

currents 113

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# SHIMON ATTIE

Lost in Space (After Huck)

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM





*WILD AND URGENT (i)*, Two on-location custom made light boxes, Settler Houses, Israeli Settlement, West Bank, 2014; digital C print; 27 x 40 inches/48 x 72 inches; from *Facts on the Ground*, Shimon Attie, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York © Shimon Attie

Installation Shot, Borsgraven Canal, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1995; nine 2x2 meter Duratrans photographs mounted on light boxes submerged 1 meter under water; on light box in foreground: *Present day Yugoslavian refugee with Danish entry stamp on passport*; from *Portraits of Exile*, Shimon Attie, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York © Shimon Attie

Shimon Attie's work explores ideas of space, place, social memory, and identity. His multifaceted projects shine a light on what has been lost, buried, or forgotten. The visual and auditory experiences that Attie creates in his artworks expose the layers of history that construct our world.

For *Currents 113: Lost in Space (After Huck)* Attie has created a new, immersive site-specific installation. A sculpture of a ghostly white raft floats in the middle of the room. Illuminated from above, the raft's cast resin seems to emit a soft, otherworldly glow. As a sculptural object, the raft alludes to the history of minimalist and post-minimalist art. Formal connections can be made to the geometric constructions of Robert Morris or Donald Judd and the work of Bruce Nauman—or even more contemporary work like the concrete casts of negative space by Rachel Whiteread and the conceptual sculptural forms of Wolfgang Laib.

Attie's raft is populated with several recognizable objects, seemingly left behind by its absent inhabitants. These objects—an oar, a knife, a corn cob pipe, three sticks bound at the top, and a bundle tied to a stick—all appear rudimentary and handmade. The raft and several of its iconic, rustic objects evoke a bygone era, drawing from an older aesthetic and literary tradition—19th-century Realism. In particular, the sculpture references the raft from Mark Twain's 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the book, Huck Finn and his travel companion Jim, a runaway slave, journey down the Mississippi River on a raft in search of freedom. Within this surreal world Attie has created, one item situated on the raft stands out from the others: a police light or safety siren. Sitting atop the white sculpture, softly glowing red, this recognizable object brings us back to our contemporary time.

Surrounding the sculpture on all sides is a six-channel video installation depicting a nocturnal scene. Floating clusters of light punctuated by flashes of lighting temporarily illuminate the room. Though the video environment seems to mirror the night sky, on closer examination the groups of stars are too dense and constructed to be an accurate depiction of a celestial vista.

The footage is actually taken from NASA satellites filming the United States at night. Instead of looking up into the realm of space, these “stars” are filmed looking down from space.

The largest areas of light correspond to geographical locations with the greatest population density (i.e. urban metropolises), while the sparser areas of illumination coincide with less populated regions (i.e. rural America). Within this wondrous environment, Attie overlaps multiple fantasies and realities: a contemporary lived space with romanticized depictions of nature, urban spaces with rural ones, and the celestial sphere with the terrestrial, manmade world. The musical soundtrack playing throughout the video's duration adds a powerful audio component to the installation. The audio consists of an abstraction of sounds culled from two broad categories: nature sounds such as those of a river, birds, or the forest, and sounds of our contemporary socio-political moment taken from cultural sources like television news and public affairs. As a whole, Attie's installation establishes a purposeful ambiguity, creating a symbolic space where meanings from the past can be examined alongside important socio-political issues of the present.

Throughout his career Attie has used art as a means to explore the relationship of past and present, with a particular interest in examining sites of trauma and disenfranchisement. In a series of installations produced in Europe between 1991 and 1996 titled *Sites Unseen*, Attie projected or embedded images into contemporary public spaces in Germany, Denmark, Poland, and the Netherlands. In the German and Dutch projects, he illustrated the life of European Jews prior to the end of World War II, while other groups of works made links between the history of the Second World War and the contemporary political moment. These images represented a history of people, architecture, neighborhoods, and ways of life that were destroyed by the Holocaust.

In one group of images from that series, *Portraits of Exile: Copenhagen*, 1996, Attie submerged a row of nine light boxes in the Børsgraven Canal. The canal was used as an escape route by the Danish government in 1943 to ferry the city's Jewish population to





safety in Sweden. The light boxes contained photographs of the faces of both Jewish refugees from World War II and those of contemporary refugees from the former Yugoslavia. *Portraits of Exile* juxtaposes a laudable action from the past with a Danish policy in the 1990s that detained Balkan War asylum seekers in severely overcrowded hostels for extended periods of time while determinations were made regarding their refugee status. These luminous images haunted the water, exposing the contradictory nature of politics by connecting the contemporary with historical circumstances.

Yet Attie's work neither provides a road map to history nor specific answers; rather, it conflates moments in history. According to Attie, "I intend for my artworks to be mirrors of the past and present, rather than articulating any specific message."

As in much of Attie's work, *Lost in Space (After Huck)* combines history and the contemporary to examine marginalized communities and moments of human displacement. In this installation, the artist turns to the historic position of Missouri as both the gateway between the United States' East and West and between our North and South. In referencing Mark Twain's novel, Attie comments on the history of race relations in the United States. Far from explicit in its meaning, the siren light becomes a multilayered symbol. A siren can indicate a police presence—a charged concept in contemporary society—but it can also serve as a security device or a warning, indicating that help is on the way or that one should exercise caution.

Just as the fictional character Huck navigated the constraints of society and culture—at times even questioning the morality of helping Jim to freedom—Huck and Jim's raft alludes to contradictions and polarizations within the history of race relations in America. Attie draws out the social and political history of Missouri's geographical location on the border between the North and slave-holding South. This history is placed in proximity to the

contemporary, not only through the video but through the siren light, which brings one back to a present in which our history continues to resonate.

Attie reveals how space defines us, and how we define space as well. He has explored a similar idea in his most recent body of work, *Facts on the Ground*, in which he examines the Israel/Palestine conflict. In a series of photographs, Attie interrupted desert landscapes with light boxes that have short, often poetic, statements on them. In one of the photographs the words, "WILD," on one light box stand near, "AND URGENT," on another. Both appear in front of a cluster of Israeli settler houses on the West Bank, with the flag of Israel caught in the wind. In the distance is another town, almost blending into the desert hills. The words ask the viewer to think more critically about the scene, allowing a multifaceted reading of a deeply complex situation.

The experience of viewing *Lost in Space (After Huck)* also asks us to contemplate the layered and complex structures of societies, whether represented by buildings, objects, or lights of cities passing underneath a technologically sophisticated satellite. These structures do not simply grow out of the ground like nature: we imagine and construct them and they represent our culture's myriad ideologies.

*Currents 113: Shimon Attie: Lost in Space (After Huck)* is curated by Hannah Klemm, assistant curator of modern and contemporary art, with Molly Moog, research assistant. Shimon Attie, Hannah Klemm and Molly Moog would like to thank the following for their support and assistance with this project: Brent Benjamin, David Burnett, Ann Burroughs, Kristin Cassidy, Carmon Colangelo, Heather Corcoran, Jon Cournoyer, Jeanette Fausz, Kaitlyn Garbarino, Simon Kelly, Michael Lantz, Ted Lawson at Prototype NYC, Jacopo Mazzoni, Diane Mallow, Courtney McCarty, Christopher Moreland, Patricia Olynk, Johnny Pelhank, Ella Rothgangel, Tim Skornia, Kari Varner, and Monika Weiss.

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#### SHIMON ATTIE

American, born 1957

MFA, San Francisco State University, CA, 1991  
MA, Antioch University, San Francisco, CA, 1982  
BA, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1980

#### Works in Exhibition

##### Gallery 210

*Untitled*, 2017

cast epoxy, rope, resin, and mixed media  
27 1/2 x 72 x 96 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York, NY

*Untitled*, 2017

six-channel video projection with audio soundtrack  
duration: 13 minutes 47 seconds, looped

Jacopo Mazzoni – animator

Marc Boutges – editor

Brooks Williams and Beo Morales – music composition and  
sound design

Sam Fox School of Art and Design, St. Louis and the School of  
Visual Arts, New York – facilities and equipment support  
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

##### Gallery 301

*The Crossing*, 2017

single-channel video with audio soundtrack  
duration: 8 minutes, looped

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions and Public Projects

2017

Kunstkraftwerk, Leipzig, Germany

2016

*Facts on the Ground*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY  
(exhibition and public project)

*The Attraction of Onlookers: Aberfan – An Anatomy of a Welsh  
Village*, National Museum Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom

2012-2013

*Shimon Attie: The Neighbor Next Door*, Mary and Leigh Block  
Museum of Art, Evanston, IL

2011-2013

*Shimon Attie: MetroPAL.IS.*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art  
Museum, Ridgefield, CT; The William Benton Museum of Art,  
Storrs, CT; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

2008-2009

*Shimon Attie—Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum*,  
de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA

2006

*New Work: Shimon Attie*, Miami Art Museum, FL

2004-2005

*Re/collecting: A Centennial Installation*,  
The Jewish Museum, New York, NY

2004

*The History of Another: Projections in Rome*,  
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL

2000

*White Nights, Sugar Dreams*,  
Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, RI

1999-2000

*Sites Unseen: Shimon Attie—Photographs and Public Projects*,  
1992-1998, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA

1998

*Between Dreams and History*, produced by Creative Time, Inc.,  
New York, NY (public project)

1996

*The Walk of Fame*, produced by the Goethe Institute,  
Krakow, Poland (public project)

1995

*Portraits of Exile*, produced by BizArt, Børsgren Canal,  
Copenhagen, Denmark (public project)

*Brick by Brick*, produced by the Cologne Kunstverein,  
Germany (public project)

*The Neighbor Next Door*, produced by the Paradox Foundation,  
Amsterdam, Netherlands (public project)

1993

*Trains II*, Dresden Central Train Station,  
Germany (public project)

1992-1993

*The Writing on the Wall*, Berlin, Germany (public project)

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2016-2017

*Intersections: Photographs and Videos from the National  
Gallery of Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art*,  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

2016

*Seeing! Saying: Images and Words*, Van Every Gallery,  
Davidson College, NC

*Defying Darkness: Photography at Night*,

Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA

2015-2016

*Art AIDS America*, Tacoma Art Museum, WA;  
The Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY

2012-2014

*WAR/PHOTOGRAPHY: Images of Armed Conflict and its  
Aftermath*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Annenberg  
Space for Photography, Los Angeles, CA; Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, D.C.; Brooklyn Museum, NY

2012

*Imaging History*, FotoMuseum, Antwerp, Belgium

2007-2008

*Photographs, New acquisitions*, 2003-2007,  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France

2006

*Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*,  
Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA

2004

*After Images: Kunst als soziales Gedächtnis*  
(After Images: Art as Social Memory), Neues Museum  
Weserburg, Bremen, Germany

2001

*Théâtres du fantastique: printemps de septembre*  
(Fantastic Theater: Spring of September), Toulouse, France

2000-1

*Open Ends: Counter-Monuments and Memory*, Museum of  
Modern Art, New York, NY

*46th Corcoran Biennial: Media/Metaphor*,

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

2000

*Seeing Double*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

1994-1995

*New Photography 10: Shimon Attie, Abelardo Morell, Jorge  
Ribalta, Michal Rovner*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

1994

*La ville—Visions urbaines* (The City—Urban Visions),  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France

#### Selected Awards

Lee Krasner Award, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, NY,  
2013-2014

Creative Arts Fellowship, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial  
Foundation, New York, NY, 2008-2009

Mildred Londa Weisman Fellowship, Radcliffe Institute for  
Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA,  
2006-2007

The Rome Prize, American Academy in Rome, Italy,  
2001-2002

**Cover:** Video Still from *Untitled*, 2017; courtesy of the artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York ©Shimon Attie

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