

Celia Perrin Sidarous:
Toujours la coquille de l'autre
always the shell of another
 Parisian Laundry, Montreal
 April 13 – May 19, 2018
 by Kendra Ainsworth

¹ Eva Kernbauer. "Anachronic Concepts, Art Historical Containers and Historiographical Practices in Contemporary Art." *Journal of Art Historiography* 16 (2017), 1–17.

² Georges Didi-Huberman. *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

³ Kaja Silverman. *The Miracle of Analogy, or, The History of Photography*, part 1 (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11.

⁴ Ibid.

Toujours la coquille de l'autre always the shell of another offers a subtle meditation on art history, the mysterious pull of beautiful objects and time itself. Known for her photographs of unexpected, esoteric groupings of found and made images and objects that play with conventions of collage and still life, Celia Perrin Sidarous' practice has been expanding. Her installation *Nocte coralli* (2016), in the most recent (and likely last) Montreal Biennale, saw her signature collage assemblages proliferate into film and three-dimensional works with armatures and sculptural features that echoed formal components of her photographs. In *Toujours*, the artist's finely attuned sense of the associative power of layering, framing and art's ability to collapse and complicate temporalities find an adept apogee.

Toujours is a spare, almost austere exhibition, but one that rewards the viewer's time. The main floor of the gallery is hung with a series of framed prints: staged studio shots of individual and grouped objects (many featuring the show's titular *coquilles* or shells), images of cultural sites in Greece and reproduced pages from a catalogue of the archaeological museum at Delphi, published in 1975. Greece has been a reference point in several of the artist's recent works, but here, it's Delphi's particular history, mythology and cultural significance that take centre stage.

The space is bisected diagonally by a long, low plinth on which rests *Notes to Self* (2018), a collection of ceramic objects – mostly vessels of various sorts: pinch pots, bud vases, delicate spoons and some more unconventionally shaped, calling to mind rock formations, coral or shards of pottery – glazed in a restrained palette of white, slate blue, sea green and taupe.

What feels like both the conceptual and emotional heart of the exhibition is *Slip* (2018), a silent 16mm film projected in the gallery's basement, the "bunker." Though enigmatic and non-narrative, it acts as something of an index for the exhibition. Here, as in a photograph upstairs, are the pillars of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, collaged between waves and spray washing over sand, olive trees rustling in the wind. The glossy still lifes are animated here; the elegant female hand, which appears in some of the photographs with nails painted scarlet, enters the frame and delicately, languidly places an olive branch, moves pearls from a table into a dish and pours cream into pitcher, all with purposeful, balletic grace. Situating the film here, in this subaltern space below the white cube, evokes a sense of accessing, or unearthing, a deeper level of meaning beyond the aesthetically beautiful but somewhat unyielding images and objects in the space above. It is an effective use of the gallery's secondary exhibition space; the whirr of the projector the only sound and the flicker on the screen the only light in a space that calls to mind an excavation site for some wonder of classical antiquity.

The significance of Greece here extends beyond the merely representational. The connotations it invokes as the place considered in Western history to be the incunabulum of art, architecture and philosophy, bring a sense of historiography to the show, particularly as it concerns the role of the historian, archivist or collector. In *Abalone* (2018) and *Lucie* (2018), two of the framed prints which feature the aforementioned hand (of the artist's aunt), the collector is anonymous but seen – and is noticeably female. By contrast, the images from the Delphi museum catalogue seem to amplify the lack of a human presence, exemplifying the invisible and no doubt male "objectivity" of the archaeologist or historian. In subtly questioning the poetics and politics of collection, display and documentation of objects through these juxtapositions, the presence of the hand is significant. It not only calls attention to the haptic potential of the ceramics, but also to the agency and embodied knowledge of those who consider, select, handle, place and contextualize these objects. Who decides what is documented for



Celia Perrin Sidarous, *Toujours la coquille de l'autre always the shell of another*, installation view at Parisian Laundry, Montreal, 2018
 PHOTO: MAXIME BROUILLET

posterity and how it is presented? Perrin Sidarous seems to point toward a more intimate, analogical way of knowing objects and their movement through space and time than the traditions and timelines that art history allow. By being documented, activated and re-documented across different media, the art or archaeological object becomes a locus for the collapsing and complicating of temporalities. Through the spatial and formal layering of *Slip, Notes to Self* and the photographs, Perrin Sidarous invokes an almost Warburgian exploration of the “heterochronic afterlife” of the art object,¹ whereby art history is transmitted via hauntings, residues.²

Specifically, it is Perrin Sidarous’ vessels – as either image or object – that have the most interpretive potential. *Omphalos* (2018), one of the framed prints depicting an item from the catalogue of artifacts, comes to mind. In ancient Greece, the omphalos was a carved stone vessel believed to have represented the centre of the world, the place from which life emerged and the portal through which the gods communicated with their supplicants; in other words, it was the physical shell of the otherworldly. Here, the catalogue reproductions, the artist’s images and ceramic objects can be thought of as analogues of the omphalos, functioning as shells for something just as amorphous, though tailored to our present: the generative potential of art as archive and the power of photography to “disclose the world, show us that it is structured by analogy, and help us assume our place within it.”³ In its multivalent echoes, mirrorings and associations, *Toujours la coquille de l’autre always the shell of another* connects the present-day gallery-goer to Apollonian priests and priestesses, 19th-century archaeologists, museologists of the ’70s and Perrin Sidarous herself, alone in the studio, parsing the “untranscendable similarities that structure Being,”⁴ each perspective or reality the shell of another.

Kendra Ainsworth is a curator, writer and arts administrator based in Toronto.