

Sherrie Levine Wood

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By Howard Singerman

“I have become interested in issues of authenticity, identity, and property—that is to say, What do we own? What is the same?”
—Sherrie Levine, 1979

For some three decades, Sherrie Levine has been a collector of curios. Early on, those she showed—the gnomes she cast in glass and bronze as *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (2002), the retriever with a bird in its mouth, the carved parrot on its perch—were objects that hovered, as her title suggests, at the edge of kitsch, and in relation to it. They brought their sentimentality and friendliness with them. Increasingly, the objects she has collected and cast have become more singular, older, stranger, and perhaps less likable: the skeleton of a two-headed calf, a roughly hewn child’s cradle, a child-size coffin.

These are found objects, *objets trouvés* rather than readymades, at least according to the guidelines Duchamp eventually laid down: selections “based on a reaction of visual indifference, with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste.”¹ They are, of course, already made, but they are also quite clearly handmade and singular. They are sourced not from showrooms or hardware stores, but looked for and found in rummage and antique stores and curio shops, and increasingly now online, sites where they have already been labeled “collectibles,” and perhaps already collected.

In her earlier exhibitions, Levine’s curios were cast in bronze; the mirror-polished shine she added emphasized (but also made strange) the originals’ carved and textured surfaces. Levine’s process froze—embalmed—the objects she collected, and in her transformation they are doubly displaced. The originals are erased and, in the process, recast as representations of themselves as art. Cast in bronze, they cannot disappear or move back onto the shelves of curios and oddities—or at least not easily so. They are claimed for a different world of collecting and valuation and objects—this particular art world.

The most recent work in this exhibition, *Scholar Figure, Head, and Fox* (all 2023), test another formula for the readymade—Robert Rauschenberg’s famous telegram “This is a portrait of Iris Clert, if I say so”—as directly as her early rephotographs did. They are, as Duchamp would have it, unassisted readymades, made art, or art objects within this art world, by the act of selection and display, by title, signature, and the proper name. But they test even more insistently than the industrial objects Duchamp chose whether the shift in context can hold, whether these works, at once made and unfinished—unfrozen—could conceivably revert to different kinds of works by other kinds of artists, or at least to the odd and searchable spaces of 1stdibs, and onto other shelves in a different kind of collection. Objects of projection and desire, their relation to Levine’s catalogue of similar objects is clear, but their relation to their past lives is infrathin, always there—particularly in their woodenness, in their grain.

Levine has always had a taste for wood; it has served as a ground for her work since her 1984 casein-on-mahogany paintings after Kasimir Malevich and Ilya Chasnick; she unveiled it as her subject in the *Knot Paintings* of the later 1980s. In those works on blank plywood grounds, Levine’s intervention was to paint the regularized but seemingly random eye-shaped plugs lumber companies use to repair knots and irregularities in the grain, an image at once based on chance aberrations and interruptions, and absolutely machine-made—at once intentional and, like the wooden objects here, found. Nature in Levine’s work almost always has an unnatural and, indeed, fully cultural aspect. Under her gaze, it tends to grow unnaturally, to become imagelike, sculpture on its own—like *Scholar Figure*, but also like her photographs of plants *After Blossfeldt* (1990) or the *Gottscho-Schleisner Orchids* (1964–1997).

The oldest work in the exhibition is a series of small paintings on cherry panels from the mid-1990s. Each panel holds the same image, one after another, of a disgruntled cartoon animal. Levine’s subject here is Fitz the Dog, created by the cartoonist Dick Huemer for Max Fleischer Studios in the 1920s. Levine cropped Fitz’s portrait from an animator’s guide showing the decidedly human dog from the front, side, and rear, and running through a set of cartoon emotions. Blown up and fitted to the cherry panels, the animator’s fluid ink lines become craggy, roughhewn, and abstract; they barely hold together as a face. And here they come around to *Head* and *Scholar Figure*, nearly overwhelmed by their materiality and again their woodenness.

¹
Quoted in William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).