



Miranda Lichtenstein
Danse Serpentine (doubled and refracted)
 2010
 HD Video, Endless loop
 installation view
 Elizabeth Dee, New York



Miranda Lichtenstein
Screen Shadow #17 (For Maya)
 2009
 Elizabeth Dee, New York

CONSIDERING THE IMAGE

by Mary Barone

In 1897 the Lumière Brothers released Danse Serpentine, a 49-second-long film of American dancer and lighting technologist Loie Fuller performing her Serpentine Dance, which had been first done in 1892 at the Folies-Bergère and which was based on popular skirt dances of the period. It was a radical, conceptual innovation in the field of dance and marked an important influence on early 20th-century visual artists, notably Pablo Picasso and the Futurist F.T. Marinetti.

The film and the dance continue to find a place in artistic production today, notably at two exhibitions now on view in New York. It is one of the first things that a visitor sees at "On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century" at the Museum of Modern Art, and it also plays an important role in Miranda Lichtenstein's solo exhibition of photos and video at the Elizabeth Dee gallery in Chelsea.

According to the critic Bridget Goodbody, Lichtenstein -- who took her MFA from Cal Arts in 1993, has had a dozen solo shows since 1997 and lives in New York -- has a thing for the "search for spiritual transcendence," typically undertaken in isolation. Roberta Smith, who found her 2007 exhibition "puzzling," noted all the same that Lichtenstein seemed able "to do anything she wants with a camera."

Her new show includes the video, Danse Serpentine (doubled and refracted), which manipulates the Lumiere film and projects it onto a folded theatrical curtain, reducing its subject "almost entirely to shadow and light" so that it "teeters on dissolution."

Artnet Magazine contributor Mary Barone caught up with Miranda Lichtenstein to talk about Fuller and the influence on her current work.

Mary Barone: "On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century" takes *Danse Serpentine* as a starting point in its survey of line and drawing in 20th-century art. Can you talk about the film's impact on your photographic works?

Miranda Lichtenstein: I first saw *Danse Serpentine* a little over two years ago and knew I wanted to use it in some way, whether this meant collaborating with a dancer to restage it or to work with the original film. Then I saw it on YouTube and kept seeing it in museum shows, at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, and in a design show at MoMA last year. It's actually surprising that I hadn't seen the film before because it is one of the earliest examples of cinema and modern dance, particularly Loie Fuller's performances which were tied to the new medium.

Danse Serpentine can be considered as pre-cinematic -- Fuller was a



Miranda Lichtenstein
Untitled #1 (Plant)
2005
Polaroid
Elizabeth Dee, New York



Miranda Lichtenstein
Untitled
2005
c-print
Elizabeth Dee, New York



Miranda Lichtenstein
Screen Shadow #21 (Staircase)
2010
archival pigment print
Elizabeth Dee, New York

moving image on stage, not dissimilar to the magic lantern shows of the period. She used light to describe movement but also as a hypnotic device, performing the piece against a black curtain so that her image would disappear when the light wasn't hitting her. This appealed to me because I like to imagine the sense of wonder produced by such a simple gesture and because a series of photographs I began in 2005 called "The Searchers" came out of an interest in hypnosis.

Hypnosis was actually the catalyst for Fuller's *Danse Serpentine*. During an early performance she improvised a section pretending to be hypnotized. The audience went wild, and she responded to their reaction by choreographing a dance that worked with these repetitive and swinging movements.

The photographs I've been making for the past two years concern light and the notion of the screen, both physically and metaphorically. I want the subject of the image to be difficult to pin down, so the objects in the images are unanchored. I do this by using reflective surfaces and Japanese paper, or washi, which I always backlight. I think we are at a point where backlighting is taken for granted -- mostly everything is viewed on a digital screen now, and the surface of the image, particularly of a photograph, is not considered unless we have the chance to see it in person.

I use the reflective surfaces to double an image, but I stage the tableau in a way so that this is not always obvious. I also stage compositions behind paper screens so that it is difficult to tell if you are looking at a silhouette, a projection or something printed on the paper itself. It forces you to consider the surface of the screen as one possible subject. In *Danse Serpentine (doubled and refracted)*, 2010, I downloaded the film from YouTube and treated it in a similar way by projecting the video onto a reflective surface and re-shot its refracted reflection, with a second projection of the film projected onto that surface making it both doubled and refracted. The original film already moves from figuration to abstraction and plays with light and movement in a way that disorients the viewer, and in the video I enhance this effect.

The film historian Tom Gunning has written about the connections between the early cinema of attractions and cinema prior to 1906 to the video-sharing site YouTube. As Gunning puts it, "It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking. It was a cinema based on spectacle, shock and sensation. Today many of the clips on video-sharing sites like YouTube bear a remarkable similarity to these early films."

I decided it was best to appropriate the original film since I wanted to use current modes of viewing and sharing imagery by reusing the source material in its current form as a YouTube clip. This circling back calls attention to backlighting, and reworks the surface or the screen in a similar way I've been thinking about surfaces in making my photographs.

MB: The MoMA exhibition looks at the ways that artists interprets line through sculpture, installation, painting, performance and film to explore the idea of what constitutes a drawing. Photography is included in the exhibition but mostly to document a performance or



Miranda Lichtenstein, 2010

action. In your current work you seem to be asking what constitutes a photograph and you "question what role depiction might continue to play in the capricious visual field."

ML: For a while now I've been working with lines, both of light and also hand-drawn lines that I photograph. In 2002, while on a residency in Giverny, France, I discovered a toolshed that had a clumsy trompe-l'oeil painting of each of the tools that was used in the garden. Every time I walked through the shed I saw that the tools were misaligned with their own shadows -- for instance the shovel might be hanging on the painted shadow of the rake, and the spade would be hanging over the shadow of the shovel, and so forth.

I was struck by this image as a pithy example of a failed system. It prompted me to start drawing the shadows of objects and I began with clipped plants and flowers from Monet's garden. Then I photographed the object in front of this second shadow, but slightly misaligned. Eventually I started photographing the painted shadows themselves, and they became more elaborate. I used black flashe on black paper so it was very matte, and I would then photograph the drawing so the paper might be read as a sky, or natural backdrop, depending on how I printed it.

I thought of it as a send-up of Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the calotype, who made his first photogram because he was frustrated with his drawing skills. On the contrary, I was sharing a studio at the time with two painters and was feeling frustrated by photography. I wanted to make something in the studio, and was struck by how much drawing shadows of objects was equivalent to using my hand and eye as a camera.

What constitutes a photograph has become very open-ended and I think some people embrace this while others are disappointed in the shift. The material of the medium has been a subject since the early 20th century but we are witnessing a renaissance of concrete work, which I think makes perfect sense given the ubiquity of the medium. As I mentioned before, I think light has become something to pay attention to perhaps now more than ever, since there is the light of the scanner, and the light of the computer screen to contend with, and a kind of surface tension to call attention to.

I still shoot film with a 4x5 camera because I want to get the kind of detail it gives me, and the subject can be distorted or confused depending on how I shift the camera itself. Depicting a composition, a space or a still life has a quotidian quality that interests me, since it constitutes de-familiarizing the ordinary and the everyday. I like how flexible the medium has become and so the way I work with the material demonstrates this flux. I still want to slow people down, to make them stop and look, and wonder, and if I can do this with a photograph, then I believe there are still plenty of places for the medium to go.

Miranda Lichtenstein, Nov. 5-Dec. 18, 2010, at Elizabeth Dee, 545 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

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