DIRECTIONS

SHERRIE LEVINE
MARCH 9 - MAY 30, 1988


This exhibition, which was jointly organized with the High Museum of Art in Atlanta for its Art at the Edge series, will be on view there June 11 - September 4, 1988.
In the early 1970s, Sherrie Levine acquired and subsequently photographed seventy-five pairs of odd, child-sized but adult-style shoes, creating a record, list, or index of these strangely poignant objects. Several years later Levine sold the shoes at the Mercer Street Store. Thus, from the beginning of her career, Levine has been attracted to and gathered objects. By extension, her work reveals the desire of others to possess those objects and defines art as a particular category of objects of desire.

Levine first gained critical attention in the early 1980s when she was associated with Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, David Salle, and other artists known as "appropriators" because their work was based on references to images from popular culture. These artists questioned the way that meanings become assigned to images and how or why certain kinds of objects are read as "art." Levine alone borrowed her images directly from high art sources. She first rephotographed photographs by Andreas Feininger, Edward Weston, Eliot Porter, and Walker Evans—a practice she has returned to with a recent series of photographs after Alexander Rodchenko (fig. 1). She later made collages and then watercolor copies from reproductions in art books of works by such diverse artists as Piet Mondrian, Vincent van Gogh, and Joan Miró.

Much of her work was interpreted as a commentary on the death of Modernism and its belief in high ideals and artistic originality as well as on art’s status as a commodity (her subjects were always reproductions, not the original works of art). While her work was thus read as an appraisal of art and the artist in contemporary society, it also projected a feeling of loss—a desire for the absent originals it depicted. Her copies seemed motivated by a desire to possess the spirit of the originals, not entirely dissimilar to the impulse to buy the reproductions and postcards to which her work alluded.

This exhibition’s twenty-four paintings were selected from four recent series: the gold, white, and golden “knots” (fig. 3) and the “lead checks” (cover). At first glance, the knots and checks seem unrelated to each other, or to Levine’s past work, and appear puzzling and indecipherable objects. Both humorous and serious, they abound with art historical references and are subject to multiple interpretations.

The knot paintings are simply plywood panels—a cheap and easily available material—on which the artist has marked, with the most minimal of gestures, the plugs that replace missing knots. Because Levine encased the panels in shadowbox frames and displayed them as "paintings" in the most traditional of modern formats, they can be read as a comment on art’s status as a commodity—that a painting is only another ready-made, an illusion to the found objects of Marcel Duchamp.

Looking behind the frame and glass to the images themselves, other interpretations become possible. The wood grain may refer to nature; the highlighting of the knotholes to the arbitrary since chance determined their placement and size. The painted plugs can be read as funny or touching, suggesting raindrops or tears. By painting the plugs, Levine emphasizes that something else once filled them, suggesting absence. This absence is the subject of these paintings, as it had been in much of Levine’s previous work. The shapes of the knotholes present a decidedly female imagery. Gilded or painted, then framed and put behind glass, they suggest traditional symbols of female sexuality—desirable but unattainable. This series thus suggests a link between absence as the subject of her work, desire for possession, and unfulfilled sexual longing.

The check paintings are brightly colored squares of casein paint on lead. They allude to game boards, which are indeed their source, providing another reference to Duchamp, who at one time said he was giving up art for chess. They also represent order and geometry, the tradition in Western abstract art from Mondrian to Barnett Newman and Brice Marden associated with the unattainable and sublime.

The pairing of apparent opposites has also been a theme in several of Levine’s exhibitions. In her 1984 exhibition at the Nature Morte Gallery in New York, Levine showed watercolors and casein paintings after Ilya Chasnik (fig. 2), Kasimir Malevich, and Egon Schiele. That exhibition focused on the polarities between figuration and abstraction or expressionistic eroticism and formal purity. However, the sensual beauty of Levine’s ersatz Suprematist paintings belies such clear-cut oppositions. The knots and checks in this exhibition contrast the unpredictable and organic with the logical and geometric: stereotypical clichés
Fig. 1. Untitled (after Alexander Rodchenko: 4), 1987. Photograph, 20 x 16 inches. Photo: Ziadman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone, Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

Fig. 2. Untitled (after Ilya Chashnik), 1984. Casein on wood, 20 x 16 inches. Photo: Ziadman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone, Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

of feminine and masculine. Yet the intimate scale of the checks, delicacy and irregularity of the paint strokes, and sweetness of the colors feminize these otherwise masculine images. These are incongruous paintings—beautiful yet full of contradictions. Like the shoes, they remain strangely compelling objects.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

The voluminous criticism on Sherrie Levine's work has enveloped it like a shroud, obscuring the objects themselves under a scratchy weight. Her art has been examined in light of the modernist tradition of radicalism and defined largely by what it is not. To many Levine appeared to deny the validity of self-expression. As she adopted images by well-known artists, she audaciously recycled both their images and our hallowed notions of originality. She was accused of emptying the meaning from art, of gutting cultural forms like an aesthetic terrorist. Yet to view her work only through the veil of this rhetoric is to ignore the presence of the objects and deem their beauty mere grist for the mill of theory. The sense of careful making and earnestness that gives birth, or rebirth, to these images preserves the original artists' intent as well as gives the works new meaning.

Levine's objects have a delicate, romantic quality, as if each decision and brushstroke were made with delight. Color in her recent works is lush, often
blatantly decorative and domestic, in contrast to “pure” colors sanctioned by art of the past. Her objects hint of savored moments of solitude and a precious, studied repartee with their antecedents, and the subtle details are in keeping with her early experience as a printmaker. The results of an inherently private, disenfranchised activity, her art is in effect the product of a typically female cottage industry. Although we admire and value such handmade articles, the identity of the one who labored to make it is usually of little consequence. The object is produced from a stance of anonymity, rather than as a creative act of self-expression. Such issues reflect the feminist underpinnings of Levine’s work, underscored by her appropriation of images by only pivotal male artists.

The tension between the fragile sensuousity of Levine’s work and the distance she maintains psychologically gives her art a hermetic quality—the “sublimity of aloofness” to which she has referred. Her “generic” abstractions, most of which are anonymously titled and made by the half-dozen or near dozen in series, have the symbolic look of “known” paintings. They present a potluck of images emblematic of Constructivism, Minimalism, Op Art, and Color Field paintings. In relinquishing identity and self-expression, Levine distances herself in a maneuver of apparent control. Although revealing the private side of her artistic endeavor (the reworking and artist’s touch), she denies us access to the more public side (the artist as a personality). She thus presents the viewer with disturbing polarities—the most intimate and the most calculated of attitudes.

In her knot paintings (fig. 3) Levine used plywood cut to order order from a lumber yard, painting over the elliptical plugs used to replace weak knots in the wood. Although chance dictated the Duchampian results, these works strangely lack any impertinence. The golden knots, for example, have strong optical effects as the pale gold ellipses float on the surface pattern of the plywood, naturalistic in contrast with the glistening iconic “eyes.” The grain thus evokes a sense of landscape; the knots, as Levine mentions, might be veins of rain or tears. Is this field of grain also a visual pun on the stained canvases of Color Field paintings? The readings of the surreal images abound, and in putting these works behind glass, Levine romanticizes their subject.

In a reversal of the alchemist’s magic, Levine followed her gold knots with paintings on lead (cover)—moving from precious to poisonous material, from the ethereal to the elemental. Patterns of checks, derived from game boards and rendered in sugary colors, float on the dark, heavy lead panels. Again, Levine’s allusions to chance and gaming are clear (her bookshelves hold catalogs of board games). These found images are quite humorously like archetypal geometric paintings. The surfaces are fetching, but the objects appear ever so slightly like grave markers.

Central to Levine’s work has been her admiration of an ultimate economy of means. Her new objects are direct and dense: they have the power of that economy and the uncanny ability to invite references to stream in through the side door. Levine weds the intellectual pleasures and wit of Conceptualism with the fundamental enjoyment of the craft of painting and the skill of looking. She thus seems to assert a new theory of artistic practice as she maneuvers among the images of the old.

**Susan Krane**  
**Curator of Twentieth Century Art**  
**High Museum of Art**

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Fig. 3. Untitled (Gold Knot: 6), 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Private collection. Photo: Lee Stalsworth.
BIOGRAPHY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1974 de Saissert Art Gallery, University of California at Santa Clara.
1978 Hallwalls, Buffalo.
1983 Baskerville + Watson, New York (also 1985); Richard Kuhnenhseid Gallery, Los Angeles (also 1985).
1987 Mary Boone, Michael Werner Gallery, New York; Donald Young Gallery, Chicago; Wedsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1977 Artists Space, New York, Pictures, and Tour.
1981 Metro Pictures, New York, Photo.
1982 Museum Fredericianum, Kassel, West Germany, Documenta 7; Art Institute of Chicago, Seventy-Fourth American Exhibition; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Image Scavengers: Photography; Vancouver Art Gallery, Marxism: A Theory of Culture.
1983 Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, Art and Social Change U.S.A.
1996 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, Origins, Originality and Beyond: The Sixth Biennial of Sydney; Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, Enigma: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture.

1987 Fundacion Caja des Pensiones, Madrid, Art and Its Double.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHECKLIST


Untitled (Gold Knots: 8), 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31¼ x 25¼ inches. Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estin, Washington, D.C.


Untitled (Golden Knots: 4), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglas, 61¼ x 50¼ inches. The Beckman Collection, New Canaan, Conn.


Untitled (Lead Checks: 2), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. The Fredrik Roos Collection, Zug, Switzerland.


HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN
Smithsonian Institution