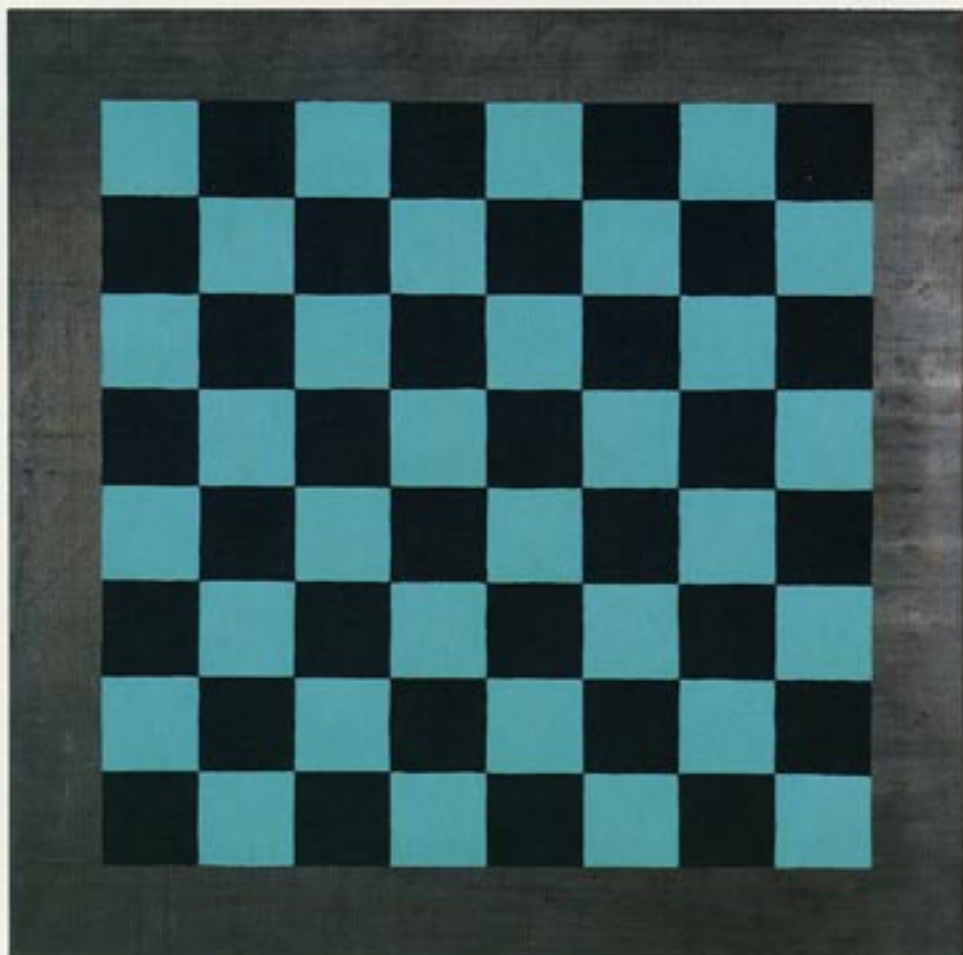


DIRECTIONS

SHERRIE LEVINE

MARCH 9 - MAY 30, 1988



Untitled (Lead Checks: 6), 1987. Cassin on lead, 20 x 20 inches. John and Mary Pappajohn, Des Moines. Photo: Zindman/Frenost.

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.¹ 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.²

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: Zaidman/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

1. The Mercer Street Store was an artists' exhibition space. See Douglas Crisp, *Pictures*, exhibition brochure (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977), pp. 18 and 29, for a description of the sale and a reproduction of the snapshots, which no longer exist. A similar indexing of images occurs in "Sons and Lovers," Levine's project for that exhibition.

2. They have also been related to the work of Max Ernst and the tradition of pre-Renaissance panel painting. See Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron," in *Enigmas* (MIT Press, 1986), exhibition catalog, p. 16.

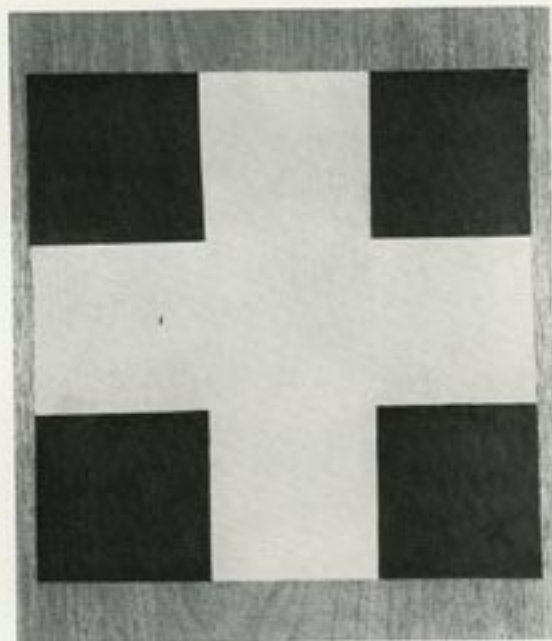


Fig. 2. *Untitled (after Ilya Chaznik)*, 1984. Casein on wood, 20 x 16 inches. Photo: Zaidman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone, Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

THE VOLUMINOUS CRITICISM ON Sherric 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"¹ 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 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 veils 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 locking. 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

1. Levine, unpublished statement (c. 1980) in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21 (September 1982): 52.

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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 Stalworth.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, April 17, 1947. Educated at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, B.S. in art, 1969; M.F.A., 1973. Lives and works in New York City.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1974 de Saisset Art Gallery, University of California at Santa Clara.
- 1978 Halfwits, Buffalo.
- 1982 A & M Artworks, New York (also 1984).
- 1983 Baskerville + Watson, New York (also 1985); Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles (also 1985).
- 1984 A.C.E. Exhibitions, Washington, D.C., Nature Morte, New York.
- 1986 Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles.
- 1987 Mary Boone, Michael Werner Gallery, New York; Donald Young Gallery, Chicago; Wedsworth Athenaeum, Hartford.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1977 Artists Space, New York, *Pictures, and tour.*
- 1981 Metro Pictures, New York, *Photo.*
- 1982 Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, West Germany, *Documenta 7*, Art Institute of Chicago, *Seventy-Fourth American Exhibition: Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Image Scavengers: Photography; Vancouver Art Gallery, Mannerism: A Theory of Culture.*
- 1983 Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, *Art and Social Change U.S.A.*
- 1984 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., *Content: A Contemporary Focus; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, Difference: On Representation and Sexuality, and tour.*
- 1985 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Biennial Exhibition.*
- 1986 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, *Origins, Originality and Beyond: The Sixth Biennial of Sydney; Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture.*

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

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21 (September 1982): 43-56.
- Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," October 15, (Winter 1980): 91-102.
- Gerald Marzorati, "Art in the (Re)Making," *Artnews* 85 (May 1986): 90-99.
- Stephen W. Melville, "Not Painting: The New Work of Sherrie Levine," *Arts* 60 (February 1986): 120.
- Jeanne Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," *Arts* 59 (Summer 1985): 141-44.
- Paul Taylor, "Sherrie Levine Plays with Paul Taylor," *Flash Art* 135 (Summer 1987): 55-59.
- Lily Wei, ed. "Talking Abstract Part Two," *Art in America* 75 (December 1987): 114-15.

CHECKLIST

- Untitled (Gold Knots: 1)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Bette and Herman Ziegler, New York.
- Untitled (Gold Knots: 4)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Arthur and Carol Goldberg, New York.
- Untitled (Gold Knots: 6)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Private collection.
- Untitled (Gold Knots: 8)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Collection of the artist.
- Untitled (Gold Knots: 10)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Arthur and Carol Goldberg, New York.
- Untitled (Gold Knots: 11)*, 1985. Metallic paint on plywood under glass, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.
- Untitled (White Knots: 4)*, 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. Phyllis and Bill Mack, New York.
- Untitled (White Knots: 6)*, 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, gift of Daniel Weinberg.

Untitled (White Knots: 5), 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, Washington, D.C.

Untitled (White Knots: 9), 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. Collection of the artist.

Untitled (White Knots: 10), 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. Paul and Camille Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago.

Untitled (White Knots: 11), 1986. Casein on plywood under glass, 31 1/4 x 25 1/4 inches. Private collection.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 1), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 2), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. Martin E. Zimmerman, Chicago.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 3), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. Courtesy Thomas Ammann, Zurich.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 4), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. The Beckman Collection, New Canaan, Conn.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 5), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. Mera and Don Rubell, New York.

Untitled (Golden Knots: 6), 1987. Oil on plywood under plexiglass, 61 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches. Private collection.

Untitled (Lead Checks: 1), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. Carol and Paul Meringoff, Old Westbury, New York.

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

Untitled (Lead Checks: 4), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. Emily Fisher Landau, Rye, New York.

Untitled (Lead Checks: 5), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. Barbara Guggenheim Associates, New York.

Untitled (Lead Checks: 6), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. John and Mary Pappajohn, Des Moines.

Untitled (Lead Checks: 7), 1987. Casein on lead, 20 x 20 inches. Leo Castelli, New York.



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