

High and Dry on Sherrie Levine's Lost Island of Art History

by Ben Davis

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Sherrie Levine's career reads like one big riff on the idea of the "artist's artist." Her work is super-refined, super-subtle, full of art-about-art games. She came to prominence in the '80s as part of the "Pictures Generation," the constellation of New York figures — among them Barbara Kruger, [Richard Prince](#), and [Cindy Sherman](#) — who pioneered various forms of photo-based and appropriationist art. For traditionalists, Levine is maybe the most infuriating of this crew, since she has often trafficked in near-exact copies of well-known works by the likes of [Egon Schiele](#), Edward Weston, and other great artists.

The title of Levine's current Whitney survey is "Mayhem." This references the way she plays havoc with expectations about originality, but also rings somewhat ironic because the whole show feels deliberately spare, almost mannered in its over-subtle conceptualization. The artist herself has choreographed the idiosyncratic selection of her work, aided by critic Johanna Burton and Whitney curators Elisabeth Sussman and Carrie Springer. The art is displayed in no particular historical order and offers

no clear statement about any development in Levine's work, instead focusing on half-articulated rhymes between objects and images.

The first thing you see as you enter the galleries, which have all been painted a muted gray, is Levine's series of copies of Depression-era Walker Evans photos of hard-pressed farmers, abandoned farmhouses, and makeshift graves — her star-making outrage from a 1981 Metro Pictures gallery show. Laid in a glass case near to "After Walker Evans" is Levine's cast-bronze replica of a men's urinal from 1991, a gleaming homage to Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" that reminds the viewer of the long history of artistic horseplay with found objects.

Two pianos await in the next room, facing each other, one with a cloudy white cast-glass copy of [Constantin Brancusi](#)'s "Newborn" — a notched, egg-shaped abstraction — set atop it, the other with another cast of the same sculpture that is matte black. (The Brancusi-on-a-piano image comes from a magazine spread Levine saw about a collector's house.) Another gallery is centered around four large billiard tables, each with an identical configuration of balls, sculptural realizations of an image from a [Man Ray](#) painting. At the end of this same gallery, there is a wall of 18 framed postcard versions of Courbet's well-known shot of a naked, spread-eagled woman, "The Origin of the World." The most recent work in the show is a series of identical cast-crystal skulls from 2010, displayed in identical glass vitrines, playing on one of the most venerable symbols of Serious Art. These are all different kinds of repetitions of iconic images, and they repeat themselves internally, via the use of series or doublings.

The show contains some pleasant surprises, like smudgy 1988 paintings of creatures from George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" comic, executed on wood panels. And, recurring like a punctuation point, each gallery contains one abstract painting with bars of alternating color, from Levine's 1985 "Broad Stripe" series, seemingly meant to evoke some kind of indistinct form of abstract painting. (Levine [has stated](#) that she began on the appropriationist path after realizing that everything she did as a young painter already seemed to have been done: "There was no way to do it better than the

New York Minimalists were doing it. Eventually, I decided to make that a virtue, as opposed to a problem, in my work.”)

Levine is an important artist, that’s for sure. But today, it strikes me that she may be less important on account of any big singular innovation, and more as a kind of early bellwether of a way of thinking. She’s less a Courbet, in other words, and more of a Constantine Guys. Guys, of course, was the subject of “The Painter of Modern Life,” the poet Charles Baudelaire’s great book on modern art, one of the first real works of art criticism. Few people now remember Guys’s works — they just happened to serve as a handy example of a moment and an emerging sensibility.

In 1980, appropriation was still actually difficult to pull off, a matter of asymmetrical warfare between those who controlled images and those who didn’t. Today, appropriation is the native sensibility of tens of thousands of Tumblr and YouTube users. In “Mayhem,” you get hints here and there of the way that an altered technological context has changed this artist who is so obsessed with the way context changes things: Levine’s clever “Equivalents” series (2006) takes Alfred Stieglitz’s divine black-and-white cloud photographs of the same name, and reprocesses them into grids of differently shaded gray colored blocks that correspond to the different areas, pixilated abstractions of the source material. Perhaps the best works in “Mayhem” are Levine’s “Meltdown” paintings, for which she would take a work by an iconic modernist figure — Kirchner, Mondrian, Monet — then use a computer to find the average of its colors, painting a canvas all with the resulting hue. The “Meltdown”s offer a neat and very contemporary spin on the well-worn tradition of the monochrome.

The fact remains, however, that Levine’s work doesn’t *feel* like it particularly relates to the carefree image-swapping mentality of contemporary digital culture. At every point it feels reserved, withdrawn even, closed into its own head and deliberately discrete and standoffish. This is for a simple reason: Levine’s preoccupations are firmly with the art-historical canon, not with anything so tacky as popular culture. An artist like [Richard Prince](#) can feel relatively conversant with the present, in his cynical way, because his allegiances are with advertising and celebrity. Levine, on the other hand, is defiantly nerdy. Nothing to be ashamed of there — but this fact does mean that her body of work ultimately reads as the product of a kind of transitional moment, when old-style high-art purity ceased to matter, but still hadn’t lost its hold on the creative imagination.

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