



## STILL STANDING (AFTER BALANCING EN POINTE FOR NEARLY FOUR DECADES)

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### From Decorated Totems to Post-nuclear Primitivism

When Coleen Sterritt arrived in Los Angeles in 1977 to attend graduate school at the Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design), she was among the first wave of artists to inhabit downtown Los Angeles' deserted industrial buildings.<sup>1</sup> There she created *Loose Shorts* (1978), an installation of 25 bamboo tripods. Atop each tripod Sterritt balanced a river rock, some sporting tribal headdresses made from rubber tubes, latex, paint and/or tar. The program at Otis supported diverse art-making practices and the student-run gallery aided Sterritt's interest in architectural installations. She worked closely with Betye Saar who nurtured her ornamental impulse. She was also introduced to Arte Povera and the lectures of Germano Celant encouraged her interest in everyday materials. Sterritt's deployment of industrial media in tandem with natural materials expanded and developed the idea of altering natural forms into subversive hybrid entities. Her approach was to create autonomous, freestanding sculptures that she would then decorate, rather than assembling poetic compositions from disparate fragments. Using decoration to stylize or personalize objects eventually became the hallmark of art associated with "identity politics." But back then, it ran counter to that era's *unadorned* movements, most notably Minimalism, Process Art, Earthworks, and Finish Fetish, whose practitioners simulated the gleaming surfaces of surfboards and hot rods.<sup>2</sup> However LACMA's 1978 presentation of Ken Price's *Happy Curios*, housewares inspired by Oaxacan pottery, publicly affirmed her decorative urge.

Ever since *Loose Shorts*, Sterritt's attention has been trained on sculpture, which she considers a form of emotional and psychological self-portraiture. Her earliest sculptures convey figures sporting piercings, spurs, and spikes. As such, several objects evoke morning stars more than sculptures. One even imagines some beast

Installation of *Loose Shorts*, Otis Art Institute, 1978

swinging *Rocket Red* (a three-legged dominatrix wearing red spikes and balanced on conical heels) like a mace. *Cabrillo Jumpsuit* (1978), a tripod bearing an unadorned stone atop its cinched waste suggests a white jumpsuit bedecked with black spikes, recalling that era's fierce punk looks (the Cramps and Black Flag emerged in 1976). Just as Brancusi's endless column was initially meant as a pedestal, *Up-deck Privilege* and *Tropical Tilt* (both 1979), two four-legged tables dressed in high-heeled silver boots seem to have tossed their displays, becoming the objects themselves. These two towers were featured in "Downtown L.A. in Santa Barbara" (1980), the wildly controversial exhibition of sixteen artists organized by Betty Klausner for the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum. Klausner's early inclusion of street art incited public vehemence!<sup>3</sup>

The edgy sculpture *Collect Call from Jimmy to Pinky* (1980) was included in LAICA's 1980 exhibition, "Southern California Artists," curated by Barbara Haskell of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In reviewing the show, *LA Times* chief critic William Wilson described *Collect Call...* as a "big, black minimalist wedge covered with gunk and pierced with sharpened sticks...virtually indistinguishable from familiar provincial Modernism of two decades standing."<sup>4</sup> In a class all its own, I really can't imagine anyone associating a "gunked-up," "pierced" and un-bronzed angled plane with either modernist or minimalist tendencies. During this time Sterritt started producing drawings that informed her sculptural practice but, unlike most sculptors' drawings from that era, hers did not describe the sculpture in a representational manner. Using various media she incorporated geometric and organic shapes that refer to both man-made and natural structures that appear in different forms in her sculpture. Only two years out of graduate school, Sterritt's first solo show in 1981 at Mark Quint's brand new San Diego gallery featured only drawing.

Whether Sterritt was channeling her own youthful angst or that era's punk energy, her emotionally raw sculptures complimented the Neo-Expressionist paintings on view at Ulrike Kantor Gallery (1979-1986), where she was the lone sculptor (and woman) to have a solo exhibition.<sup>5</sup> Shorn of their spikes and spurs, one imagines Sterritt's vertical, angular wedges and pyramids informing *Noche a Noche*, *Jigpost*, and *Hats Off, Mr. 95* (all 1981) being monochrome prototypes for that era's Memphis Design (1981-1987). Joan Hugo made a similar point in her review of Sterritt's 1982 Kantor show, characterizing a handful of tiny sculptures as "reliquaries of the monastic style," while describing three oversized red sculptures as "anonymous architectural antecedents," noting that Michael Kurcfeld called Sterritt's vernacular "Post-nuclear primitivism."<sup>6</sup> The best example of Sterritt's primitivist foray is *O.W.W.I.H.* (1984), which coincided with MoMA's "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern" (1984).<sup>7</sup> Others like *Endear 153* (1987), *Pike: For Earl the Pearl* (1988), and *Cradle Up* (1989) perfectly blend tribal and modernist elements. Sterritt's biomorphic sculptures are as strong as any produced by Martin Puryear or Louise Bourgeois during the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

Her sculpture has been described as: "characteristically gruff and imposing"; "ungainly"; "crude and awkward"; "leggy, gawky" and "an organic nervous, biological geometry"; "jagged, spikey agglomeration of studio detritus"; "charged with psychological tension"; as well as: "balance[d], against all odds, with an entirely unlikely dignity"; "a virtuoso acrobatic performance"; "an exquisite, tenuous balance that speaks very much to the organization of nature"; and as recently as 2013 "funky sculpture," "wonderful[ly] clumsy[y]," and "subtly rebellious."<sup>9</sup>

Two points arise from such incredulous reactions to Sterritt's work. I imagine her self-portraits seeming at odds with their actual allure, but only when spectators focus more on outward appearances rather than on the internal energy expressed in the work. Such critical responses indicate that her sculptures truly challenged expectations of sculpture, let alone women sculptors, of which Sterritt was among her community's rare contemporary example. From the onset, critics sensed her focus on *balance* as a distinct aspect all its own, since her sculptures habitually balance their unwieldy physical presence with expression, emotion, and candor. The "ungainly" remains the hallmark of her routine efforts to linger off-kilter, as she develops ever more elaborate balancing acts.

### From a Moveable Feast to Onomatopoeia

Blending found objects, studio artifacts, and natural materials, Sterritt's works have anticipated larger artworld discussions concerning primitivism's impact on art in the 1980s (from tribal decoration to identity politics), the beauty debates of the 1990s (her sculptures waver between sexy sirens and punk aesthetes), and more recently, lo-fi materiality. Like Arte Povera (1962-1972) artists Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Gilberto Zorio, Sterritt has often deployed nature in her art, but she has eschewed their urge to cast otherwise ephemeral materials in bronze, aluminum, or glass, thereby freezing them in place. I don't want to make some "ideological" claim like "Sterritt keeps it real," but she has thus far avoided giving in to "forever," though I doubt that her limber sculptures are in jeopardy of disappearing anytime soon.

Thanks to Sterritt's handling of materials, her sculptures emanate energy and radiate a sense of movement ordinarily lacking in static, cast sculptures. In a review of "Raw Grace" (1988), at the Otis/Parson Gallery, Marlena Donohue remarked, "Though [Sterritt] uses tough materials- wood, concrete, resin and Fiberglass, the works glide and bend through space."<sup>10</sup> Even the large-scale, swan-like *Flush* (1991) seems ready to soar over the floor, while *T.S.A.E.* (1990) hints at someone pinned to the wall, wriggling *en pointe*, as he/she tries to break free. With *30-H* (1990), one senses an ice skater lifting a partner, whose feet and arms remain fully stretched overhead. Works like *Albatross* (1994), *Low Yellow*, and *Looking Over* (both 1995) insinuate animal figures such as dogs, sheep, and ducks.

In mid-1995 a significant shift occurred in Sterritt's process. She began using increasingly ephemeral material, harvesting discarded fragments and detritus from the street and studio. Cardboard, carpet, plastics, plywood, and bits of dismantled sculptures changed the direction of her work. She began stacking, gathering, folding and arranging these recycled materials, making three-dimensional pieces from relatively planar materials. *My Original Face, in Two Piles, Now Hanging* (1995) is a suspended conglomeration that launched this new direction. *Red Stack (Heartbeat)* (1995) stands over six-feet tall and the crinkled sheets atop seem to flutter like a pitter-pattering heart. Sterritt's eleven-foot tall *Fandancer (for J.S.)* (1997) spoofs burlesque fantasies with surprisingly mundane materials.

Sterritt's *Syncopated Stack* (2001), *Squeezebox* (2002), *Pinecone Stack* (2003-2004), and *Diagramme de Navigation de Mon Coeur* (2005) anticipated the "slice, dice and splice" approach popularized in the mid-aughties by Miami-based Mark Handforth and fellow Angeleno Matthew Monahan. Rather than chopping up everything just to amplify the perspectives ordinarily afforded sculpture's 360-degree vantage, Sterritt's artistic process directly links the exploitation of natural resources to our built environment; hence the stump bases, plywood sheeting, carved spindles, birch branches, and faux-antique table.

4 More recently, the implicit movements of Sterritt's sculptures have given way to silent sounds. *Tall, Tender, and Extremely Touchy* (2011) appears primed like a top to perform a pirouette, while *Honey Pile* (2011) and *Over & Over (Flat White)* (2013) feel like they fell *kerplunk* on their derrières! *And Then Some* (2012) looks like it's picking up live sounds with antennae-like mics that could be broadcast through the sophisticated speaker system evoked by *EAR, near, dear, Hear, Clear* (2014). *Stiffy* (2014) suggests rhythmic instruments, resembling harps whose pliable strings are replaced with cords connoting arrows and drum sticks.

Sterritt continues to erect ever more chaotic towers balanced *en pointe*, as evidenced by recent works like *Green Rondo à la Turk* (2015), *Fleur du Mal*, and *Sexy Beast* (both 2016). These works exploit readymade forms by pulling naturally occurring materials such as sea sponges, an agave stump and palm fronds into the mix. The pieces convey the same upward movement and explosive energy found in earlier works like *Daddy-O* (2006) and *Coatdress/ButterUp* (1996). *Fleur du Mal* and *Daddy-O* conjure incendiary circus acts, while the giant *Sexy Beast* appears to perch like a lion, ready to pounce at any moment.

#### Anticipating Encore Performances

With the art world so focused on emerging artists, their progenitors often go ignored. Monographs provide opportunities to rectify the imbalances, inviting



viewers to evaluate the relevance of an earlier artist's oeuvre and to assess its legacy. The appellation "artist" implies that one's work has influenced others, or at least paved the way so that what occurs later gets noticed. Rather than taking Sterritt's influence for granted, I situate her work amidst Los Angeles' vast sculptural field. In recent years, this city has lured scores of sculptors keen to crack sculpture's unrealized potential rather than escape its limits, as those smitten by Rosalind Krauss' "expanded field" have done. Elsewhere, only a handful of artists under the age of sixty are known for "sculpting" *in* their studios.<sup>11</sup>

To my lights, Sterritt's forty-year oeuvre sets the stage for three local exhibitions that were organized to capitalize on Los Angeles' stature as sculpture's global capital: "Mise en Scène: New L.A. Sculpture" (2000) at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica; "Thing" (2005) at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and "Another Thing Coming" (2014) at the Torrance Art Museum, Torrance. Serving as the missing link between Finish Fetish and "thingness," Sterritt's hand-made, free-standing objects set a precedent for two generations of artists who remained committed sculptors (those who came in the mid-eighties and those who arrived in the early aughts), long after their global peers discovered interventions, social sculpture, public art, environmental art, etc. Buoyed by the bulwark that long-standing careers like Sterritt's provide, local sculptors more easily stay the course, rather than jumping ship whenever sculpture hits a wall.

In hindsight, Sterritt's sculptures raised the curtains for: Liz Larner's floating color forms, Rachel Lachowicz's waxy-red artifacts, Patrick Nickell's delicate items, Lynn Aldrich's quotidian agglomerations, Evan Holloway's spindly armatures, Mindy Shapero's psychedelic cuttings, Kate Costello's rough-hewn figures, Joel Morrison's aluminum blobs, Miyoshi Barosh's furniture amalgams, and Thomas Houseago's lo-fi primatavist monuments. Even sculptors who claim little or no familiarity with Sterritt's oeuvre cannot deny the impact of her slew of fifteen solo exhibitions, as well as her thirty-four-year teaching career at Otis College of Art and Design, Claremont Graduate School, and program head at Long Beach City College.

It matters that site-relational and component-based works like *My Original Face...* and *SqueezeBox* are seen as sculpture, not installation art. Sculpture asks whether this object can stand on its own two feet (both physically and conceptually), while installation art asks where the spectator ought to stand. Sterritt has always considered her sculptures to be self-portraits—not as objects to be psychoanalytically analyzed, but as active bodies with agency, implicitly moving and making noise. Compared to the intricate narratives some artists proffer to bolster their practices' complexity, Sterritt's "self-portraits," precariously balanced *en pointe*, remain comparatively cloaked in mystery. Her sculptures are risk-taking actors standing provocatively on the landscape of contemporary sculpture.

## Endnotes

1. Sterritt is one of 14 downtown Los Angeles artists featured in *Young Turks* (2013), Stephen Seemayer and Pamela Wilson's documentary of this epic era, ca 1977-1981.
2. In 1978, Rosalind Krauss had yet to publish her seminal essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), which describes *in situ* works created by New York artists beyond the limits of both sculpture and the city.
3. Ross, Richard, "At Large In Santa Barbara," *Journal L.A.I.C.A.* Number 28, September–October 1980, pp. 45-47. The groundbreaking "Downtown L.A. in Santa Barbara" (1980) should definitely have been featured in "Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945-1980" (2011), initiated by the Getty Foundation.
4. William Wilson, "Toward a Definition of Post-Modern," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, February 1, 1981, p. 82.
5. The "it" gallery in 1982, Ulrike Kantor showed Sterritt alongside painters Roger Herman, Gary Lloyd, Gary Lang, David Amico, George Condo, Victor Henderson, and Andy Wilf.
6. Joan Hugo, "Ambiguous Presences," *Artweek*, February 6, 1982, p. x. Los Angeles art critic Joan Hugo (1930-2006) got her start in the art world as the Otis Art Institute librarian. In addition to serving as So Cal editor of *Artweek* (1980-1990), west coast editor of *New Art Examiner* (1990-1994) and assistant to Cal Art's Provost for eleven years, she authored scores of catalog essays.
7. I use primitivism to mean that which "celebrates certain values or forms regarded as primal, ancestral, fertile and regenerative." *Grove Art Online* encyclopedia: Cardinal, R. 'Primitivism' *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 5, 2012. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T069588>. Antliff, Mark and Patricia Leighton, 'Primitive' Critical Terms for Art History, R. Nelson and R. Shiff (Eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 (rev. ed. 2003).
8. As a genre, the 1980s version of "Biomorphic Sculpture" covers a diverse range of sculptures produced by England's David Nash and Anish Kapoor, Angelenos Tony DeLap and Charles Fine, and New York-based sculptors Louise Bourgeois, St. Clair Cemin, Katherine Dowling, John Duff, David Henderson, Bryan Hunt, Win Knowlton, Catherine Lee, Andrew Lord, Martin Puryear, William Tucker and Ursula von Rydingsvard. Even LA sculptor Liz Larner, whose work defies this genre has occasionally cast twigs in bronze (early 90s and *Ghost Story* (2002-2003)).
9. Frank, Peter. "Coleen Sterritt." *LA Weekly*, 29 Jan.1988, p.x; Clothier, Peter. "Coleen Sterritt," *LA Weekly*, 31 Jan.1986, p. x; Hugo, Joan. "Critics Choice: Downtown Artists." Los Angeles: Transamerica Center. 1984; Couzens, Julia. "Coleen Sterritt: Stuck to the World" Riverside Art Museum. 2006. Mallinson, Constance. "Coleen Sterritt: Between." University Art Gallery, California State University, Stanislaus. 2009; Hugo, Joan. "Six Downtown Sculptors." *Artweek* 21 Apr. 1979; Frank Peter. "Haiku Reviews: Intergalactic Sculpture, Drag Opera and the History of the Piano." *HuffingtonPost.com*. 5 Dec. 2011; Mallinson, Constance. "Coleen Sterritt at d.e.n. contemporary art." *Art in America*. Mar. 2007. p.x; Satorius, Katherine. "Coleen Sterritt at d.e.n. contemporary art." *Artweek*. Feb. 2007, p.x; Pagel, David. "Coleen Sterritt's 'Torque' Rebels in Subtle Ways." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Dec.2013.
10. Donohue, Marlana. "Sculpture Taking its Lyrical Ease Beyond Gender in 'Raw Grace,'" *Los Angeles Times*. 13 Aug. 1988. p.x.
11. A short list of studio-oriented sculptors (<60) these days includes: Mirosław Bałka, Carol Bove, Michael E. Smith, Rachel Harrison, Mark Manders, Doris Salcedo, and Tatiana Trouvé!