



BY MICHAEL VASS

Around the looming, tilted black slab, which appears as both an unearthly presence and an unsettling void, fragments of a world can be glimpsed: below it, a pale sun-drenched lawn; to its right, a sliver of a parking lot with three or four vehicles partially visible; to its left, and paying no attention to it, a man and woman, both with short-cropped, windswept hair, stand pleasantly chatting, him tall and athletic, smiling in dark shades and a dark suit, and her petite in billowy white pants and a white blouse, casually clutching a large sunhat behind her back. Behind them is a parked sedan; across the street is a one-storey white building with a terracotta roof; above everything, a distant mountain range fades into the pale-white sky. A vertical line cuts through the black slab (as well as the sky above it and the lawn below it), unnaturally distorting it, rounding its flat, smooth surface. This is a book gutter, dividing the black-and-white photograph across two pages. The looming black slab is Modernist artist Tony Smith's sculpture *New Piece* (1966).

A large reproduction of this photograph—digitally altered to remove the book gutter—hangs on the wall of Erin Shirreff's studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. In the last few years, the Kelowna-born artist has been receiving steadily increasing attention for her diverse work, which includes sculpture, photography, video and online art. She won the \$50,000 2013 AIMIA AGO Photography Prize, and she has recently had solo exhibitions at White Cube in London, at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery and at Lisa Cooley in New York. It would surely be an oversimplification to claim that the seeds of Shirreff's successful career can somehow be traced back to her encounter with this photograph of *New Piece*. Its prominent place on her studio wall, however, hints at the extent to which it has been something of a wellspring for her work.

Erin Shirreff *Sculpture Park*,  
Tony Smith, *Die* (still) 2007 Colour  
video, silent 7 min 16 sec loop  
ALL IMAGES COURTESY SIKKEMA JENKINS  
& CO., NEW YORK

RIGHT: Erin Shirreff *Untitled*  
(*Shadows*) 2010 Ash, hydrocal and  
armatures Dimensions variable  
PHOTO RON POLLARD

# objects + images

ERIN SHIRREFF  
AND THE GREY AREAS  
OF REPRESENTATION



BELOW FROM LEFT: Erin Shirreff  
No. 5; No. 9; No. 10;  
No. 15; No. 19; No. 25;  
No. 27; and No. 28  
All 2013 Archival pigment  
prints 50.8 x 50.8 cm each

OPPOSITE: Erin Shirreff  
Medardo Rosso, *Madame X*,  
1896 (stills) 2013 Colour  
video, silent 24 min loop

When Shirreff first came across this photograph in an art book, she had recently returned to New York after receiving her MFA in sculpture from Yale. Something drew her powerfully to the image. Her interest was in part due to Smith's striking sculpture, but she was also curious about the snippets of real-world context provided by the photograph. She wondered how Smith's work lived in the world of its time, and how people interacted with *New Piece* when it was new. To investigate this further, she made a trip to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where one of the three editions of *New Piece* is permanently installed. However, Shirreff's in-person encounter with the imposing sculpture turned out to be oddly prosaic and underwhelming. The experience lacked the mystery and intrigue that the photograph seemed to contain. This struck Shirreff as interesting. Smith was known for insisting that presence was one of the most important elements of his work—he sometimes preferred to use the term "presences" to describe his sculptures. How could an old black-and-white photograph, awkwardly spread across two pages in an art book, have a greater impact than the physical presence of the sculpture itself?

Ruminating on this experience led Shirreff to make her breakthrough videos *Sculpture Park, Tony Smith* (2006) and *Sculpture Park, Tony Smith, Die* (2007). These works offer an intriguingly indirect investigation into the underlying themes of Shirreff's *New Piece* experience. They portray an imaginary sculpture park at night as snow falls on some of Smith's black abstract forms. To achieve this, Shirreff roughly reproduced five of Smith's sculptures in miniature with foamcore-and-matboard maquettes, and then shot them in her studio against a black backdrop while covering them with bits of Styrofoam. The first video is composed of five vignettes—one for each sculpture depicted. Each vignette begins in darkness, and then gradually a black "sculpture" becomes distinguishable from the surrounding darkness as the white snow falls on it. The second video repeats the same set-up, but focuses only on Smith's black-cube sculpture *Die* (1962). The difference is that here the sculpture is rotating, so that we appear to be moving 360 degrees around it, glimpsing shifting perspectives of the cube as it is covered in snow.

In the videos, which are silent, Smith's forms are made visible as images by the contact with the snow, which in turn makes them evident as material

objects. Thus the videos dramatize in miniature the elusive reciprocal process of an object revealing itself as an image and an image revealing the materiality of an object. The melancholy, mysterious atmosphere Shirreff creates through her deft manipulations of space, scale and perspective suggests that illusory photographic "presences" can sometimes affect us in ways that real presences cannot.

Shirreff's subsequent work has continued to inventively mine the ambiguous and evocative perceptual and experiential grey areas between images and objects. Although she works across various mediums, exploring indeterminate zones between sculpture, photography, video and installation, her projects can be grouped into three basic categories: works that are primarily photographic, works that are conventionally sculptural and moving-image works. Compartmentalizing Shirreff's work in this manner mirrors her own methods. She rarely produces a one-off piece, preferring instead to work in interconnected series and groups of projects that explore similar formal parameters in subtly shifting variations and combinations. This approach has allowed her to burrow deeply into the areas that interest her while creating a remarkably varied but cohesive body of work.

In the sense that Shirreff is always concerned with the perception and contemplation of objects, all of her work can be considered sculptural, including her photographs and videos, which often begin with reflections of sculptural practices. Even her conventional sculpture projects, however, usually involve conceptual layers of implied or hypothetical mediation.

This is most obvious in her sole work of public art thus far. When commissioned by New York City's Public Art Fund in 2011 to make an outdoor sculpture, Shirreff opted intriguingly to return to the exploration of Tony Smith's work that fuelled her *Sculpture Park* videos. *Sculpture for Snow* (2011) is based on Smith's sculpture *Amaryllis* (1965). Or rather it is based on the foamcore-and-matboard maquette Shirreff made of *Amaryllis* for the earlier video, which itself was based on a single photograph of the sculpture. Made of aluminum and painted black, *Sculpture for Snow* matches the large scale of *Amaryllis* and faithfully mimics its form as viewed from the perspective of the photograph that inspired the maquette. However, Shirreff leaves out all the parts of *Amaryllis* that are not seen in that photograph, turning

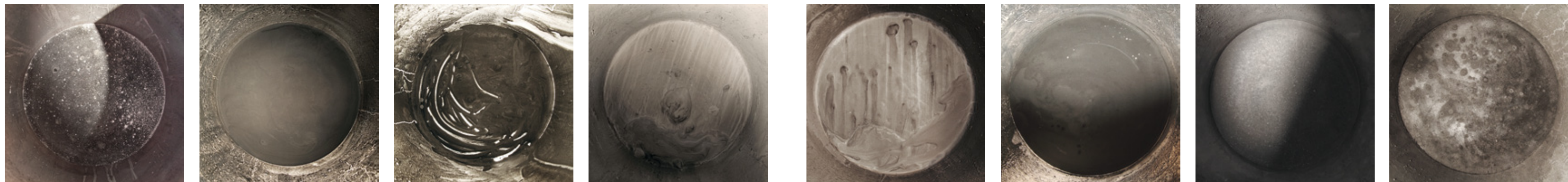


her sculpture into a kind of facade of the original. Thus, from the "frontal" perspective, *Sculpture for Snow* appears to be a weighty, imposing form, but viewed from any other angle, it is revealed to consist of thin sheets of aluminum, like oversized origami.

Aside from referencing the earlier videos, the title *Sculpture for Snow* can perhaps also be interpreted as a sly allusion to the work of Michael Snow. Shirreff counts Snow's landmark structural film *Wavelength* (1967) as a major influence, and Snow's sculptural work, like Shirreff's, is predominately concerned with interrogating perceptual experience through objects. His well-known project *Walking Woman* (1961–67) even began as a cardboard cut-out, which Snow then recreated in various sculptures and images. Despite Shirreff's numerous allusions to midcentury abstract sculptors like Tony Smith, and her frequent appropriations of their

Minimalist aesthetic, Snow is in many ways a more useful reference point in thinking through the substance of her practice.

In the *Untitled* sculpture series she produced between 2009 and 2011, Shirreff worked with compressed ash to make thin, pale, often angular forms. Calling to mind something in between fragile, archaeological artifacts and disposable papier-mâché props, these works conjure qualities not usually associated with sculptural objects: they seem transitory, provisional, insubstantial. For sculptures exhibited in a gallery, they are also unusually affected by and dependent on the context of their surroundings. Shirreff made the works in the series for specific exhibitions and designed the forms with particular gallery spaces in mind (though she has subsequently shown them in other places). The sculptures' strange and haunting presence results from the fact that they just barely seem to register as present at all. The





Erin Shirreff *Moon* (still) 2010  
Colour video, silent 32 min loop

## “Shirreff specializes in a carefully calibrated form of double quotation.”

with the *New Piece* photograph, Shirreff produced a number of series that play with the format of reproducing photographs of sculptures in book form. Books are laid out for printing in single sheets known as signatures. In *Signature* (2010), *Signatures* (2011), *Monograph* (No. 1, 2 and 3) (2011–12) and *A.P.* (2012), Shirreff presents framed signature sheets that appear to contain black-and-white photographs for a book on midcentury abstract sculpture. In fact, these are not actual sculptures, but again small, painted, foamcore-and-plaster maquettes that Shirreff makes, roughly imitating the work of sculptors like Tony Smith, Alexander Calder and Anthony Caro. Shirreff then photographs the maquettes in a style similar to art books and catalogues from the period.

Each signature contains a different partial photograph of a partial sculpture on its right and left sides. The seemingly accidental collages that result are simultaneously jarring and oddly seamless. Two truncated objects/images are awkwardly conjoined in a manner that defies all visual logic. And yet the conceit of the signature gives the composition a practical rationale as well as a distinct aesthetic cohesion, since each apparent collage is in fact a single framed print. The sense of double abstraction at work (two abstract forms dissected and combined to create a new abstract image) subverts and toys with the unified sense of wholeness that a sculptor like Smith strove to attain.

*Signature* and *A.P.* consist of individually framed signatures containing two mismatched sculptures. *Signatures* doubles down on this already doubled approach by presenting diptychs of two corresponding signature sheets side by side. Within each diptych, the right side of one signature fits together with the left side of the other signature, so that we can mentally reconstruct a “whole” object/image by looking back and forth between them. The *Monograph* series offers even more complicated mental puzzles, presenting groups of five or six framed signature sheets. In these works, the hypothetical possibility of mentally completing the forms hovers tantalizingly at the edge of consciousness, never to be fulfilled. This becomes a canny metaphor for the nature of photography itself.

The moving-image works Shirreff has produced since the *Sculpture Park* videos represent perhaps the most intriguing aesthetic package she has yet come up with to contain her thorny paradoxes about images and objects, perception and materiality, illusion and reality.

The first paradox related to these moving-image works is that each one is constructed from either a single photograph or a series of slightly differing photographs of a single subject. Thus, although duration is a key component, there are no actual moving images involved, at least not in the sense that we are used to. The videos all start with a source photograph. These are usually flat, minimalist compositions depicting an object and/or location. For *Ansel Adams, RCA Building, circa 1940* (2009) and *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896* (2013), the sources came from art books. For *Lake* (2012), she used a photograph from a British Columbia tourist brochure. For *Roden Crater* (2009) and *Moon* (2010), she printed off images from the Internet. In the case of *UN 2010* (2010), Shirreff took the source photographs herself and then treated them as found objects.

Shirreff photographs these source photographs in her studio under various lighting conditions. She then stitches these multiple secondary

images together with editing software so that light appears to be slowly changing within a single, locked, continuous video composition. The silent results are technically animation, though they seem more like alchemy. At times, the effect mimics naturally occurring changes of light: the sun rising, setting, passing behind a cloud. But then the image will morph into something unreal and dreamlike, as strange colours or tempos seep into previously realistic-seeming light movements. At other times, the effect is more like seeing a strip of celluloid that has been gradually overexposed or underexposed: light floods the frame in strips or broad bursts that seem purely photographic and have no correlation in nature. And then sometimes the light glares off the surface of the source photograph itself, making us explicitly aware of exactly what we are actually seeing: photographs of photographs.

In the videos, everything is regarded equally as both object and image. Shirreff’s diverse choice of objects/images is significant precisely because of the way she treats them all the same. An iconic building (*UN 2010*); a building photographed by an iconic photographer (*Ansel Adams, RCA Building, circa 1940*); an unspecified romantic landscape (*Lake*); a desert crater/James Turrell art project (*Roden Crater*); a 19th-century sculpture (*Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896*); the moon (*Moon*): all are stripped of any broader context beyond their essential qualities as images and things. Even the apparently fluid and ephemeral elements of light and time are rendered as material in the works, since Shirreff makes it clear that they exist only in the form of individual objects (photographs). And yet, when the videos are projected in a gallery, the languid, meditative pace continues to lull us into the illusion of movement and to seduce us to fantasize beyond what is visible within the frame. The extended durations of the videos, which range from around 7 to 44 minutes, allow us time to repeatedly pick apart the photographic tricks on display and then to fall prey to them all over again.

While this is by no means an exhaustive survey of Shirreff’s projects, I have included a broad sampling in order to try to do justice to her unique body of work. One of the ironies of Shirreff’s practice is that her habit of burrowing into the spaces between various working media, in an attempt to engage with the problem of photographic representation, often renders her projects difficult to convey via photographic representation. Shirreff specializes in a kind of carefully calibrated form of double quotation marks. Her “photographs” (which are presented as objects) depict “objects” (which do not exist outside of the photographs). Her sculptures, meanwhile, seem conceived from the outset to consciously thwart or subvert in advance any attempt at photographic depiction. And her use of video seems largely motivated by its capacity to *almost* collapse the distinction between image and object by obscuring the nature of both. The usual forms of photographic documentation inevitably tend to portray Shirreff’s projects as more conventional than is actually the case. However, this posture of conventionality is in fact a crucial part of Shirreff’s larger conceptual strategy, luring us into a murky realm where all images are objects and all objects are images. ■

Discover more of Erin Shirreff’s work at [canadianart.ca/erinshirreff](http://canadianart.ca/erinshirreff)

ghostly colour of the ash blends in with the white-cube surroundings. Many of the sculptures are constructed to lean awkwardly against the gallery walls. A subset sequence within the series, *Untitled (Shadows)* (2010), even directs attention away from the sculptures themselves and onto the carefully orchestrated shadows they cast on the wall and floor. Here the distinction between material object and perceptual ephemera is effectively blurred as Shirreff turns the shadow into an essential component of the object and makes the object seem like a calcified shadow.

Two recent series of sculptures, inspired by scraps of paper and cardboard collected from her studio floor, take this material representation of disposability in a different direction. *Drop* (no. 1, 2 and 3) (2013) each present replicas of scraps expanded to many times their original scales and rendered in steel. These sculptures invert the defining characteristics of their models, appearing monumental, even dangerous, rather than light and inconsequential. For the *Catalogue* series (2012–13), Shirreff began by sketching different curves based on the paper scraps, cast some of these forms in plaster pigmented with graphite and then grouped them together. The results look like bizarrely blank-but-dense architectural models. In contrast to the ash sculptures, these forms command attention even as they make no attempt to claim any identity or purpose. However, unlike the bombast of Smith’s abstract “presences,” Shirreff’s *Catalogues* retain a sense of modesty that links back to their original source. They achieve something like an insistent declaration of their own inscrutable muteness.

Shirreff’s most prolific output thus far has been her numerous series of photographs. Most of these projects fall into one of two distinct groups.

The first group consists of multiple series of framed black-and-white photographs taken by Shirreff, depicting small objects she sculpts from

non-drying, wax-based clay. She photographs these objects individually, dramatically lit in the centre of the composition against a dark backdrop. After being photographed, the objects are destroyed: they exist only to be documented. The stark aesthetic is partly inspired by the influential 1935 catalogue *Perfect Documents*, which featured Walker Evans’s photographs of African sculptures. In the series *Knives* (2008), *Shivs* (2008) and *Teeth* (2010), the sculptures resemble recognizable objects. In *Untitled (Series 1)* (2009) and *Untitled (Series 2, The Interior)* (2010), the objects on display are more mysterious. They are vaguely reminiscent of primitive artifacts, but there is no gesture at identifying them as they hover, suspended in ambiguity. *No Title* (2009/12) presents a variation on this approach, depicting harness-like clay straps that hang from the top of the frame, their intended purpose left tantalizingly unspoken.

In these works, the photographic style injects the objects on display with an unspecified sense of importance. At the same time, the photographs do not hide that these are freshly handmade objects. The visible malleability of the clay contradicts the violent sharpness implied by the titles *Knives*, *Shivs* and *Teeth*, and it undermines the archaeological authenticity of the unlabelled objects. The photographs simultaneously suggest and deny a fixed identity for the objects. Meaning is indicated and refuted in the same gesture. Shirreff subtly forces us to acknowledge the unexplained open elements concealed beneath the seemingly closed aesthetic of her formally elegant “perfect documents.” This is consistent with Shirreff’s characterization of photographic meaning throughout her work: contradictory, paradoxical, unstable.

The second group of photographic projects adds even further conceptual layers to the mix. Perhaps again reflecting indirectly on her encounter