

SHERRIE LEVINE

MAYHEM

Whitney Museum of American Art
November 10, 2011–January 29, 2012

Since the late 1970s, Sherrie Levine (b. 1947) has effectively rewritten the history of modern art by reprising images and objects—such as sculpture by Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp, photographs by Walker Evans and Alfred Stieglitz, and geometric forms from abstract modernist painting—and placing them before contemporary audiences to be experienced anew. This practice underscores the ways in which art accumulates different meanings over time and in different contexts. Levine suggests that how we see and understand things is conditioned by our own experiences, collective and singular, shared and private.

Levine's works operate overtly as repetitions, as things we may have seen before. In what is arguably her most famous work, *After Walker Evans: 1–22* (1981), Levine drew upon Evans's iconic black-and-white images of the Great Depression taken for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the 1930s. Although Evans's pictures of impoverished sharecroppers, stark buildings, and modest grave sites seem to simply document everyday scenes and situations, they are invested with an irrefutable sense of subjectivity and drama. By re-presenting images—Evans's in this case—as her own, Levine asks us to reconsider objects and raises questions about conventional notions of authorship, originality, and artistic lineage. Like others of her generation—among them Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, and Haim Steinbach—Levine questions artistic and cultural legacies and proposes new trajectories.

Ranging from full-size pool tables after Man Ray to cast-bronze urinals after Marcel Duchamp, the work on view here illuminates the ways in which history is told and retold. Through these objects, Levine not only re-emphasizes the importance of a certain work, art-maker, or the ethos of a particular moment, but also reveals beliefs and biases that might not have been readily apparent before. Formally elegant and even sensual, Levine's work presents an alternative story, or stories, delivering a deep disruption to canons and conventions. In this context, the artist's title, *MAYHEM*, reads as an acknowledgment of the inherently destabilizing nature of her art. Groupings of works that span Levine's entire career are presented in this exhibition, offering viewers an opportunity to see older and newer works together and to make associations between them. This brochure also eschews a chronological format and is loosely grouped by medium to offer a window into the close ties between the powerfully seductive material and conceptual nature of Levine's art.

I HAVE BECOME INTERESTED IN ISSUES OF AUTHENTICITY, IDENTITY, AND PROPERTY—THAT IS TO SAY, WHAT DO WE OWN? WHAT IS THE SAME?
1979

I DON'T THINK IT'S USEFUL TO SEE CULTURE AS RIGID AND UNCHANGING. I'D RATHER SEE IT AS HAVING MANY VOICES, SOME CONSCIOUS AND SOME UNCONSCIOUS, WHICH MAY BE AT ODDS WITH ONE ANOTHER. IF WE ARE ATTENTIVE TO THESE VOICES, WE CAN COLLABORATE WITH THEM TO CREATE SOMETHING ALMOST NEW.
1997

A HOT DOG WALKS INTO A BAR AND SAYS: I'D LIKE A BEER. THE BARTENDER SAYS: I'M SORRY, SIR, WE DON'T SERVE FOOD HERE.
2010

Photography

Since the early 1980s, Levine has made photographic works that utilize a variety of sources. Her early pictures reprise well-known photographs by acknowledged masters, including Walker Evans and Edward Weston. Levine later photographed works made in different media, such as painting and drawing, by famous artists like Edgar Degas and Piet Mondrian. She also turned to pictures by other figures from the history of art, such as Karl Blossfeldt and the commercial photographic team Gottscho-Schleisner. In all her photographs, Levine changes the material and conception of her sources, imparting new hues, textures, and meanings to the resulting images. If *After Walker Evans: 1–22* (1981) is the most well-known of Levine's photographic transformations, it is partly due to the controversial discussions it elicited about authorship and originality.

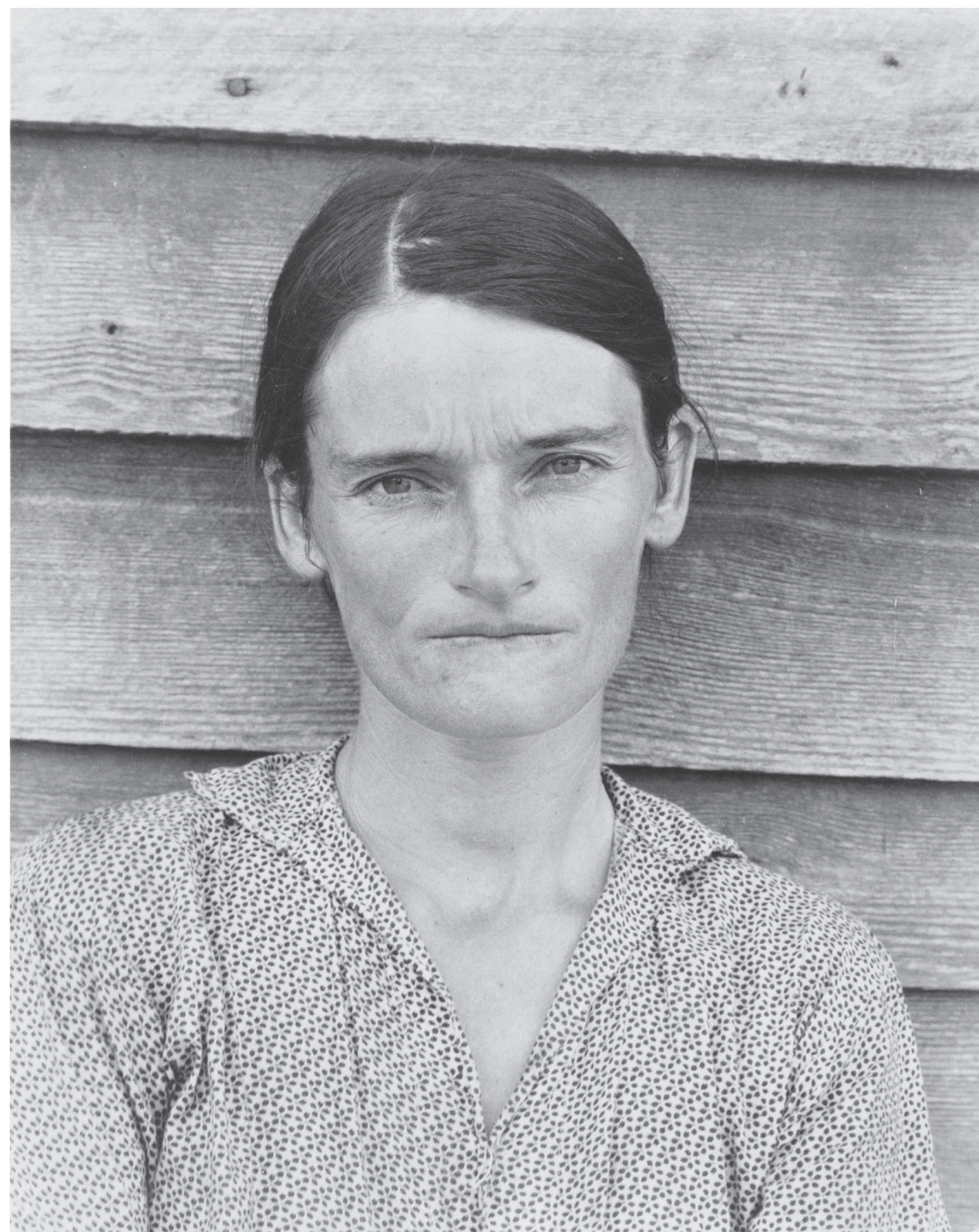
In her photographs that constitute this work, Levine asks that images be seen in an entirely different context than that in which they were first made. Her photographs bring to mind questions about how the gender, authority, or status of an author affects the meaning of an image: Is a photograph, reframed by a female artist nearly five decades after it was first made, asking to be seen in a wholly other context? How, in that light, do we rethink related questions such as: What is an original? What is a reproduction?

These questions of originality and reproduction are posed in Levine's *After Courbet* (2009), a suite of eighteen postcards depicting Gustave Courbet's famous 1866 composition titled *L'Origine du monde*. In his work depicting the torso and genitals of a model, Courbet rendered the female body both essentialized and metaphoric—Levine undoes both operations by presenting the once-taboo work multiple times and in the format of an easily acquired souvenir. In *After Courbet* and other works focusing on images from the history of art, Levine challenges assumptions about the experience and reception

of art. The context in which we see a picture—whether in a magazine, book, museum, or, more recently, in digital format—plays an important role in our understanding of it. For example, in *L'Absinthe: 1–12* (1995) Levine presents twelve black-and-white images of the Edgar Degas painting of the same name from 1876. Showing an alienated female figure seated at a cafe, the picture was considered risqué in its day, presenting behavior considered less than moral. Levine's version, created more than a century later, highlights how such stereotypes becomes less readable as social mores change. Levine's images of images suggest that every picture has a malleable history.

In the series *After Karl Blossfeldt: 1–20* (1990) and *Gottscho-Schleisner Orchids: 1–10* (1964–97), Levine takes up a theme ostensibly different from those she pursues in her works after more recognizable sources and figures from the history of art. For these two groups of photographs, Levine focuses on the seemingly natural forms of plants and flowers. But here too she presents images in a framework, encouraging thoughts about connections between nature and culture. Levine's re-presentation of these images of plant forms that were perhaps originally intended as tools for study or identification brings to mind questions about how “natural” things are often mediated and creatively framed, and might not be as “natural” as they might at first appear. By gathering together dissimilarly marked categories of objects in her own work, Levine upsets strict genres that categorize some images as scientific specimens and others as works of art.

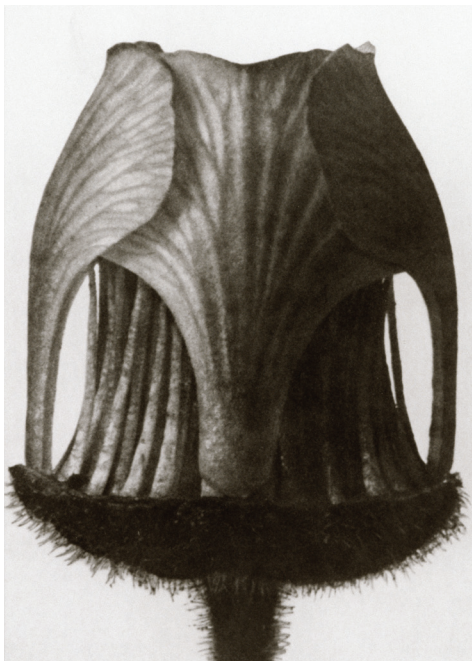
As much as Levine upends conventional ideas of art history, she is also part of the centuries of artists that have drawn upon the work of their predecessors, either by making visual references to actual works or by reusing specific or historical titles or subject matter as nods to the past. Levine has continued that tradition, but she has also pushed it to its logical extreme by producing work that often bears little visual distinction from her



After Walker Evans: 4, 1981. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Private collection. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



L'Absinthe: 1-12, 1995 (detail). Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



After Karl Blossfeldt: 3, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Private collection. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

source material. Her work over the last three decades questions the primacy of authorship while also acknowledging that an increasing proliferation of photographic images has facilitated a fluid exchange of influence through borrowing and recasting images. Indeed, at the outset of her career, Levine's work had resonance with a growing image-culture, anticipating many of the discussions around today's digital modes of reproduction, distribution, and sampling.

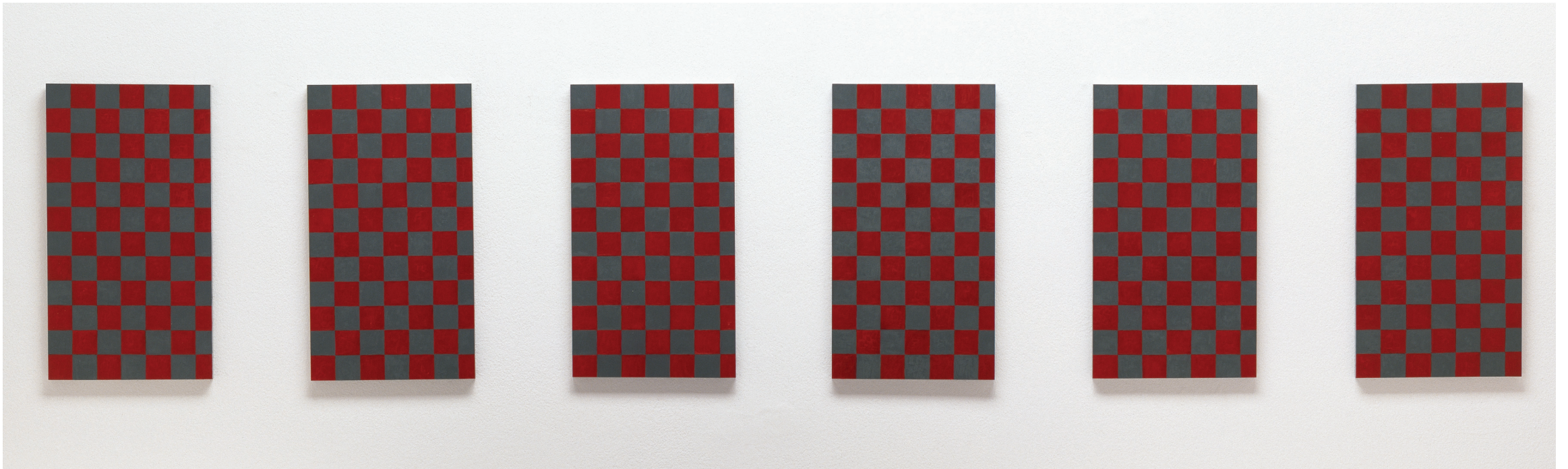
Painting

In the mid-1980s, Levine began making paintings with general references to the history of art. Rather than re-presenting individual images with specific, recognizable sources (as with her photographic works), she used familiar elements from Modernist painting and sometimes turned to unexpected materials to make objects that appear to be mostly abstract. Both strategies resulted in works that contain numerous intertwined art-historical references.

These references can be seen in works such as Levine's *Broad Stripes* (1985) and *Red and Gray Check: 7-12* (2000). Composed of geometric forms, grids, and repetitive panels that recall early twentieth-century Modernist painting by the likes of Kazimir Malevich, as well as Minimalist compositions from the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Brice Marden and Frank Stella, the intimate scale and rich material surface of Levine's works, however, can also be seen as reminiscent of art from other periods. For example, to create *Broad Stripes*, Levine applied casein paint on mahogany panels, which resulted in the red and brown tones of the wood affecting the color of the paint. This technique is similar to how a layer of underpainting (often red or green) in early Renaissance paintings gives a greater depth and richness to the colors visible on the surface. Levine's material process for the *Broad Stripe* paintings can be seen as a metaphor for her own conceptual practice of exposing the



Gottscho-Schleisner Orchids: 9, 1964-97. Chromogenic print, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Published by Winter Works on Paper, New York. Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Red and Gray Check: 7–12, 2000. Oil on aluminum, 18 x 10 in. (45.7 x 25.4 cm), each.
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; gift of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, 2002.
© Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

way layers of meaning and reference are inherent in almost any work of art.

Levine's *Red and Gray Checks* not only suggest the grids found in Minimalist painting and sculpture, but also game boards, bringing to mind Marcel Duchamp's fascination with chess. In 1923, Duchamp claimed he was giving up art to devote himself to the game, and Levine's compositions seem to nod to both practices. Even the word "check," which in chess implies a threat to capture a king, resonates with Levine's own interest in questioning traditional notions of hierarchy within art and cultural history. The *Red and Gray Check* paintings combine aspects of traditional painting with elements of conceptual play, a duality often seen in Levine's other painted works.

Another type of duality is found in Levine's *Krazy Kat* (1988) and *Ignatz* (1988) paintings, made after images from George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* of 1913–44, which itself combined elements of repetition and tragicomic drama. Levine portrays two characters that are hyperbolic and affectively complex: Krazy Kat is an unfailingly optimistic feline of

indeterminate gender, and Ignatz is a mouse who repeatedly hurls bricks at Krazy Kat in efforts that seem both amorous and violent in nature. Levine positions these characters, who are foils to one another, on separate wood panels that recall the logic of comics, though without text or familiarizing landscape. Removed from their narrative sequences, the two are relieved from their endless slapstick—placed in a kind of contextless limbo. Here, Levine's interest in repetition locates itself within an absurdist drama that repeats in dreamlike fashion. Altering the comic even more radically, Levine's *Black Splattered* (1991) depicts a tonally reversed image of Krazy Kat. Herriman's original "splattered" drawing was inspired by accidentally spilled black ink that unexpectedly transformed Krazy Kat, with strangely poignant results. Levine has often presented the duality between positive and negative or black-and-white images; in *Black Splattered* she shows another side to Krazy Kat, one that depicts the cat quite literally transformed and in so doing shows how a simple aesthetic shift can produce profoundly emotional



Broad Stripe: 6, 1985. Casein paint and wax on mahogany, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). Collection of Nina and Frank Moore. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Large Gold Knot: 1, 1987. Metallic paint on plywood, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 88.48a–b. © Sherrie Levine. Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins

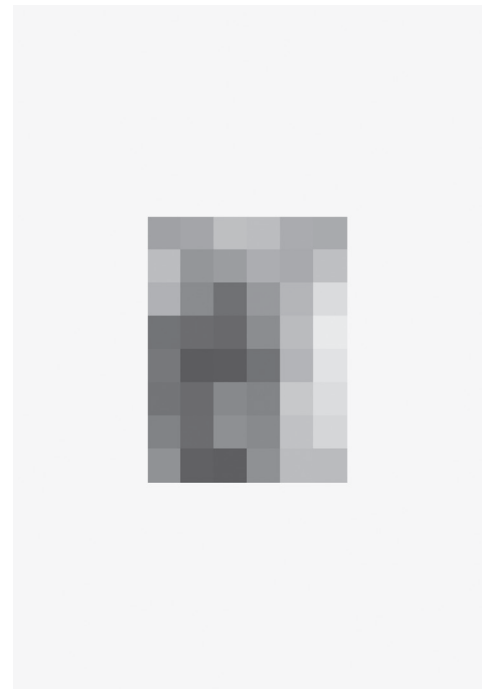
ones. Levine also modified the context of the *Krazy Kat* characters by placing them on mahogany and cherry wood supports that have a rich grain, giving a comic strip an aspect of permanence and preciousness.

A very different type of wood forms the primary visual element in Levine's *Knot Paintings* (1987, 1988, and 2002). The support for these works is the common building material plywood, which is composed of many thin layers of wood glued together for strength. Plywood's most direct relationship to art comes from its use for crates built to protect painting and sculpture (particularly for shipping), but by making plywood her "canvas" Levine has reversed that role in the *Knot Paintings*. Although the title of these works can be read as a pun for "not painting," by painting over or mimicking the shape of plugs that fill holes sometimes left by naturally occurring knots within the wood, she transforms ordinary plywood into a field of wood grain and painted knots. Knots are often considered imperfections in wood, but by using the ready-made compositions that the plugs produce, as well as sumptuous, often mineral- or metal-based colors to highlight them, Levine's *Knot Paintings* suggest that there is aesthetic pleasure to be mined in even the most ostensibly banal objects. Gold and silver knots bring to mind precious materials, while lead conjures the element that alchemists dreamed about transmuting into gold.

Simple, yet evocative, changes are also at the heart of Levine's abstract *Melt Down* paintings from 1990. Although made by hand using traditional painting materials, this series of monochromatic works was devised by using a computer program to process images of paintings by Piet Mondrian, Claude Monet, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and averaging their colors and tones, "melting" them into single fields of color (many surprisingly luscious in tone and density). In the *Melt Down* paintings Levine's reference to the original works is both general and specific, embodying a kind of summation of the image—one that gathers every



Melt Down (After Monet): 1, 1990. Oil on mahogany, 28 x 21 in. (71.1 x 53.3 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Collectors Forum, Mimi and Peter Haas, and Helen and Charles Schwab. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Equivalents (After Stieglitz): 8, 2006. Inkjet print, image: 7 1/4 x 5 1/2 in. (18.4 x 14 cm); sheet: 19 x 12 15/16 in. (48.3 x 32.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Print Committee 2008.220a–r. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



La Fortune (After Man Ray): 4, 1990. Mahogany, felt, and billiard balls, 33 x 110 x 60 in. (83.8 x 279.4 x 152.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Eugene Schwartz, and Robert Sosnick 92.1a–h. © Sherrie Levine. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements

aspect of it yet produces something completely different. Levine has continued to use digital methods to calculate and average color and tone for painted and printed works, such as her *Equivalents (After Stieglitz): 1–18* (2006). These works take as their starting point Alfred Stieglitz’s famous black-and-white photographs of clouds, a series that, in line with Modernist theories of equivalence, suggests that abstract forms could represent corresponding ideas or emotional states.

Sculpture/Installation

In the late 1980s, Levine began to make three-dimensional works using materials, such as bronze and glass, more typically associated with classical and modern art than with contemporary art. By using these materials, the artist extended her explorations of the cultural and art-historical significance of works by well-known artists. Levine’s sculptural works often include more than one object, taking the form of pairs, or, in other cases, larger groups—which

she calls “gangs”—or installations. When placed together, these sculptures play with our experience and understanding of repetition and the formal possibilities of opposites—many pairs even seem like positives and negatives of each other. In some cases, Levine’s objects can be considered sculptural “realizations” of other artists’ images, relegating iconic masterpieces from the history of art to preparatory sketches, or source material for Levine’s own work.

Bachelors: 1–6 (1991), one of Levine’s earliest sculptural ventures, consists of six three-dimensional objects based on the “Malic Molds” in Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23), an enigmatic work widely considered the artist’s masterpiece, which depicts a kind of machine whose components suggest the erotic dimension of industrialized production and society. The forms in the lower half of *The Large Glass*, the “Bachelors,” represent various modes of what Duchamp identified as masculine occupations (ranging from a policeman to an undertaker’s assistant) and, more symbolically, male



Fountain (Madonna), 1991. Cast bronze, 15 x 15 1/2 x 25 in. (38.1 x 39.4 x 63.5 cm). Private collection. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Crystal Skull: 1–12, 2010 (detail). Cast crystal, 5 1/2 x 7 x 4 1/2 in. (14 x 17.8 x 11.4 cm). Private collection; courtesy Jablonka Galerie, Cologne. © Sherrie Levine. Image courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photograph by Davina Semo

sexuality. For her own work, Levine translated six of these forms into bronze objects (other versions are rendered in glass and iron) and presented them collectively, but with each in its own vitrine. Levine's bronze sculptures are both mechanistic (in appearance and because of their infinite reproducibility) and sensual (due to the allure of the bronze). They bring to mind objects to be played on a game board or shiny fetishes, and they can be seen as variations on a theme, both formally and conceptually: they are similar but different, suggesting the possibility for unique functions, even while visibly linked. Levine's use of casting and Duchamp's own use of the word "molds" implies the possibility of endless repetition; however, each of Levine's "Bachelors," given its material permanence and preciousness, possesses a value of its own.

In 1990, Levine made *La Fortune (After Man Ray)*, a sculptural manifestation of a billiard table found in the eponymous Man Ray painting from 1938 (on view in the exhibition *Real/Surreal* on Floor 2), in which the object appears in a bleak, distended

landscape and a sky filled with multicolored clouds. The four iterations of Levine's *La Fortune* in this exhibition exemplify Levine's practice of giving images physical form. In the case of this sculpture, she used wood, felt, and billiard balls to make an object that seems to exist simultaneously inside and outside of the landscape of Man Ray's painting. Yet if Man Ray's work is a Surrealist piece par excellence in its depiction of the pocketless table used in a type of billiards, Levine's installation of her four *La Fortunes* also reinserts a kind of realism into the equation (even as the repetitions create a cool sense of the Surreal) by suggesting nothing less than a simple pool hall. By repeating *La Fortune* within one installation, Levine creates a three-dimensional environment of illusion that allows viewers themselves to traverse the space between reality and art.

The following year, Levine made her *Fountain (Madonna)* (1991), another work after Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was a readymade (a commercial urinal that the artist removed from its functional context and presented as art), while

Levine, for her part, cast a urinal similar to Duchamp's in bronze. The high value of the bronze that Levine used in this work—as well as in the later version *Fountain (Buddha)* (1996)—and the highbrow associations that material has within the history of sculpture suggest that the radical nature of Duchamp's work has now become an accepted part of the history of art. Levine's material transformation, the creation of a gleaming, polished surface that calls viewers' attention to the form of the object, also underlines the organic, almost feminine contours of the urinal, subverting the functional connotations of an item used almost exclusively by men.

Levine's *Crystal Newborn* (1993) and *Black Newborn* (1994) were made after a famous Constantin Brancusi sculpture of 1915—an abstract shape, yet one that is deeply evocative of human anatomy (a simple ovoid, it has often been discussed as an egg or a child's head). Levine cast her *Newborn* first in crystal in 1993 and then, the following year, in black glass. Brought together they act as exact doubles but also as opposites—positive and negative—that create a pair, whose binary logic Levine has explored throughout the 2000s with other sculptures. The forms of *Newborns* are displayed on grand pianos (instead of a traditional pedestal), a placement that Levine initiated after seeing a photograph of the interior of the British collector H. S. Ede's home, in which a Brancusi sculpture was displayed atop a piano. Evocative of a scene removed from the clean, white cubes of modern museum displays, the grand pianos in this installation underscore the cultural stratification embedded in art. For some, art may not only be viewed but also owned and lived with, an idea that also calls up associations of how class structure dictates aspects of domesticity, design, and "good taste."

In the 2000s Levine began to make sculpture based on objects she found in antique stores and flea markets, including some forms that refer to the natural world. One such object is *False God* (2008), a cast-

bronze two-headed skeleton of a calf, a sort of Janus figure (the Roman god often depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions) that suggests that the present acts as a hinge between the future and the past. Animals with two heads are extremely rare and typically have a short life span, yet Levine's use of bronze for this sculpture transforms the skeleton into a permanent icon. The title of Levine's sculpture *False God* further points to associations of iconography and idolatry, such as the story in Exodus of the idol, a golden calf, that the Israelites worshipped in Moses's absence. The empathy that might be prompted by the freakishness of the natural form is balanced by the gold color that also suggests references to desire, fetishes, or the worship of money and material goods.

Crystal Skull: 1–12 (2010), the most recent sculpture in this exhibition, is based on a small model of the human skull. Twelve identical cast-crystal skulls are presented together, each encased in a separate vitrine. The translucent crystal lends a timeless quality to the works, but they still call to mind the ghostly finality (and inevitability) of death. Levine's skulls transform seeming organic matter into otherworldly objects. The beauty and symmetry of this installation is tempered with an undercurrent of chaos, with the quiet procession of skulls extending into the past and alluding to unknown and uncontrollable things yet to come.

—Johanna Burton, guest curator, and Carrie Springer, senior curatorial assistant

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