

Friction: Rubbing the Eyes

By Ian Meares

In the exhibition *Form is the outline and structure of a thing*, the connections and engagements of artists Carly Steward, Kristen Morgin, and Deanna Erdmann begin with images gleaned from the vernacular. Working these images through explorations of media and exercises of form, these artists deploy the popular and ubiquitous materials of clay and the photographic image to approach the seemingly familiar and the inexhaustibly overlooked gaps within our visions of the world. Clay, used for building materials and as filler in paper products, and photography, seen daily in newspapers and textbooks, are omnipresent and overlooked even as they are seen. It is these media's contrasting fibers of plasticity (of materiality in clay and significance in photography) and granularity (the particle of the clay and the grain of a negative) that syncopate their respective positions and dialogue. In turn, they draw our attention to the ideological gaps that exist in our habitual ways of looking and perceiving the images with which we surround ourselves. Perhaps, by drawing these artists together, and teasing out these threads through my curatorial interest in the indexical and liminal, we can fathom our own deceptively familiar terrain.

What do we make of the ways things are structured and how we structure ourselves through their use? I am hoping to share several interlocking ways that form and structure rub up against our assumptions through a consideration of these artists' works. Though their studio practice, materials, and initial concerns differ, all use found printed material as a starting point for their work, ranging from card stock/board, images of sculptures by Brâncuși or Rodin, to young men training for military exercises. Essentially all three are working with discarded, gathered, and gleaned images, from old textbooks, the day's news, or a 30-year-old sticker collection. They manually modify and redistribute their source material, showing us their view in disrupted images.

Kristen Morgin's compositions are recreations of once mass-produced objects. Currently her focus is on comic books, magazines, games and other non-precious wood and paper products. Morgin attentively re-renders her objects from hand formed clay

that is dried and painted, ensuring the brittleness of the work's form. Infrequently she will integrate a found object in her sculptures. Once these base elements are mimetically rendered, they become the substratum for an indexical drive, to mark, to make familiar, or to make these one's own. Morgin's impulse to remake things stems from her desire to learn more about the original object, usually because they are things that are financially or circumstantially out of reach or lost.¹

As Morgin remakes a given object, she considers the idiosyncratic traces of its provenance as well as how her own investment of time and energy impact that particular mass-produced object's significance. Since the source materials are printed on media that are chosen for their durability rather than image quality, the sourced imagery takes on the patina of its use: a history observed and recorded onto Morgin's clay tablets, a palimpsest.

Carly Steward constructs her work's vocabulary through found images, layers of bound pages and the actions of cutting and documenting. Steward selects images from artist monographs based upon a given work's texture, form, and materiality to shape an alternate view of these masters' works and their historicization.² The image is cut through, sometimes tearing where the knife doesn't completely cleave the page. Further incisions are made within the outline of the initial image's form, revealing the image on the next page – one page after the other – down into the book. Vilém Flusser wrote of form in experiential, and functional terms: “In short: Forms are neither discoveries nor inventions, neither Platonic Ideas nor fictions, but containers cobbled together for phenomena ('models'). And theoretical science is neither 'true' nor 'fictitious' but 'formal' (model-designing).”³ The contrasts of the source's texture – and Steward's recursive cutting through the pages along the margins of their outlines and the resultant shifts between each layer – reinvest these caviated images with the materiality of the source imagery and the book's palpability.

¹ Kristen Morgin, interview by Ian Meares, November 25, 2014.

² Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore and Constantin Brâncuși monographs provide the source material. Carly Steward, interview by Virginia Arce and Ian Meares, November 29, 2014.

³ Vilém Flusser, *Shape of Things* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 26.

As we look more closely at the work, how the images were made emerges more clearly: documentation styles and the roles that different media⁴ play in the process of photographic documentation and publication are brought to the fore. How does the camera grasp, index and place a view? Furthermore, Steward's use of artist monographs highlights how the scaffolding of dedicated artists are viewed in posterity. While Steward's reductive collages use individual sculptures, the emphasis is rather on the collectivity of works that culminate in the construction of the reader's conception of the artist and their oeuvre. Steward resists these historical articulations and reception of canonical artists by cutting into the book's images. In so doing, she disrupts the inviolate nature of the publication, manifesting a heightened rereading of the most solid characters of modernism through a post-structural grammar of today.

Deanna Erdmann aggregates images across different news items, especially from that benchmark of public record The New York Times website. Each aggregate is composed of images culled from one day's worth of news, from representations of military exercises, devastation of war, or an ominousness that is difficult to identify. Images are selected, cropped, isolated for their profile and color qualities from their sources and are further collaged, layered and printed on multiple Plexiglas sheets. Each sheet's image floats one-fourth of an inch above the next; however, their orientation and order are not fixed. They can be shuffled and reordered, by the artist, upon each instillation's iteration. These stacked, transparent strata of fragmented, spaced, and rearrangeable images are then backlit. The illuminated works are then displayed upon an elevated light box alternately resting on the floor, leaning against the floor and the wall, or upon a shelf at standard display height leaning against the wall. Though these images index specific and notable incidents of a particular day, their impact is dampened by our fatigue of them. Their particularity is not what is central here; it's their similarity to other reportage of events from around the globe and across time. In that similitude they begin to

⁴ Differences between digital, film negative, color slide, black and white slide imaging and techniques of image reproduction for publication purposes.

destabilize our sense of orientation: this happened where and when and to whom? Or was it some other place, time or people of circumstance?

Erdman creates a layered optic riddle from the din of news images. The sculpture of images that Erdmann has created of that day's news moment seeks not to overwhelm us with intrusive horror, but to dislodge the static friction of our curiosity. This produces a *shifting* that moves us into her view of the news's staggering and isolated moment. Here the compound images stand in relation to one another at a depth that challenges our habituated focal ranges of screen or page. They have a density and airiness that requires the eyes to shift their focus continually, to apprehend their relative positions, laterally and in depth to one another. It's these ocular disruptions to the ways that these images were intended to be encountered that draws us closer to the work, to see what is going on, materially, subjectively, and with(in) the media itself.

Taken together, Morgin, Steward, and Erdman's respective images recall something familiar – our habitually passive way of looking at the world. We cultivate a vocabulary of reflexive sightedness through their shared cognizance of images. Of interest here is what we make of these shifting images formed in our minds – alternately their durability *and* their instability. Images, ideas, and materials are always unstable; they morph, are prone to rearrangement, and redistribution. Yet are simultaneously durable; their fragmentary parts recirculate and coalesce into new aggregations. Images, like language, retain a heuristic value based upon their ductility. They hold multiple significances – slipping into and out of multiple meanings – as nonexclusive agencies. Morgin, Steward, and Erdman's work thus reaffirm the notion that contemporary culture is swimming in a sea of media. In closing, Terry Eagleton's observation about the imbricated tensions between sensing and understanding is poignant here. As he puts it, "Swimming is an apt image of the interplay in question, since the swimmer actively creates the current which sustains him, plying the waves so they may return to buoy him up. Thus Ferdinand [a character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*] 'beats the surges' only to 'ride upon their backs', treads, flings, breasts and oars an ocean which is by no means just pliable material 'contentious', antagonistic, recalcitrant to human shaping.

But it is just this resistance, which allows him to act upon it. Nature itself produces the means of its own transcendence...⁵

Bibliography:

Eagleton, Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Manifestos, 2000.

Flusser, Vilém. *Shape of Things*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.

Morgin, Kristen. 2014. Interview by Ian Meares. Transcript. November 25. Gardena, California.

Steward, Carly. 2014. Interview by Virginia Arce and Ian Meares. Transcript. November 29. Pasadena, California.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Manifestos, 2000), 3-4.