



SARAH T. MARKGRAF MARK STREET

MARTIN RUMSBY **CINEMA OF THE POLYNESIAN TRIANGLE**

GARETH POLMEER CHRIS WELSBY

JOHN POWERS **NEW HISTORICIST TENDENCIES**

WORLD VIEWS



Amie Siegel, *Provenance* (2013), installation view at Simon Preston, New York.
Courtesy the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York

AMIE SIEGEL *PROVENANCE*

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
June 23, 2014 – January 4, 2015

Playful monkeys climb up the façade of a concrete building bathed in yellow light as the camera tracks slowly past a serene reflecting pool. This enigmatic image is just one of many magnetic scenes in Amie Siegel's incisive visual film essay *Provenance*, currently showing in the contemporary wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The film follows mid-century furniture designed by Pierre Jeanneret on a reverse journey from magazine-ready domestic spaces to the furniture's original site in government and administrative buildings in the planned city of Chandigarh, India. As gorgeous shot rhythmically follows gorgeous shot over the course of forty minutes, we are drawn into a seductive image world that slowly unpacks a flow of global capital and

commodity speculation. An economical use of formal tools: cinematography borrowed from architectural photography, slow tracking shots and subtly designed diegetic sound, along with a focus on site, make the film's critical points. Speech and text are kept to carefully planted fragments. In the spirit of modernist design, Siegel's film is a perfect marriage of function and form.

Opening scenes are windows onto upscale homes in the likes of New York City, the Hamptons, and London. Images of each space frame or pan across Jeanneret's chairs, shelves, tables—freshly upholstered, outlined by a window, paired with valuable and recognizable artwork or otherwise suspended in a

hermetically sealed state of domestic equilibrium. A baby, a woman reading, a man walking down the stairs activate each space, but only as props for the well appointed setting or footnotes to the larger narrative. Furniture in a yacht is placed gingerly on a white carpet and automatic sliding glass doors muffle sounds of the outside.

The journey continues through a classy European showroom and at live auctions in which the furniture commands tens of thousands of dollars and euros. In one striking scene a photographer directs her male assistant to move the furniture just so, into its optimal position to be best framed by the camera. It is a relief as the visual lines of the two chairs are wrested into perfect alignment. The photographer considers the image on the computer screen and we learn that this is a construction for the auction catalog. While I at first read this moment as a stand-in for the artist herself, an image maker in control of crafting an image, during an artist talk Siegel described this as an instance of people acting as the stewards of objects, or in subordination to them. Following scenes in a restoration warehouse are equally surprising and slyly humorous, as the very same furniture previously viewed in a state of untouchable perfection is here seen worn, languishing in dark spaces, or unceremoniously ripped apart.

Tracing the ownership of valuable objects will invariably point to complex political histories. The furniture in question was all designed and produced for Chandigarh, a city that Prime Minister Nehru asked Le Corbusier to design following India's partition. As the capital of the Punjab the city would promote India's modern future. Le Corbusier designed the initial plan and administrative buildings, but eventually handed the reins to his architecture partner and cousin Pierre Jeanneret. The last stage of *Provenance* lands in Chandigarh, and Siegel revels in showcasing the exteriors and interiors of the great modern architecture conceived of by Le Corbusier and his colleagues. Architecture at once severe and whimsical is punctuated by quotidian activity and evidence of administrative labor. Jeanneret shelves are overstuffed with unruly stacks of papers and it seems that piles of neglected or discarded furniture are around every bend, decorated by cobwebs gently moving in the breeze, or bleaching in the sun alongside a lounging man on break with his radio. A signature mid-century architectural touch—a row of interior windows accented with primary colors—is mirrored by men working in an office wearing turbans that are each a different bright color. The pleasure taken in showcasing such incongruities and the playful activation of objects in storytelling recalls Jacques Tati's

send ups of a 20th century obsession with modernity and consumerism in France. What you might call the film's 'material-semiotic' approach proposes an example of actor-network theory in which objects are agents in a network of social relations.

Finally, we end up inside of libraries and classrooms—sites of knowledge acquisition for liberation or indoctrination, likely those of Punjab University where graffiti scratched and stickered Jeanneret tables further deflate the idea of rarified, collectible objects, or illustrate benign neglect and an ignorance of the value of what one has—depending on your perspective. In the final scene a professor discusses an economic process during which we can make out fragments of her lecture “getting something,” “interest,” “spending money.”

Siegel completes the cycle of subsuming objects into a luxury commodity market by auctioning off her own work—the very film that we are watching—at Christie's for thousands of dollars. This appears as a separate video on the backside of *Provenance* and is complemented by a framed, printer's proof of the page of the auction catalog depicting Siegel's artwork. While at first I may have felt, like other reviewers, that the critique of commodity capitalism and colonial structures that continue to add value to the lifestyles of economically advantaged classes does not go far enough, I came to realize that one of the best strengths of *Provenance* is how it stealthily draws the viewer into complicity. This effect is complimented by the concurrent show at the museum *Charles James: Beyond Fashion*, an exhibition explicitly foregrounding the pleasure of viewing objects. Not only do the shapely dresses eroticize absent 1950s female forms, but also small robotic cameras (masterminded by architects Diller, Scofidio, and Renfro) gliding over the sculpturally draped fabric provide a live-feed close-up view of the seductive surfaces projected.

The lush art house images of the recently commodified *Provenance* are an ideal lens through which to contemplate the politics of a post-colonial capital city in relation to the larger design commodity market. The museum, an institution whose mission includes the stewardship of thousands of displaced cultural objects, is an ideal site. Our very presence in the darkness of the richly and cleanly projected *Provenance* implicates us, the viewer, in the system that Siegel so smoothly articulates.

RACHEL STEVENS