

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Border Crossings  
Fall 2013

## BORDERCROSSINGS

VOLUME 32 | NUMBER 3 | SEPTEMBER OCTOBER NOVEMBER 2013

VISUAL ART

### Erin Shirreff

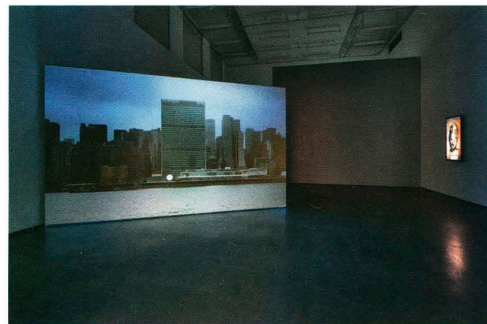
By Gary Pearson

Photographic mediation of the physical world and the inquiry into its meanings are subjects that have been discussed ad infinitum, so one hesitates to broach the subject once again. Yet, when what we know or have questioned, even accepted in our attempt to understand things in the world through reproductions and external information is challenged or made more interesting, it deserves our attention. Erin Shirreff's recent exhibition titled "Pictures" at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver placed the audience in just such an opportunity—that is, how to question the relationship between the sculptural object and its photographic representation in the construction of meaning and aesthetic response. On the surface this may not sound groundbreaking but her investigations and resultant work in various mediums could be argued to have probed this question in new and intriguing ways.

Lawrence Weiner was once asked what art is, and he said something to the effect, that it is information, and to understand it you have to be willing to do your homework. In an often useful, albeit simplistic, way we continue to rely on familiar terms in our descriptions of art—painterly, sculptural, flat, architectonic, decorative, dark, light, mimetic,

romantic, atmospheric, et cetera. In doing so we must acknowledge the historically bounded meanings of these descriptive terms and their possible transferability across boundaries, since these convenient descriptors, when removed from their discipline and stylistic origins and used in other locations, often bring as much uncertainty to the artwork's reading as they do enlightenment. Such is the task of information gathering in the (post) post-modernist art world; complicated in turn by the fact that much of this information—visual information—is received through reproduction technologies. For example, how many of us have actually seen Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* firsthand, an artwork we all know so well?

That question takes us to Erin Shirreff's project, which is, in part: what is our relationship to sculpture, to things in the world, when we have come to know them through vicarious experience, documentation and supportive information? Shirreff's interest in the competing states of proximal/distal connections to the subject and their impact on knowledge and reception was the leitmotif of her CAG exhibition. Most illustrative of this is a piece titled *Lake*, 2012, a modified video capture of an '80s travel brochure photograph of Okanagan



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Lake in BC's southern interior. The artist grew up in Kelowna, a small city in the Okanagan, so she knew the region's picturesque, semi-arid countryside well, but she has not lived there for years. As a consequence the photographic "view," as Rosalind Krauss would call it, became the singular focal point of a complex representation of the Okanagan in her nostalgic memory of this (landscape) place. The found photograph, which the artist re-authored as a video loop, could ostensibly be described as an objective scenic portrayal of nature in its raw and primitive state. For Shirreff the photograph was a "thing," a relic of another time, as she described it in an interview in the exhibition's accompanying book, but clearly also held meaning and information of another thing, namely a particular landscape, which the artist had experienced first-hand. That the video *Lake* is perhaps the most ambitiously altered animation of any of the photographs behind other videos in the CAG show suggests the artist revelled in the subjective process of reimagining her youthful empirical impressions of nature in relation to the theoretical discourse of the image. Through very direct and evidently low-tech visual treatments she evokes cultural constructs like the painterly, romantic, spiritual and the

melancholy—there are those terms again—in the construction of representations. The static photograph is made constantly restive, transformed into a narrative aesthetic through orchestrating cinematic effects of colour and light that play out across the projection screen. The editorial pacing of the visual transformations of this once static scene evidences just how singular the still photograph's view of the temporal world really is, and by extension provides an entertaining lesson on how to read the image.

I think Erin Shirreff has read Rosalind Krauss closely. In her 1978 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" Krauss cites Rodin and Brancusi as pioneering sculpture's transition from the logic of the monument to a space she calls its "negative condition," where sculpture has experienced a loss of place and entered a state of sitelessness, becoming "essentially nomadic." She references Brancusi's fetishization of the base and how the sculpture absorbs "...the pedestal into itself and away from actual place..." Not mentioned in the essay was Brancusi's late career inclination to disassemble and reassemble his sculptures, photographing each variation as if he conceived of them as independent works. The photographs of these variations form an archival record of Brancusi's interest in hybridization and provide our only access to many of the experimental form and material groupings of his sculptural aesthetic. Krauss might also have included late-19th-century sculptor Medardo Rosso in her backgrounding of sculpture's turn from the monument to its "negative condition," since Rosso desired surface over form and aspired to have his sculptures compete with the retinal import of painting. For this reason

he turned to photographing his work as a conceptual and pictorial extension of his practice.

Thus, it was appropriate to see Erin Shirreff's photographic reworking of an Internet-obtained image of a Rosso sculpted head for her looped colour video still titled *Medardo Rosso, Madam X, 1896, 2013*. This printed image was subjected to an exhaustive list of probing lighting and colour changes during video recording, at times ranging from subtle shifts of grey to sepia, then all greys in a grainy, silvery light that transformed the sculpted volume into something like a flattened head on a medallion or coin. The nomadic is a metaphor that underscores Shirreff's work. Her preoccupation is with temporality and the indeterminate, in reading the counter-conditions of material reality, in the simulacrum, authenticity, sculpture, nature, architecture and time and space. These are all open to interrogation and subject to change. All this with the attendant caveat that in the end, it is what it is. ■

*"Erin Shirreff: Pictures," curated by Jenifer Pappararo, was exhibited at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, April 19 to June 16, 2013. "Erin Shirreff: Available Light," curated by Sandra Dyck and Jan Allen, was exhibited by collaborating institutions Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, in 2012.*

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