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frieze

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Erin Shirreff



Lisa Cooley Fine Art, New York, USA

We are dealing with replicas, but of what? For her first solo show 'Landscapes, Heads, Drapery and Devils' at Lisa Cooley Fine Art, Erin Shirreff presented an arrangement of cryptic objects, films and photographs that appeared to be mundane, but stubbornly managed to defy recognition.

The title of the show derived from the most common associations that people make when confronted with ambiguous forms - they are, perhaps, the most basic categories by which we generate meaning. In his unfinished essay 'The Artist as Site-Seer' (1966-7), Robert Smithson related the origin of the visual to language, or what he called the 'enigma of blind order', to reflect on the process of creating meaning through classification. A similar investigation can be found in Shirreff's recent works, which employ the idiom of the all-too-familiar as a visual trap. They lure the viewer into familiar terrain by employing a visual language that mimics well-known things in the world, as well as the pseudo-scientific aesthetics established by Conceptual art. However, the familiar quickly becomes unfamiliar, and the viewer - unable to make sense of what he or she is seeing - has to rely on perception that is based less in recognition than in observation.

In *Two Moons* (2009), a moon-like sphere hovers in the middle of each of two adjacent monitors. Both spheres are lit from the side: while one slowly appears and disappears within the brightening and dimming lights, the other rotates on its own axis, gradually revealing its cratered surface. The changes are hardly detectable to the wandering eye, the slow pace turning the investigative gaze into a mesmerized stare.

There is a similar effect in *Roden Crater* (2009), a single-channel video that was

projected onto a large screen suspended in the back corner of the gallery. Shirreff took hundreds of photographs of a photograph of the dormant crater that houses James Turrell's iconic, still-unfinished earthwork. She photographed the image repeatedly from the same distance and perspective, but under changing light conditions, then edited the pictures together to create a 15-minute film, mimicking a time-lapse shot of the actual terrain. The altering light environments create the impression of changing daylight and seasons while the flash reflection on the image's surface is reminiscent of the travelling sunlight.

In Shirreff's recent series 'Untitled' (2009), angular geometric forms made of compressed ash leant along the long gallery wall, their relatively thin surfaces suggesting veneer or casts rather than actual structural elements. With no immediately obvious function, these shells may evoke ancient temples as much as they might the papier-mâché architecture of Disneyland. It is difficult to find the right angle from which to examine their multiple surfaces, which encourage viewers to continually shift their body in relation to them; an erratic dance, examining them from all sides and angles. Shirreff's work plays with the relationship between appearance and the actual object, collapsing the things that we think we see with the actuality of compressed ash, plaster casts and pictures of pictures. All the action occurs on the surface; it is where our knowledge and the objects' inherent references meet. It is also where the artificial nature of the works is revealed. Once the sleight of hand is exposed, and the viewer realizes what he is actually looking at, the stand-in nature of the works becomes apparent. It is not about the reference to moons, craters or architecture but much more about the process of recognition, about how something may appear to be a landscape, a head, drapery or a devil.

Anna Gritz

Erin Shirreff
Roden Crater
2009
DVD still