

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artslant
July 2013



The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things

Amanda Ross-Ho

Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)

220 East Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60611

July 23, 2013 - November 1, 2013

Tête-à-Tête

by Stephanie Cristello

In his 1973 text, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom cited a term called *poetic misprision*. What he was referring to was a process that artists, in his case literary authors, adopted in order to further themselves from their sources and avoid being derivative. As an artistic process, it's a brilliant explanation of how to deal with appropriation and context in contemporary art – to consciously and deliberately misread your source in order to create new meaning. For *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*, the latest MCA Plaza Project by Amanda Ross-Ho, which was unveiled this past Tuesday, the source image was in fact the only thing many people

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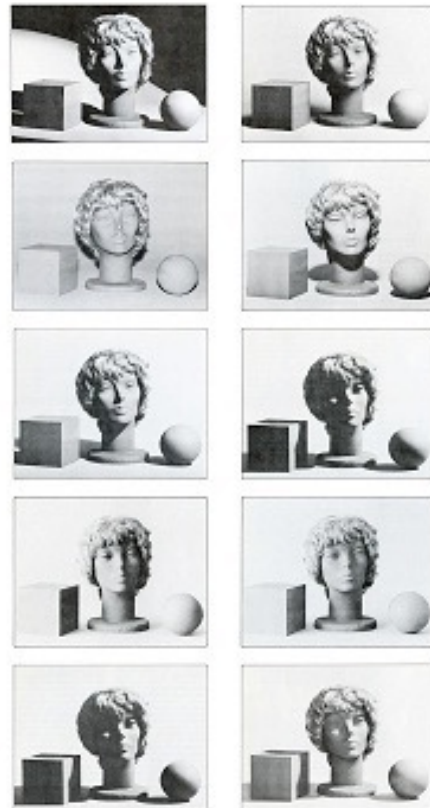
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knew of the large-scale sculpture piece in the months leading up to the public installation. And while the installation has a certain faithfulness to the image, it does so many things differently. Ross-Ho pulls off what many public art projects fail to do. I am sadly reminded of those awful chia head planters just down Michigan Ave., if only for the formal resemblance and proximity, *Plant Green Ideas* – clichés stay out please!

The Plaza Project is finally an elegant answer to public sculpture and a stimulating challenge of how to deal with source material in an outdoor context, sharing many of the exhibition themes on view within the museum, all the while bringing a breath of fresh air to the face of the museum.

The image represents a type of ideal; a height of 1960s style in three standard parts. The photograph echoes with the residual nostalgia of a black and white half-toned Xerox, heightened by the hyper-mod design element in the mannequin's features, and the two fundamental geometric elements poised on either side of the bust. In a word, the composition is iconic. In fact, the image is lifted from a 1980s manual, *How to Control and Use Photographic Lighting*, by David Brooks – though the photograph appears midcentury, and even humorously “classical”. With a source so good, why fuck with the original? The genius of Ross-Ho's installation functions precisely because it transcends the memory of the original image, purposefully misunderstands its context, and transforms the photographic into the spatial – without losing the original effect.

For those who have seen it from afar, the installation is essentially a still life that has become part of the architecture. Fabricated out of the same three distinct elements in the photograph – the cube, the female bust, and the sphere, cast in tonal grey material at a monumental scale reaching twenty-five-feet high, the piece looks as though the museum itself is equivalent to the backdrop in the photograph. There is an additional element added to the front of the head, a color calibration card, and while it brings the idea of the piece closer to photography, it also tricks your eye from afar – a sudden reminder that you are not, after all, seeing in black and white.



Photographic lighting technique illustration, source material for Amanda Ross-Ho's 2013 Plaza Project at the MCA Chicago. Courtesy and copyright David Brooks.

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Amanda Ross-Ho, MCA Plaza Project: *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*, July 23–October 2013.

However, where the two differ the most is that the photograph has an instant effect that the installation does not. Ross-Ho knowingly sets up the failure of immediacy. She does this through how she deals with space and light – an almost painterly preoccupation to her approach. What we get as viewers in the MCA Plaza is the ability to move through a photograph, experience its shadows, its interiors, the spaces that would otherwise be relegated to pure flatness. While the effect that light has on these objects in the photographs registers in a snap, the piece itself is subject instead to a twenty-four-hour light test. The image may be visibly dated, but the installation belongs to *time*.

—Stephanie Cristello

(Image on top: **Amanda Ross-Ho**, 2013, Photographic lighting technique illustration, source material for Amanda Ross-Ho's Plaza Project at the MCA Chicago; Courtesy and copyright David Brooks.)

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