



DISAPPEARANCES, SHADOWS & ILLUSIONS

Organized by Miami Art Museum and curated by Assistant Director for Programs/Senior Curator Peter Boswell. It is supported by MAM's Annual Exhibition Fund.

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MIAMI ART MUSEUM PRESENTS
**DISAPPEARANCES,
SHADOWS & ILLUSIONS**

JUNE 6 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 21, 2008



Inside the museum, Infinity Goes up on trial

Voices Echo this is what salvation must be like after a while¹

A common expectation we have of art in museums is that it should "stand the test of time," representing core, universal values and enduring in the face of changing circumstances. This exhibition, on the other hand, highlights works—or aspects of them—that purposefully court impermanence and, more importantly, create uncertainty in the mind of the viewer. Using tricks of light, perspective, reflection, erasure and the like, they present visual conundrums, ephemeral experiences and suggestions of presence or absence that short-circuit the connection between the eye and the brain and cast the viewer into varying states of confusion, anxiety, wonder and delight.

These works make us acutely aware of our role as viewers and cause us ask ourselves such questions as "What I am I seeing?", "How do I see?", "How does what I think affect what I see?", and "What was I expecting?" They are designed to make us come away thinking different thoughts, asking different questions, and seeing different things than when we arrived. The experience of art—and many of the works are meant to be experienced rather than merely seen—becomes less an affirmation of

existing values than a cleansing ritual, a refreshment of the eye, mind and spirit that leads us to look at the world around us in a new light.

Light, that most immaterial of materials that can fill a room while leaving it empty, is a prime medium for many of the artists in this exhibition. **Mark Handforth's** *Western Sun* uses fluorescent bulbs to bathe its surrounding space in a fierce red light. Even from a distance we imagine we feel its heat, a heat that becomes physical reality as we approach it. Or is that, as our mind's eye sees the blank "sun" slipping down below the floor's horizon, we imagine the heat lessening? **Wendy Wischer** uses electroluminescent wire in her installation *Ariadne's Thread*, which alludes to the Greek myth in which Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete, gave the hero Theseus a ball of thread that he could trail behind him in order to find his way back out of the labyrinth. Wischer's serpentine ladder climbs miraculously into the darkness, seeming to offer a glowing means of escape or deliverance from the obscurity that surrounds it. In **Matt Schreiber's** laser installation, *Guilloche, The Blind Man*, the green rays of light seem almost tangible, creating an eerie sensation when we pass through them and feel nothing. The overlapping

¹Bob Dylan, *Visions of Johanna*, "Blonde on Blonde", Columbia Records, 1966.

Themes of disappearance and insubstantiality can bring with them allusions to mortality.

spiraling lines produce what is known as a guilloche pattern. These complex patterns are commonly used in designing paper money, official documents and security holograms as a means of discouraging counterfeiting. This reference to reality and deception underscores the elusive nature of the laser lines, which seem material, like the glowing thread of Wischer's installation, but can be penetrated effortlessly. In the case of all of these works, viewers who pass before these lights also seem to lose their materiality, becoming dark silhouettes, ghostly shades in the obscure environment.

Shadows, the projected absence of light, play an important part in several other installations in this exhibition. In **Olafur Eliasson's** *Five Fold Sphere Projection Lamp*, the lamp itself is only a component of the installation. More affecting is the weblike pattern of cross-hatched lines that envelops viewers when they walk into the room. The fragile, ephemeral nature of the suspended leaves in **Karen Rifas' Reflection is emphasized by the quivering pattern of their shadows on the walls around them. In **Paul Chan's 4th Light** the projected shadows of unseen objects, floating and descending, create a chilling, post-9/11 scenario of aspiration and ruin.**

Even though we tend to think of photography as a record of what exists, it is, in fact, a record of light and therefore particularly susceptible to its tricks. **Ralston Crawford, William Garnett, Lotte Jacobi, Hiroshi Sugimoto** and **Minor White** all explore the unexpected consequences of how light is recorded on film. One type brand of photograph that is particularly adept at creating ethereal effects is the photogram. Photograms are made by placing objects on photographic paper, then exposing the paper to light. The object's shadow appears as a light silhouette against the dark ground of the exposed paper, as in **Gyorgy Kepes' Geometric and Perforated Objects Solarized**. In her *Garden [Change]* and *Metamorphosis* series,

Maria Martinez-Cañas uses the varying degrees of translucency found in leaves to evoke their evanescent nature. **Christopher Bucklow** exploits the way photography converts corporeality into light in his *Guest 12:38PM 30 Sept. 95*, which blurs the line between presence and apparition (even the title evokes the idea of a transient incident).

Themes of disappearance and insubstantiality can bring with them allusions to mortality. **Oscar Muñoz's** ghostly *Cortinas de Baños* (Shower Curtains), 1994. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of George M. Safirstein, M.D. and Pola Reydburd. Regina Silveira, *Escada Inexplicável 2* (Inexplicable Staircase 2), 1999. Collection Miami Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds from the MAM Collectors Council. Photo: Courtesy Galeria Brito Cimino. **Inside right:** Paul Chan, stills from *4th Light*, 2007. Digital video projection. Collection Debra and Dennis Scholl.

when unpredictable shootings and bombings meant that disappearances were a fact of daily life, like taking a shower. Death is alluded to more coolly in **Michael Badura's** series of photographs that show him gradually morphing into earth, from which life springs and to which it returns in the end. **Bert Rodriguez** presents a more unsettling look at the subject in his *A Friendly Reminder II*, in which the word "death" flickers uncertainly. The fact that the black light cast by the piece will illuminate visitors' white teeth and clothes effectively incorporates the viewer into its message, to unsettling effect.

Among the materials that can most confuse and mystify our sense of space are glass and mirrors, whose reflective surfaces allow us to see in different directions at the same time. **Magdalena Fernández** uses mirrored discs and strips to slice our environment into disjointed segments. The effect is particularly confounding when the mirrored strips hang in space; what we see through their interstices mingles with what is reflected back at us, creating a disorienting spatial play. Photographer **William Klein**

creates a similarly perplexing scenario in *Mirror, Times Square, Vogue*, while **Louis Faure** uses the interplay between reflection and transparency in sheets of glass to create ambiguous spatial and narrative links in his photograph, *The Accident*.

Other artists use the illusion of three-dimensional perspective to disorienting ends. **Regina Silveira's Escada Inexplicável 2** (Inexplicable Staircase 2) presents a negative drawing (white on black) of a stairwell, but the drawing appears not on a two-dimensional surface but in a corner, where two walls and the floor meet. The competing perspectives of the drawing and the corner have a dizzying effect on the viewer. **Jan Dibbets** also plays with perspective in his photograph *Perspective Collection: LeWitt*. The photo presents an oblique view of a wall on which a drawing by Sol LeWitt has been inscribed; but the drawing has been rendered in a skewed perspective

(called anamorphic perspective) that makes it appear as a perfect square from the viewpoint of the camera. LeWitt's "square" thus seems to float in the air parallel to the picture plane and in contradiction to the receding diagonal of the wall on which it is drawn.

Absence is a key theme in a number of works in this exhibition, beginning with **COOPER's** multi-part installation *Drainpipes and death myths...*. The objects in the installation appear to be all that is left from a performance, a vestige of which appears on a monitor installed in the pyramidal wooden structure hanging from the ceiling. The performance's narrative, such as can be deduced from the evidence of the objects, revolves another absent figure, Abraham Lincoln. But the true illusion is that the "performance" that these objects and the video seem to document never actually occurred. This element of fiction, of sets for absent actors, recurs in the photos of **Miriam Backström** and **James Casebere** and in the shadow boxes of **Joseph Cornell**, miniature dioramas that seem like sets for forgotten plays (Cornell was, in fact, an avid theater-, film-, and ballet-goer).

The idea of the museum itself as a stage for fictive illusions is explored by several artists in the exhibition. **Frances Trombly** presents what looks like an object used to install the exhibition that has been left casually behind, but in fact it is a handmade replica. Once the surprise wears off, the viewer is left to contemplate what happens to one's expectations when a manufactured tool turns out to be an adept piece of crafts(wo)manship. **Tom Scicluna's** subtly skewed wall underscores the fact that many of the walls in an exhibition are temporary, pieces of stagecraft meant to appear natural. By slightly altering the angles of a wall on three axes, Scicluna calls attention to that which is intended to be unnoticed and taken for granted. In her photograph *Adaptation IV*, **Maria Martínez-Cañas** similarly highlights the museum as stage by blacking out the pictures on view in an installation, diverting our attention from the art to the museum's institutional "frame."

Martínez-Cañas' act of erasure is found again in the work of several other artists in the exhibition. **Paul Pfeiffer** has taken a video of the celebrated Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier "Thrilla in Manila" prize fight and eliminated the two boxers, focusing our attention on the reactions of the spectators. In his print series *Country Cityscapes*, **Ed Ruscha** has used strips suggestive of censorship to erase what turn out to be the works' titles, thereby sanitizing and preserving the ideal views of calendar art he has appropriated. **Bruce Conner** uses black ink to obliterate the whiteness of the page, leaving only a heavily-worked sheen of glowing darkness that evokes infinite space.

Kerry Phillips is among the artists in this exhibition who make common materials do unexpected things, in her case by causing the flat surface of the carpeted floor to swell up, as if erupting from pressure below. **Robert Thiele** exploits the illusory nature of substances such as mesh and frosted glass to throw the materiality of his artworks into question, blurring the distinction between hard and soft, opaque and translucent, object and illusion. **Martin Oppel** engages in a similar form of confounding expectations by taking a board and transforming it, through a few simple manipulations, into an object of quasi-mystical wonder.

For so many of the works in this exhibition, their effect relies on contradicting our expectations, our memory of how things are or should be. Memory—and its elusiveness—is the subject of works by **Shimon Attie** and **Elizabeth Cerejido**. Attie's photograph of buildings on Manhattan's Lower East Side inscribed with the recollections of former residents documents a public event he staged in 1998, in which illuminated words—written by lasers—unscrolled letter-by-letter onto the buildings. Cerejido's *Absence* series chronicles the growing disorientation in her mother's mind as she gradually succumbs to Alzheimer's disease. Here everyday objects lose both their function and their place, throwing us into a panic of unknowing.

To one degree or another, all the artists in this exhibition seek to throw the viewer into a state of "unknowing" similar to that evoked in Cerejido's photographic series. We began this essay by referring to presumptions about museums as places associated with permanence, endurance and established values, places where "Infinity goes up on trial." Perhaps after experiencing the works in this exhibition, visitors may find themselves more in tune with the words of noted museum architect Renzo Piano:

A museum is a place where one should lose one's head.²

²Quoted in Deanna MacDonald. "Travel: Sailing the Seas of Klee," Toronto *The Globe and Mail*, August 6, 2005.

