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VISUAL ART

Erin Shirreff

by Didier Morelli

It began with an art historical archive, or at least part of one. I use the term “part” here not because it is piecemeal or incomplete but because the documents in question are deliberately cut up into fragments. They are the parts of a larger, Western 20th-century whole. The resulting artworks are like puzzle pieces extracted from a modernist catalogue—geometric shapes and forms that constitute the lexicon of a past era. Grainy historical images taken out of their original context, blown up to unnatural sizes and reassembled into sleek glass vitrines become a new aesthetic vocabulary. Against the white walls of the gallery, they look like display cases, three-dimensional photo collages, or constructivist-inspired boxes with an uncanny air of placelessness.

Erin Shirreff’s solo exhibition, “Midday dilemma,” at Bradley Ertaskiran in Montreal is a visual delight of satisfying proportions. Situated in a former commercial laundry building from the early 1930s, the gallery occupies two floors of a restored 15,000-square-foot industrial site in Le Sud-Ouest neighbourhood. Since its usage as a contemporary art space, the landmark has been renowned for its beautiful post-industrial trappings: large steel-framed windows, red brick façade, 20-foot ceilings, concrete floors, continuous views and unobstructed galleries for exhibiting artworks. With her controlled yet monumental use of sculpture and photography, her transformation of architectural scale, perception and mass into composite assemblages, Shirreff’s work feels perfectly suited for the smooth, postmodern transformation of yesteryear’s gritty raw factory settings.



into squares to form a grid configuration. The narrower horizontal lines between the bars appear architectural, recalling windows in dense apartment blocks, foreshadowing the semi-representational architectural turn her work would soon take. This work also indicated a shift to an emphasis more formalist than political.

Then, in the 1990s, Thomasos abandoned her definitive grids. Her work from the aughts, such as *Excavations: Jaisalmer Night Suspension*, 2007, instead focused on abstracted container-like forms, both urban and architectural, and was informed by the artist’s travels throughout Asia. At points, the more rigid lines recall the deliberate technical lines of architectural drafting, especially when paired with looser, more abstract patches and gestural colour strokes.

The late work, found in her studio after her death, was abandoning imagism, focusing less consciously on line. *Untitled*, 2012, is characteristically more abstract and expressionistic—the paint applied gesturally and fluidly with vertical

drips below the central form. Again, the loose imagistic references are architectural and urban but are now defined by loose colour blocks and curvy brush strokes. The architectural traces are still there but are minimal, with colour pushing them to the background.

Denyse Thomasos’s later work leaves questions about what she prioritized overall—an expressionist formalism or an identity politics rooted in the 1990s. One wonders if she would have revisited identity politics had she lived to witness this post-George Floyd era. ■

“Denyse Thomasos: Just Beyond” was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, from October 5, 2022, to February 20, 2023.

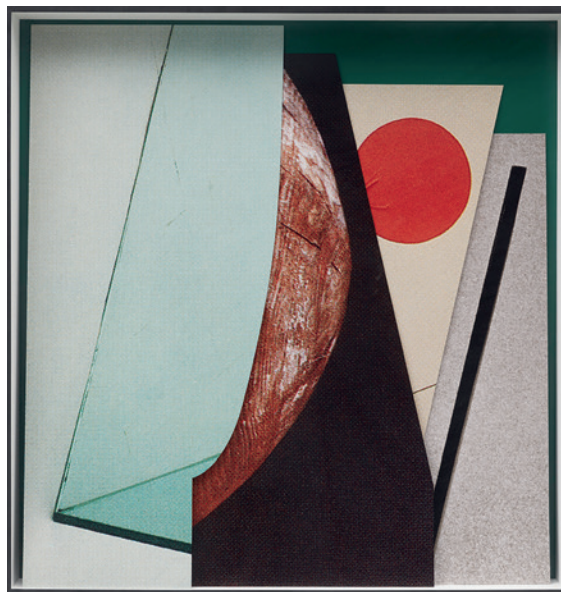
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Entering the single large gallery where most of the works in the exhibition are presented, the viewer is immediately confronted with the titular piece of the exhibition, *Midday dilemma*, 2022. Almost a square, at 73 inches by 71 inches, the wall-mounted glass box seems perfectly flat from a distance, like a large-scale digital photograph or even, perhaps, a painting. The geometric composition is dominated by a series of mustard yellow forms that move vertically across the centre of the work, like bright metal beams cutting a greyscale background. The rest of the image, a striking contrast of various shades of black, white and grey volumes, creates a surprisingly dense and dynamic arrangement. Thin, angular black lines cutting across the surface generate a sense of negative space, which furthers the piece's various dimensions. *Midday dilemma* evokes a modernist architectural drawing or design object; it is both sculptural and suggestively functional in its deployment of a clear system of relief, silhouette and outline.

From up close, *Midday dilemma*, like the rest of the works in the exhibition, takes on a new life. The viewer quickly becomes aware that each shape and line, which constitutes a neat and flat whole from afar, is a set of cut-outs, resting at an angle inside a glass casing. Viewed askance, the work is a pile of smooth parts, layers of profiles set one on top of each other. Throughout the exhibition, interspersed among these glass boxes, are archival black and white photographs slickly nailed to the wall, behind glass panes. These scenes from art anthologies published decades ago serve as the stimulus for Shirreff's work. By printing these smaller images on large sheets of aluminium, cutting them into irregular shapes

and locating them within deep-set frames, the character of the original object becomes unrecognizable.

Old friend, 2022, another work on view across the room, presents shadowy contrasts with dark red and metallic grey volumes holding the composition. The juxtaposed reds conjure a litany of possible sources of modernist public art installations, including close-ups of Claes Oldenburg's *Geometric Mouse*, *Scale X*, 1971; Alexander Calder's *Flamingo*, 1974; Mark di Suvero's *Iroquois*, 1983; or Roy Lichtenstein's *Barcelona Head*, 1992. In creating this visual, geometrically coded citational



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loop, Shirreff invites the viewer to question both the material and affective traits of her art historical archive. In doing so, she allows us to experience first-hand the appeal of dissecting and recontextualizing the iconicity, patina and nostalgia of an industrial era of grandiose artmaking that was deeply invested in transforming steel, concrete, wood and glass into titanic oeuvres

of massive proportions. Not only does Shirreff's cropping of these moments in recent art history create new collages, but it also has the effect of shrinking the often phallogocentric and immovable nature of a male-dominated modernity with its steel monuments eternally reaching for the sky.

This lightness, or absent the burden and weight of modernist

VISUAL ART

John Devlin

by Alex Turgeon

1. Erin Shirreff, *Eyelit (glass)*, 2021, dye sublimation prints on aluminium, latex paint, 140.3 × 135.3 × 14.6 centimetres, edition of 4 + 2AP. Photo courtesy the artist and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

2. Installation view, "Midday dilemma," Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, 2022. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

3. John Devlin, *Untitled (Cosmic Series 2)*, 2017, mixed media and gold leaf on paper, 27.94 × 21.6 centimetres. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy Erin Stump Projects, Toronto.

materiality, is a recurring motif in the exhibition. Whether in the various glass vitrines, the smaller historical images or the two bronze sculptures from a body of work Shirreff began in 2019, there is a sense of buoyancy to the work, which is paradoxically grounded in earthly materials and industrial transformation. The two sculptures, *Maquette (A.P. no. 10)*, 2019, and *Maquette (double curve)*, 2022, both embody a delicate and fine quality more reminiscent of an ethereal presence or spectre rather than one of fixity or permanence. *Maquette (A.P. no. 10)* is especially inspiring with its bisecting triangular surfaces, which, depending on the viewer's positioning in the gallery, change the perspectives it engenders. It is in these slight but well-calculated shifts in sightlines, composition and structure that Shirreff's "Midday dilemma" produces its most incisive interactions with traditions of mid-century architecture, design and sculpture, through a varied and considerate representation of archives and images. ■

"Midday dilemma" was exhibited at Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, from June 8, 2022, to July 27, 2022.

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“**O**ut of a Heart of Quiet” is the first solo exhibition in Canada by artist John Devlin outside of his home province of Nova Scotia. The exhibition was curated by Kate Whiteway and presented at Erin Stump Projects, Toronto. Devlin’s work has long been contextualized by his biography. Avoiding the pejorative moniker of “outsider” as applied to artistic output not tethered to normative modes of production and dissemination (the artist refers to his own work as a form of Art Brut), Devlin’s practice often reflects notions of the isolation he experienced in his lifetime. Through an abridged interpretation of formative experiences, the sites and methodologies presented in the artist’s immense and exquisite body

of artistic output become frames for windows into his quiet world.

At 25 years old John Devlin converted to Catholicism and moved from his family home in Halifax to study theology at the University of Cambridge. While a student, the exhibition’s press release outlines, Devlin fell in love with a priest. Perhaps contextualized within a time of heightened prejudice towards the anti-normative, underscored by Thatcherism and compounded within an arena that defined homosexuality as a sin, Devlin endured multiple breakdowns. This resulted in his return to Nova Scotia, undergoing periods of convalescence, never to continue his studies at the college. Devlin’s love might have been unrequited, but it was not fleeting. The artist has stated that “if you are going to have a mental