

Momus

Touch, Desire, and the Trinket Box: Celia Perrin Sidarous Shifts Time

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Celia Perrin Sidarous's second solo exhibition at Montreal's [Parisian Laundry](#) was suffused with a sense of authority and sobriety that feels new in her work – a cool, quiet solidity that echoes the ancient stone and marble monuments of her recent photographic subjects. This exhibition, with its poetic, deliberately multilingual Moebius strip of a title, *Toujours la coquille de l'autre always the shell of another*, is also the first time that Sidarous has exhibited her own hand-crafted ceramics. Many of these objects have appeared, over the last several years, in the carefully-arranged assemblages of objects that Sidarous collects and photographs in her studio. Seeing them in person adds a fresh act to the artist's already-complex play of mediation between craft and reproduction, material presence and historical memory.

Since Sidarous began her practice nearly a decade ago, her *tableaux* (still lifes, essentially) have been characterized by the artist's refined sense for aesthetic distinctions. Such sensibility is in fact what these works are about: the intuitive judgment that makes things look and feel *right* together. How objects speak to one another (and to their beholders) across time and space is a question that bridges domains both profane (advertising, art direction, product styling) and sacred (curation, museology, scholarship). While Sidarous borrows codes from both of these worlds, this latest exhibition finds her more confident than ever in her command of the language of desire.

Whereas Sidarous's earlier work often foregrounded the precariousness and humble provenance of her collections of found objects and images – vintage furniture and knickknacks, magazine clippings, old books, fresh fruit, small stones, and casually draped fabrics – her subjects, their composition within the frame, and their presentation within the exhibition space, have become simultaneously more authoritative and more intimate. Her studio constructions, even when composed of fragile or perishable materials – as in the delicately-balanced configuration of *Earth Cherry, Olive, Moonstone* (all works 2018) – now seem to manifest the same ageless self-possession as the preserved antique fragments that she photographs.

In part, this feeling of seriousness is a function of Sidarous's deepened investment in classical Greek antiquity. Ruins and statuary cropped up in some of her early work as clippings borrowed from old picture-books, but in 2015, she undertook her first voyage to Greece: Pompeii and Athens. This trip provided Sidarous's subsequent work with much of its raw material and inspiration, evident in her first solo show with *Parisian Laundry, Les Figures*, in 2016, as well as the photographic installation and short film she presented in that year's [Montreal Biennial](#).

A few months ago Sidarous returned to Greece, visiting Athens and Delphi as well as Cyprus. Many of the works in this exhibition were shot during this trip, including parts of her second 16mm film work, *Slip* – a kind of refined and expanded sequel to *Minor Key* (2016) – which was projected in *Parisian Laundry's* basement "bunker," in contemplative isolation from the photographs and ceramics upstairs. (Given the exhibition's overall Greek theme, I'm tempted to draw an analogy with Plato's cave: viewers presented with flickering images in the dark.)



Celia Perrin Sidarous, "Niké ailée, koré, Sphinx des Naxiens. Les musées grecs – Delphes, Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1975," 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Parisian Laundry.

Classical antiquity has often served, art historically, as a convenient shorthand for the passage of time in general. Over and above the specific characteristics of Greco-Roman ruins or statuary, it signifies the tragic grandeur of time's indifference to human effort, while also underscoring the persistence of forms and artifacts over eons, as traces and fragments. In her play with objects and their photographic reproduction, time has been an ongoing concern for Sidarous: how material things bear witness to it, how images store and record it – issues crucially connected to her reliance on outmoded media technologies like medium-format analogue photography and celluloid film.

Most palpable in Sidarous's work is time's tendency to strip away context. Her arrangements collapse the difference between natural and cultural, new and old, proceeding by an improvisational logic of formal equivalence and aesthetic resonance, rather than a conceptual schema of research and referentiality. In these recent works, the accumulation of deep temporal layers invokes a kind of mythic quality, but what attracted Sidarous to Greece, she says, was not the supposed timelessness of ancient culture but the weird *déjà vu* of experiencing *too much* time, temporalities sedimented in uneven, sometimes surreal layers.

Take, for example, the monument represented in *Colonne serpentine, réplique du trépied de Platés d'après un moulage de l'original d'Istanbul, Delphes* (Sidarous prefers these titles to remain in French). This twisted bronze column, standing in the open air at Delphi, flanked by cypress trees and captured in a dreamy, washed-out color palette, is a copy. The original, however, is one of the most well-documented artifacts of Greek and Roman antiquity. Made in the form of three twined serpents, it was once surmounted by a bronze tripod built to commemorate the Battle of Plataea almost 2,500 years ago, in which the Greek victory over the Persians laid the foundations for the flowering of democracy in Athens. According to Herodotus, the column was built using the bronze from melted-down Persian weapons, and was placed next to Delphi's altar of Apollo. In 324 A.D., the column was moved to

Constantinople, where it remains today. The museum at Delphi has held a copy since 1980, but the current replica was installed in 2015, only a short time before Sidarous encountered it. And, of course, visiting sites like these means fighting the crush of tourists, only to find the same thing you've already encountered in postcards and reproductions. One only ever encounters the past by proxy.



Celia Perrin Sidarous, "Colonne serpentine," 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Parisian Laundry.

The superimposition of one history over another is at the heart of Sidarous's fascination with material objects. It's a mode of survival, in which forms persist through displacement, copying, replication, and translation. It also explains how her documentation of artifacts – outdoors or in museums – fits within her expanded conception of the still life. Sidarous uses photography not only to make pictures, but as a method of collecting. In this, she subtly suggests the way that photography creates an equivalence that enables processes of ordering, selection, and classification. As André Malraux noted in *The Museum Without Walls*, the ideal museum is actually a book of reproductions. Appropriately, Sidarous has also photographed artifacts from the faded pages of vintage books, as in one work that depicts an ancient Nike and a sphinx, gazing impassively from an art catalogue – serendipitously found in the artist's lodgings in Athens – laid open on a marble floor.

These photographs of figurative sculptures also highlight what's absent from Sidarous's work – namely, human bodies. Aside from the timeworn faces of these statues, the only human presence in these works appears in the form of hands, the significance of which is hard to overstate. In her earlier work, Sidarous's hands remained invisible, suggested only by their off-stage role in moving, touching, and arranging objects. Now they have entered the frame – though the artist's *own* hands only appear in parts of *Slip*. In *Bivalvia* and *Abalone*, a model's hands elegantly display single seashells in front of a satiny, dark-green backdrop; in the former, the two halves of the shell are curiously joined by a metal hinge, like a "trinket box," to borrow a phrase from Iliana Antonova's evocative exhibition text. In *Lucie*, the graceful hand of the artist's Egyptian aunt (a former model and dancer) lightly caresses the lip of another seashell, set upon a glistening black plate and spilling forth a small assortment of pearls.

In *Slip*, that same aunt's hands become a kind of character, gingerly moving around the objects in various assemblages and meditatively pouring a thick white fluid from small ceramic vessels into other ones, which inevitably overflow. In other scenes, Sidarous's own hands turn the pages of the same picture book that appears in her photos, intercut with footage of the rolling surf of Greek beaches. Accompanied only by the rhythmic whirring of the projector, the film has a hypnotic effect that borders on [ASMR](#) – there is something atavistically thrilling about watching a stranger's beautiful hands perform subtle, mysterious gestures.



Celia Perrin Sidarous, "Lucie," 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Parisian Laundry.

According to Sidarous, *touch* became considerably more important in her work when she began making her own ceramics to supplement her found objects. There are also notable resonances between ceramics and analogue film: both kiln-firing and photographic-developing require a time interval between the initial moment of creation and the final result, one that cedes a certain amount of control to the materials themselves. The tangibility involved in both processes is precisely what the hands in Sidarous's recent work stand in for: the seductive, almost fetishistic appeal of craft skills in the age of digital media. Analogue slowness rhymes with the thematic dwelling on complex sedimentations of time: both are pitched against the disposable immediacy of digital playback and the logic of nervous gratification inherent to the internet's vertical feeds. All the same, Sidarous is not necessarily working against the grain of our contemporary condition so much as she is, like everyone else, immersed within it.

The processes of selection, archiving, and arrangement that form the basis of Sidarous's practice are also, of course, the native language of digital culture. Her intuitive probing of formal resemblance and the pre-conscious appeal of object aesthetics – the game of determining what combinations and juxtapositions of colors, shapes, and textures will excite the viewer's desire – is fundamentally not so different from the efforts expended by countless marketers and Instagram influencers (often weaponized at scale with the aid of data and algorithms). Moreover, the tactile appeal of the hand-crafted and the authenticity of the historically-certified are precisely what targeted ads are likely to be selling – there's value in scarcity. The difference, perhaps, is that Sidarous's investigation is liberated, abstracted, or otherwise elevated from instrumental goals – the faculty of judgment in free play, like art is supposed to be.

It's also, more pragmatically, geared towards art's particular economy. As Claire Bishop [once wrote](#) about Tacita Dean, another artist noted for her "archival aesthetic" and fidelity to old media, "The sumptuous texture of indexical media is unquestionably seductive, but its desirability also arises from the impression that it is scarce, rare, precious." In this regard, it is clearly smart, strategically, for Sidarous to direct her attention to more "museum-quality" objects. A similar impulse also extended to this exhibition's presentation strategies. Aside from the muted tones and prevalence of black-and-white in this suite of photographs, the hanging was more uniform and restrained than anything Sidarous has mounted to date: all the photographs were identically framed and ran in a continuous line around the walls of the gallery, which was crossed by a long, white plinth bearing dozens of Sidarous's small ceramic vessels and sculptures, all in cool, marine shades of green, blue, grey, and white that corresponded to the photos.



Celia Perrin Sidarous, "Toujours la coquille de l'autre always the shell of another," (Installation view), 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Parisian Laundry. Photo: Maxime Brouillet.

These small objects were the most curious aspect of the exhibition. Untitled, they didn't seem to assert 'art status' on the same level as Sidarous's photographs or film – not singly, at least. Rather, they were accessories to the process of creation. In their unassuming presence, however, they were also strikingly poetic – they offered the viewer an up-close view of talismans enchanted with Sidarous's studio magic. They also suggested an apposite through-line between the most ancient and contemporary facets of the show. Clay and pottery come freighted with archaeological connotations – artifacts used to date a site. Like the photographs in which they appear, these ceramics suggest a mode of containing time. Furthermore, they evoke the shell of the exhibition's title (which some of them resemble) – the empty trace of a previously vital thing, but an emptiness that can be occupied – a shelter, a treasure.