

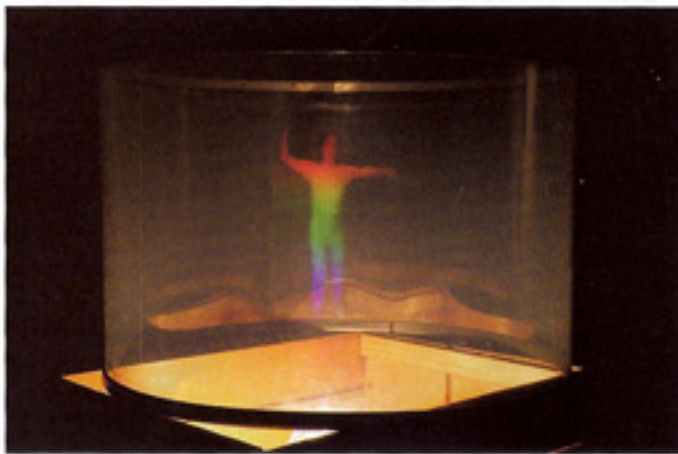
LOS ANGELES

Simone Forti

THE BOX

Dance has long been overlooked in the art world. But in the past decade, a handful of modest retrospective exhibitions have used the gallery setting to redress the medium's wide-ranging role in the post-war avant-garde, with institutions from the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis granting overdue attention to the careers of such figures as Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer. The most recent subject of this renewed interest is Simone Forti, who received a solo exhibition at the Box, a young gallery committed to exhibiting underrecognized artists and that has, so far, directed much of its focus toward figures who established their careers in the '60s. Forti began dancing with Halprin in 1955, and has since worked with many of the most significant artists of her generation. After the premiere of her seminal *Dance Constructions* at Yoko Ono's Chambers Street loft in 1961, she became a rare figure able to circulate among the conceptually oriented Judson Church group and the more expressionist Happenings scene. Forti's innovative use of props, such as the incline affixed with ropes that dancers climbed in *Slant Board* and the human-enclosing boxes used in *Platforms* (both 1961) influenced the sculpture of her then-husband Robert Morris, and she was called upon frequently to perform in works by Robert Whitman and Robert Rauschenberg, including the latter's *Open Score*, 1966.

Titled "Work in a Range of Mediums," the show surveyed nearly fifty years of Forti's movement-based practice, and displayed a surprising array of media: video and photographic documentation, drawings,



Simone Forti,
Angel (detail),
1978, hologram,
60 x 16 1/2 x 12 1/2".

paintings, notebooks, artists' books, audio recordings, and a hologram. The last—*Angel*, 1978—requires the viewer to circumnavigate its cylindrical form in order to bring the artist's body, an iridescent pixie, to life.

Forti was formally trained in painting while studying at Hunter College in the mid-'60s, and draftsmanship has remained important to her practice. Here, a suite of eighteen drawings, titled *Great Thanks, Empty Words*, 1984, hung in the exhibition's first room, revealing the artist's careful attention to bodily forms and their individual qualities of movement. Inspired by Thoreau's nature studies (which she discovered via John Cage), Forti made the drawings while observing pigeons in Central Park; she reduced the birds' gestures—standing still, lifting one wing, shaking tail feathers—to just a few ink strokes. Unlike the indexical mark-making for which her contemporary Trisha Brown is known, Forti's sketches align surprisingly with Maria Lassnig's semi-abstract body-awareness drawings (in which the artist translates her physical sensations into visual forms) yet work toward an *out-of-body* experience, a self-estrangement from the body in order to rediscover it through the movements of an other.

Forti's work explores the limits of physical relationality, with the body imagined as a kind of tuning fork to the world. To that end, she has turned her attention not only to other species, but also to how dance might resonate with current events. In her ongoing "News Animations" series, begun in 1986, Forti seeks to "dance the news" through improvisations that employ props such as newspapers or, as in a 2004 performance at the Getty Center, the American flag. These objects become the artist's dance partners, and their associations structure movement and speech. New performance works presented alongside the exhibition show Forti thinking more deeply about language cross-culturally in a time of extended political conflict. In *To Borrow Salt*, which premiered at the Box just prior to the show's opening, written placards were hung on the wall and strewn across the floor, performers spoke over one another, and Forti narrated her ambivalent feelings toward pro-Iranian democracy rallies that have taken place near her home. The intergenerational audience at these events—Forti's old friends mixed with emerging LA artists such as Elana Mann and Vincent Ramos, nondancers who incorporate movement into their work—is one more welcome indication that if avant-garde dance once struggled to be recognized within art history, we are now entering a time when that will no longer be the case.

—Natilee Harren

Paul Outerbridge

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

Is there anybody left who would question the viability of photography as an artistic medium? With high-profile exhibitions of the Pictures generation and the New Topographics group, and a slew of recent or upcoming group shows of emerging artists working in and around the medium, photography never seemed more *serious* as a medium—or site of discourse. Even Michael Fried, a major critic who by and large sidestepped three decades of art's development after Minimalism, eventually turned his attention to the once-lowly discussion.

Still, not every photograph qualifies as art—or even aspires to the category. In fact, given the exponential proliferation of photographic images, very few do. But photography's relatively brief history is filled with the most fascinating border skirmishes, and one of the most compelling involves Paul Outerbridge, a master technician who worked successfully executing elaborate domestic still-life commissions for magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *McCall's*, and *House Beautiful* in the

first half of the twentieth century, but derailed his career by pushing what he considered his, well, "serious" art: a body of work increasingly comprised of stagy, erotic female nudes.

The historical tension between these perceived poles was amplified in a major retrospective of Outerbridge's work at the J. Paul Getty Museum that featured more than one hundred works, from early black-and-white prints to the complex carbon- (a portmanteau of "carbon" and "bromide") process color works for which he became most famous. The skin tones of the nudes showcase the rich hues of the latter, and by contemporary standards the majority of Outerbridge's "scandalous" images are rather tame; most would look perfectly at home in *Vanity Fair*—in either the advertising or editorial section. Several of these—including *Nude with Claws*, in which a woman presses the blades of leather gardening gloves against her breast and ribs, and *Phoenix Rising*, both 1937, in which a male but sits atop a woman's bare chest—aggressively confront the viewer's face in favor of fetishistic attention to the female torso and face, hinting at sympathies shared with Outerbridge's Surrealist contemporaries Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. (The latter reportedly bought a production of Outerbridge's elegant black-and-white *Idle Gossip* in his studio and declared it a readymade.)

Paradoxically, then, the nudes anticipate much contemporary commercial photography, while the work-for-hire setups anticipate a significant precursor for a diverse group of younger artists, among them Roe Ethridge, Elad Lassry, and Eileen Quinlan, among others. They have investigated the codes and artifice of the photographic. Outerbridge's tableaux are consistently rigorous in composition, mixing "textbook" formal refinement (he authored the manual *Photographing in Color* in 1940) with bottom-line pragmatism (*Coffee Drinkers*, 1939, in which four men in business attire wearing a gingham apron) gather in a modern American kitchen actually photographed at a department store—a location that offered a dressed set and more space to accomplish the shot. The majority of Outerbridge's still-life compositions feature frames within frames. In *Tools with Blueprint*, 1939, an image of a house is straddled by it appears either as a view out of a construction site or an image to the wall; *Images de Deauville*, 1936, is similarly composed, a framed image of a "distant" sailboat and an assortment of shells, including a scale-defying seashell and die, situated in the foreground.

Outerbridge frequently borrowed from art history (Ingols, De Chirico, Kandinsky, and so on) in both his commercial and personal work, and regardless of these references, his compositions evidence the work of a dedicated modernist who understood that one could fully commit to a photographic image, twice over: first, in front of the lens, within the lab. In retrospect, his "art" and his commercial work are parallel ways of doing the same inventive thing—making photos rather than taking them. This timely survey should help to reevaluate Outerbridge's valuable contribution at and beyond the boundaries of the photographic medium.

—Michael Nash

