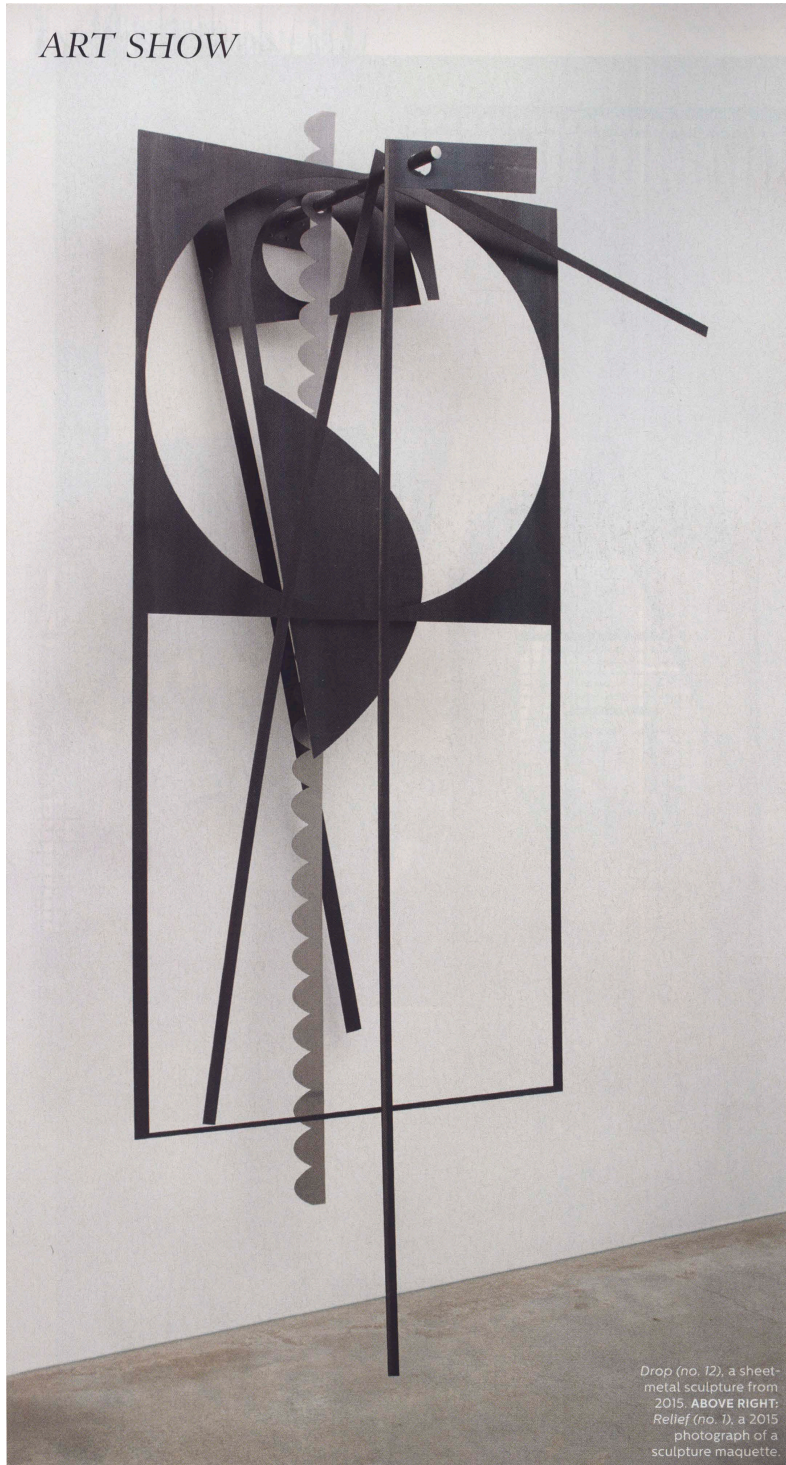


SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Elle Decor
December 2015

ART SHOW



Drop (no. 12), a sheet-metal sculpture from 2015. ABOVE RIGHT: Relief (no. 1), a 2015 photograph of a sculpture maquette.



ERIN SHIRREFF

This Brooklyn-based artist uses video and photography to investigate the very nature of sculpture.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

Plenty of contemporary artists dabble in multimedia, making an installation here, trying a performance there, as their creative whims carry them. But Erin Shirreff's boundary-crossing practice is different: She focuses on the interplay between sculpture and photography, making photos and videos of sculpture, as well as sculpture based on photographs, in an exploration of how we experience art both physically and visually.

About a year after earning her MFA from Yale in 2005, Shirreff, intrigued by the way we come to know even iconic sculptures primarily through photographs—though their creators, of course, intended them to be encountered in three dimensions—made paper maquettes of five monumental sculptures by the late minimalist Tony Smith. More precisely, she made the maquettes based on photographs of the sculptures. She then shot a video in which each is virtually hidden in shadow; fake snow falls, serving both to push the ruse that they are large outdoor pieces and to define their sharp lines. “They are revealed by what’s covering them, which I thought was poetic ▷

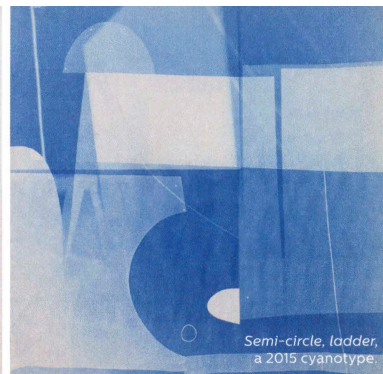
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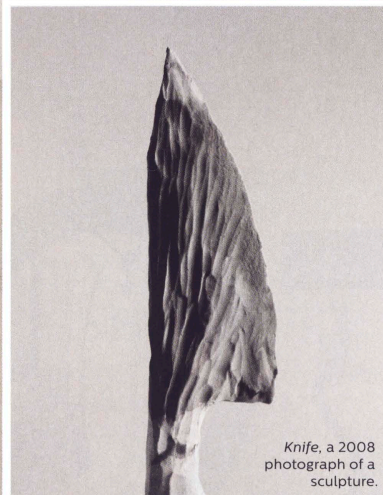
ART SHOW



Catalogue, 39 parts (Value Lesson), a plaster sculpture from 2015.



Semi-circle, ladder, a 2015 cyanotype.



Knife, a 2008 photograph of a sculpture.

and melancholy,” Shirreff says with a self-effacing laugh in her Brooklyn studio.

In a fitting bit of irony, the Canadian-born Shirreff subsequently stopped by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to view one of the Smith pieces that had inspired her—only to find that it had a tail that had been cropped from the original source photo. “I thought, Oh, there’s this whole back end to it,” she says. “There was something literally missed in that translation into an image.”

Shirreff began photographing her work in earnest in 2008, after fashioning a series of diminutive clay knives bearing a handmade, prehistoric look. When she decided they lacked sculptural presence, she says,



Sculpture Park (Tony Smith), a still from a 2006 video.

“it occurred to me that I could grant them a presence through picturing them.” Photography inevitably toys with scale—shrinking big objects or enlarging small ones—and when blown up to 40-inch prints, the tools suddenly looked more substantial, their details richer and more dramatic. “It’s a contradiction: A photograph limits your experience of an object, but also, curiously for me, freezing and framing at this remove creates a dynamic that invites contemplation.”

Shirreff, whose first large-scale museum survey opened at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art in August and travels to the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, New York, in January, followed up with “Monograph,” in which she invented the works of a fictitious artist, then photographed them in the style of art-book layouts. She has also explored more purely three-dimensional work with sculptures made from plaster and wood ash (collected from the brick ovens of Roberta’s pizzeria in Brooklyn) and from thin sheet metal, cut in shapes mimicking her paper scraps, which she then grouped together and leaned against the wall.

Lately, her cyanotype photograms, replicating a 19th-century technique that uses the scientific principles of photography but no camera, have demanded most of her attention. The process is often employed to make decorative pictures of leaves and flowers. Shirreff began the same way, using sunlight and light-sensitive paper. “I struggled for a long time because it’s hard to make a not-beautiful cyanotype,” says Shirreff. “I made all the cliché beautiful ones.”

Then she moved the production indoors, using large swaths of chemically treated muslin with a powerful UV bulb standing in for the sun. In place of nature, Shirreff chose random objects from her studio—clamp lights, cardboard—for her subjects. The results are abstracted silhouettes tinted cyan blue. “It’s like a painting, but they’re actual things,” she says. The exposure takes three hours, and the image keeps developing for 24, making chance an equal partner until it’s rinsed. “That’s when your heart gets broken, or you get excited,” she continues. “I’ve worked on them for about a year, and I’ve only made six that I like.” ■

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