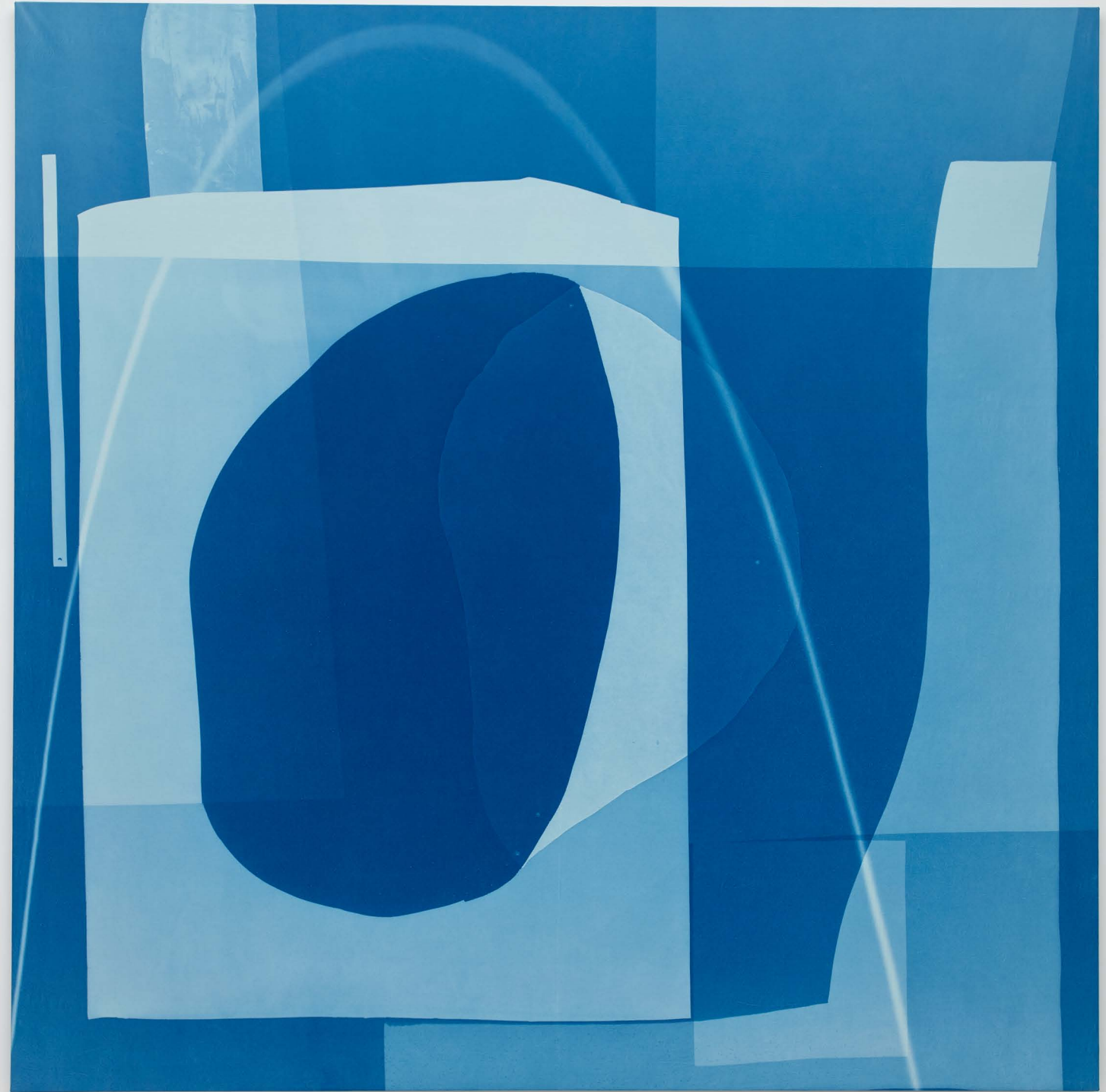
MAGAZINE

Issue 7, Winter 2015

**“A TRACE OR THE
PRESENCE OF THE
THING, BUT NOT
THE THING ITSELF”**

**ERIN SHIRREFF'S
PHOTOGRAMS**

BY TOM MCDONOUGH





What is the weight of a shadow? That's the koan-like question I found myself asking in front of Erin Shirreff's recent series of cyanotypes, four large, five x five or eight x eight foot photograms, each unique and all dating from early 2015. Shirreff trained as a sculptor but has become best known over the last five years or so for her explorations between mediums—more particularly, the effects of photographic reproduction on our perception of three-dimensional, sculptural form. In 2010 Fionn Meade had already cast her as a navigator of “the middle condition,” a phrase coined by Pamela Lee to describe a contemporary sense of artistic production as between-ness and conditionality rather than Modernist specificity and truth to materials. We intuitively sense what this entails in Shirreff's photographs of sculptural models assembled from cardboard or clay and meant only to exist as images, or in her videos, in which she animates reproductions of artworks—a Medardo Rosso bust, a James Turrell earthwork—using simple lighting effects. All of those works made use of a certain degree of trumpery, a momentary uncertainty on our part about the status or authenticity of what we might be seeing, but Shirreff's cyanotypes, in the very transparency of their process, are even more effective in confounding ontological distinctions between mediums.

Cyanotype is, in essence, a process for making pictures without camera or film. It was developed early on in photography's history, having been introduced in the 1840s by English scientist Sir John Herschel, but only entered general use some forty years later, after 1880. You coat an absorbent material—paper, say, or linen in Shirreff's case—with a chemical solution of light-sensitive iron salts, which is dried in the dark. Objects are then placed on the material and a print made by exposing it to light; after exposure you process the material by simply rinsing it in water. What emerges is a print in which the objects will appear as white silhouettes against a background of cyan, the rich, intense blue-green that gives the process its name. Its appeal to Shirreff is obvious: not only for its simplicity and for the significant element of chance involved—results of the exposure remain unknown until the final rinse ensures the oxidation of the iron salts—but also for the way the photogram, as a contact print, depends on that most sculptural property, weight. Whether the object is as insubstantial as a botanical specimen or as hefty as a piece of steel is irrelevant, all cyanotypes require that it rest on the surface of the sensitized material, occluding it with its bulk. The process does not capture, as we expect in photography, the immaterial sense of vision, bringing near what is far away, but rather our haptic ability to feel mass.

Sculpture casts shadows; photography fixes them. So we have been taught. Shirreff shuffles those stable qualities until the distinct categories seem to be less static points than moments amidst a circulatory exchange. This is an outcome of her fluid studio process, and her cyanotypes retain the feel of workroom experiments, albeit highly successful ones. The shapes that form the bases of each work—primarily arches, holes, and semicircles hand-cut from paper—are the same

as those rendered in steel in the contemporaneous *Drop* sculptures, where they hang in layered arrangements on steel rods. Paper can become shadow form on linen or it can become material form in space. The template can be translated into many different formats. And other objects might find a place on the photogram's surface, too; it is receptive to all sorts of studio paraphernalia: a ruler, some strings, even a ladder.

Their presence in the cyanotypes warrants consideration. I think they function initially as crucial reminders to the spectator that, unlike other forms of photography, the photogram reproduces objects at a 1:1 scale. This is most obvious in *Ruler and hole*, 2015 where the yardstick at left provides a reference to scale that is almost comical in its literalness. But they also suggest something of the lineage of these works, and perhaps of Shirreff's oeuvre more generally. We tend, thanks to her frequent references back to Modernist sculpture and especially to American Minimalism of the 1960s, to see her as reworking its premises in a postmodern moment of ubiquitous mediation via the image. The presence of the ruler or of strings dropped onto the linen reminds me, however, of nothing so much as the studio processes of Jasper Johns and, beyond him, of Marcel Duchamp—their embrace of chance, of course, but also their complex play with perception, time, and recollection.

The results, then, belie the simplicity of her process. Each cyanotype presents us with diaphanous layers of irregular geometric form in which figure-ground relations become indeterminate—the whitest “blanks” registering shapes laid on the treated linen surface, the darkest blue contours indicating areas left uncovered. Between those two states lay many shades of cyan, so that we come to understand these works not as representations of three-dimensional depth, but as indexes of time, of how long an object shadowed the solution-infused fabric. The longer a cutout form rested there, the whiter the ensuing shape. The flat surface of the photogram becomes the site of a prolonged duration, one more means in her ongoing concern with stretching time. Already in her film *Sculpture Park (Tony Smith)* (2006/2013), in which we see small models based on Smith's minimalist sculptures seemingly caught in a snowstorm, Shirreff announced her desire to slow down our process of perception, to acknowledge our experience of sculpture as a necessarily time-bound one. But hers is not merely the phenomenological *durée* professed by the makers of specific objects during the 1960s—the time taken by the mind to process the geometric form's gestalt—but also the psychological time of memory. Curator Jeffrey Weiss once aptly described one of her videos as encoding an experience of “distance, a metonymy of loss.” Shirreff herself has recently said that in her work, shadow functions as “a trace or the presence of the thing, but not the thing itself.” We might posit that a shadow's weight should be measured not simply by the mass of the object that casts it, but also by the extent of its indemnification in memory, by the time it sediments within its shade.