

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

Leslie Hewitt: Collective Stance By Liam Hess — July 20, 2016



Title : Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with Bradford Young, Stills, 2016, installation view, Collective Stance, SculptureCenter, 2016.

Medium : 2:42 minutes, looped

Material : Three synchronized video projections 35 mm film transferred to HD video and appropriated 16 mm film footage (c. 1976) transferred to HD video with permission from director Haile Gerima.

Website : <http://sculpture-center.org/home.htm>

Credit : Material and structural support provided by Lucien Terras Inc. Courtesy the artists and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell

A Leslie Hewitt: Collective Stance
SculptureCenter, New York
1 May - 1 August 2016
Review by Liam Hess

Where identity politics and art overlap, the body tends to be placed front and centre. From Cindy Sherman to Kehinde Wiley, David Wojnarowicz to Lorna Simpson, the experience of living as a minority has been overwhelmingly expressed through a reclamation of the marginalised body. Which is why Leslie Hewitt's new exhibition at the SculptureCenter in Queens, New York, is so surprising for its spartan modesty, a quietude that highlights both the riveting intellect and powerful emotional current of her work. 'Collective Stance' encourages the viewer to fill in the gaps of the African American histories she implicitly references, and we construct our own narratives for the vacant, half-there characters that inhabit Hewitt's world.



Title : Installation view, Leslie Hewitt: Collective Stance, SculptureCenter, 2016. Photo: Kyle Knodell
Website : <http://sculpture-center.org/home.htm>

In the **SculptureCenter**'s industrial and cavernous ground floor space, a series of white, planar sculptures are littered across the room for the viewer to weave their way through and around. Echoing both the bodily engagement of the Minimalists and the playful tactility of Neoconcretism, in particular Lygia Clark's interactive 'Bichos', their elegant expansiveness is punctuated by small and handsomely framed black-and-white photographs of anonymous civil rights protestors, either blurred or seen from behind.

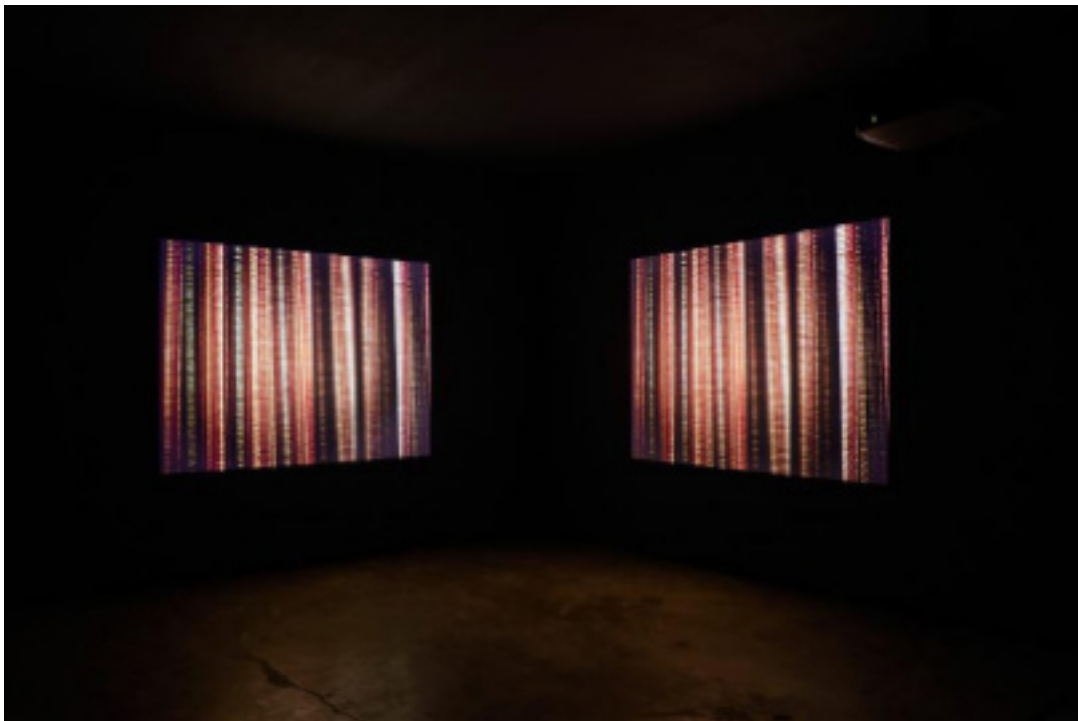
Hewitt is perhaps best known for her still-life photographs, usually leant against the wall and aligned with the floor to achieve both a disorientating trompe l'oeil effect and an intrusion into the viewer's space. Here she distills this formula into something starker and even more unsettling. The white folded shapes have an eerily anthropomorphic presence, like bodies folding in on themselves, wilting or shrinking away, vacant and unmoved observers of a secret history of oppression and violence.

A second surprise comes by way of her video piece, 'Untitled (Structures)', a collaboration with filmmaker **Bradford Young**, accessed by a blank white corridor and presented in a dark room with the stillness and clarity of slide projector images. Images cycle through seemingly at random, revealing themselves as snapshots of experience rather than objective historical fact. Faces are obscured and shot out-of-focus, with isolated architectural features taking precedence instead - the full gamut of urban buildings are displayed, from flat modernist lines to baroque details, observed with an almost fetishistic attention to detail.

After a period of adjustment, the grain and scratch of celluloid, along with the occasional blink or shudder of its human subjects alerts the eye to the presence of video. The effect, however, is not an insular optical playfulness, but a broader reminder of the vagaries of our perception of history. The foregrounding of the architectural surroundings of city life has the unsettling vacuity of an empty stage-set, urging us to understand the histories invoked by Hewitt as lived experiences rather than through the distancing medium of photo reportage.

It's been discussed at length by theorists from John Berger to Susan Sontag that the documentary photograph is a fraught enterprise, and Hewitt's work feels like a thrilling reconciliation of the formal photographic investigations of artists from Gerhard Richter to Jeff Wall with the firmly individualist tradition of artists like Lorna Simpson and Kara Walker, drawing a link between interrogations of photography's inherent truth value and the particularity of black female experience.

Elegaic, cryptic and with a genuinely moving respect for those who came before her, Hewitt's is a still, small voice of extraordinary beauty and eloquence - and 'Collective Stance' is a must see.



Title : Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with Bradford Young, Untitled (Structures), 2012, installation view, Collective Stance, SculptureCenter, 2016

Date(s) : Produced by Karin Chien. Commissioned by the Menil Collection, Houston, with the support of Jerean and Holland Chaney, in collaboration with the Des Moines Art Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Medium : 16:47 minutes, looped. Additional funding provided by Joseph Chung, Marilyn and Larry Fields, and Elliot Perry.

Material and structural support provided by Kodak, Panavision, Harbor Picture Company, and Lucien Terras Inc

Material : Dual-channel video projection, 35 mm film transferred to HD video

Website : <http://sculpture-center.org/home.htm>

Credit : Courtesy the artists and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell