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ART REVIEW

Erin Shirreff pulls Modernist sculpture from the dustbins of history

By **Murray Whyte** Globe Staff,
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WILLIAMSTOWN — The title of the Erin Shirreff exhibition currently sprinkled through the public spaces of The Clark Art Institute is “Remainders,” an appropriate name for the pieced-together, cast-off content it implies.

Those who relish bookstore shopping over its poor-substitute online equivalent (I’ll take the heft and flip of real bound pages over click-and-ship any day) will be familiar with remainders as unwanted, outdated bargain-bin closeouts. They’re reminders of the culture industry’s constant hunger for new and more, whatever might end up plowed under and left behind.

The art world is no exception to such demands. For every major movement that registers in the canon, only a handful of artists become its flag-bearers. For Shirreff, who trained as a sculptor but creates work spanning photography and film, the vagaries of Modernist sculpture bear particular fruit, both for its surfeit of content — much of it all but forgotten — and how relatively over-represented in the photographic record it tends to be.



“Remainders,” at the Clark Art Institute, recalls the over-photographed works of the mid-20th century. CLARK ART INSTITUTE



From Erin Shirreff's "Fig" series. CLARK ART INSTITUTE

Sculptors like Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore developed their sleek, amorphous forms in the middle part of the 20th century, concurrent with photography's shift from specialist medium to widespread ubiquity. Theirs was the first era to be incessantly photographed, meaning it was also the first to be overexposed, if you'll pardon the pun, in the popular eye.

It may not compare to our particular moment, with pocket-sized photo studios in most people's hands at all times. But it's worth remembering that late Modernism, with its tendencies toward abstraction, gesture, and material, was really the first art movement to play out in the mass media in any significant way. Industrial-scale publishing, whether magazines and newspapers or the book industry, were that era's internet. And what it lacked in clickable ease it made up for in volume. The heart of Shirreff's show addresses the lives of uncountable objects that, like the books that held them, ended up in the remainder bin of history itself.

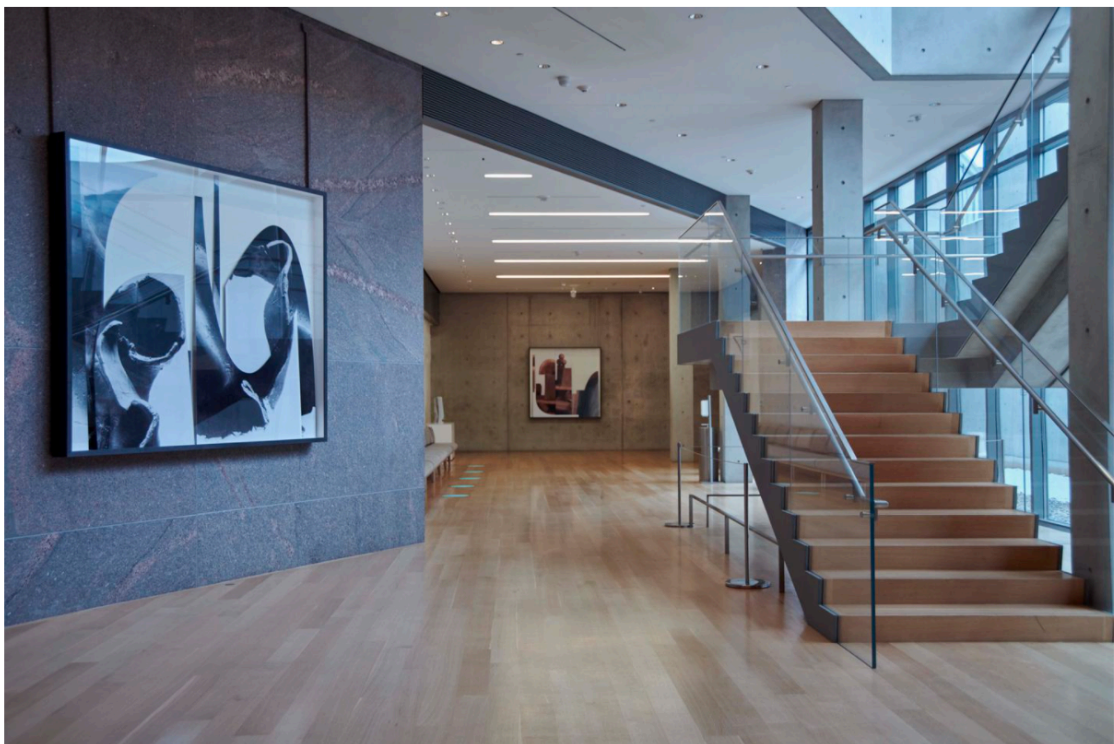
Ah, but the twist. Shirreff's "Fig" series (as in "Figure," a neutral non-title favored by Modernism), featuring large-scale photographic works in lush and silvery black and white, hang in the Clark's Manton Research Center. (Not coincidentally, it holds a trove of historical tomes, covering centuries.) Though the Shirreff works here bear all the hallmarks of sculpture's overexposed era — rich, stony texture; sparse, primal form — they're not refugees from the dustbin. She made them herself, and then photographed them repeatedly, recombining images upon images until she reached a state so highly mediated that they look almost like the forgotten works of forgotten artists, pressed between the pages of outdated books and left for dead.



From Erin Shirreff's "Fig" series. CLARK ART INSTITUTE

Each piece has a sharp fold down the middle, like the spine of a magazine, that splits the view into different perspectives. The gesture is almost too self-conscious, as though the artist wants to be sure we don't miss the point. (The object becomes photograph becomes object. A photograph of an object obscures its three-dimensionality with the medium's own single-view limitations. And so on.)

This might be a tad off-putting if the works themselves weren't so subtly gorgeous, which they unfailingly are. As a sculptor, Shirreff's eye for texture and form expresses itself photographically as a near genetic-level understanding of how light can visually transform the sculptural manipulations of material. That's been true her entire career. Past pictures include sharp and spectral images of hand-hewn objects glowing like the surface of the moon, or the smooth angles and curves of other things brooding in shadow. If photography is about light and sculpture about material, Shirreff's work makes an unresolvable knot of the two that's as beautiful as it is puzzling.



Two works by Erin Shirreff hang in the Clark's lower level. "Bronze (Slivka, Burckhardt, Busch, Laocoön)" is at left. THOMAS CLARK/COURTESY CLARK ART INSTITUTE

If it seems like a lot to piece together, Shirreff feels you. In a towering frame, the artist has printed Burckhardt's photo of Slivka's piece on a slim sheet of aluminum and literally dismembered it; the constituent bits have been laser-cut into prehensile metal sheafs that lean against each other behind glass in the deep frame. Shirreff's at play again with the irreconcilable rift between image and object, but that's just half the story here. As ever in Shirreff's work, the play of light is mesmerizingly evocative, like old bones aglow at the lid-lift of a sealed tomb.

It wasn't so long ago that "Laocoön" — and plenty like it — was important, or important enough to be photographed, catalogued, and immortalized in a book of Very Important Sculpture. Much less long ago? It was all but forgotten. Which, I think, is the point of Shirreff's work here: The thing about putting everything in its place, as time passes and things change, is that you can't.

ERIN SHIRREFF: REMAINDERS

At the Clark Art Institute, 225 South St, Williamstown. Through Jan. 2, 2022. 413-458-2303, www.clarkart.edu

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