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Stephen Berens: Thinking of Pinturicchio (While Looking Out Sol LeWitt's Windows and Elizabeth Bryant: Sol LeWitt Studio Still Lifes, Carl Solway Gallery

by Karen S. Chambers

In the summer of 2010, L. A.-based artists Elizabeth Bryant and Stephen Berens, who happen to be married to each other, spent time in Sol LeWitt's studio in Spoleto, Italy. The bodies of work they made there were in response to the Minimalist's oeuvre and the space itself, and they both added a third artist to the conversation – the 15th-century painter Pinturicchio for Berens and the 20th-century artist Giorgio Morandi for Bryant.

In conjunction with "Sol LeWitt: Editions and Structures, 1970-2005," the work the couple made in Italy is on view at Carl Solway in two separate exhibitions – "Stephen

Berens: Thinking of Pinturicchio (While Looking Out Sol LeWitt's Windows" and "Elizabeth Bryant: Sol LeWitt Studio Still Lifes."

Berens is an heir to LeWitt's mode of artmaking, clearly setting up the parameters of his aesthetic exploration. His exhibition here is the "result of thinking about how both LeWitt and Pinturicchio, though working 500 years apart, had a number of concerns in common including the incorporation of the architectural space itself into the artwork."

The artistic brief Berens gave himself for this series was to photograph looking out of the windows and doors of LeWitt's studio building and to use the architecture to frame the sky, both with and without clouds. He selected 20 images with clear skies from the approximately 1,400 he shot and matched them with similar compositions showing clouds.

Berens then converted everything except the sky into flat shapes. Setting up a color system of "red, green, blue, yellow, and black and a similar set of colors photographically sampled from a Pinturicchio fresco in Spoleto [Cathedral, Eroli Chapel, 1497], I generated 280 distinct images. The resulting pictures juxtapose the geometric flatness of the shapes against the luminous realism of the sky."

For the Solway installation, he printed out 213 images on adhesive matte vinyl panels (mostly three per panel) using an inkjet printer on site and affixed them directly to the gallery walls, essentially "wallpapering" the room. The installation format also recalls Jennifer Bartlett's "Rhapsody" because of the modular nature of the prints.

I can't decide if it is advisable for anyone with attention deficit disorder to see this show or if it is actually the perfect exhibition for someone with ADD. For myself, I found it impossible to focus on each image or set of images to determine how it differs from the next. Instead my eye caroomed from one panel to another like a billiard ball.

I got the gist of Berens' idea and found the compositions and the graphic quality of the images attractive, but was happy to escape this room to take in Elizabeth Bryant's "Sol LeWitt Studio Still Lifes." Bryant's photos are an antidote to Berens' hard-edged geometric abstraction - relieved only by the cloud formations in some of the images. Here there's a humanity that's warm and welcoming, a different interpretation of LeWitt's studio space, left virtually untouched since his death in 2007.

The tradition of still life painting has been Bryant's artistic focus for a number of years, and she acknowledges that one artist's oeuvre has been of particular interest. "Morandi's work has been an important touchstone in my ongoing research into traditional still life painting since I am drawn to his compelling use of light, shadow, and familiar household objects."

It was fortuitous that LeWitt owned nine Morandi etchings. They were hung opposite the upstairs dining table and "often became the focus of my gaze throughout the day," Bryant shares. They became the background for "SLW Studio Still Life: Upstairs Dining Table," one of the five locations she set up her own still lifes.

For this series Bryant planned to photograph each still life over the course of several days, making adjustments in viewpoint or the arrangement and taking advantage of changes in lighting. She also recorded the actual decay that is implied in the memento mori still lifes by 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painters. She then selected two images of each to present as 20" x 20" archival inkjet print diptychs at Solway.

In "SLW Studio Still Life: Upstairs Dining Table," Bryant used a tall dying floral arrangement, shedding petals, to divide the composition into roughly thirds, lining up with the radiator that provides a block of parallel lines in counterpoint to the reflective glass tabletop and the rectilinear shapes of the framed prints. To play against this geometry, she arranged a still life of eggs, an orange, shallot, baguette, stick of butter plus water, wine, and beer bottles.

One of the Morandi prints clearly visible is "Still Life," 1956, etching, 5 1/8" x 7 1/4". Also fortuitously, the Cincinnati Art Museum owns an impression of the print and the Gallery was able to borrow it.

Back home Bryant realized that she "was completely inspired by the Morandi etchings as well as being in the LeWitt space since each of my still lifes included a collection of bottles I'd saved from my daily consumption of water, wine, milk, etc. Now that I've had the chance to look closely at what I produced during that time in Spoleto, I see the pictures as a kind of conversation across time between me and LeWitt and Morandi."

Both Berens and Bryant responded directly to the LeWitt studio space, but there are no visual clues in either body of work to confirm that it is LeWitt's.

Bryant recorded a space with the trappings of what might be an artist's studio: shelves filled with art books, artwork on the walls, art supplies.

Berens' response to LeWitt's space is oddly more telling because his rigorous artistic process echoes LeWitt's. But, again, the specificity of the architecture does not reveal that it is the Minimalist's studio.

I am not certain why this matters to me. Both artists make clear the ownership of the studio in their exhibition titles, but without them, the spaces are anonymous or at least nonpersonal, an adjective that could describe LeWitt's work.

"Stephen Berens: Thinking of Pinturicchio (While Looking Out Sol LeWitt's Windows)" and "Elizabeth Bryant: Sol LeWitt Studio Still Lives" on view through December 22, 2012, at Carl Solway Gallery, 424 Findlay St., Cincinnati, OH 45214. 513-621-0069, www.solwaygallery.com. Mon.-Fri., 9 a. m.-5 p. m., Sat., noon-5 p. m.

