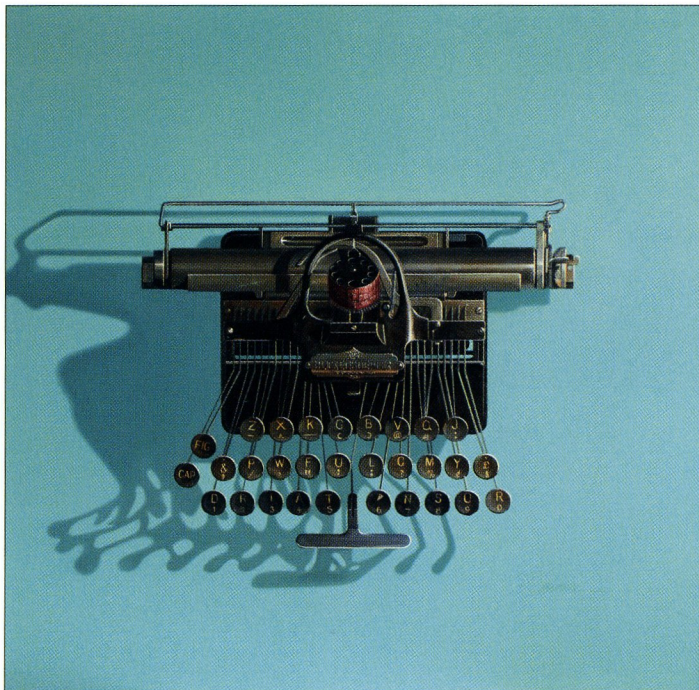


Still Life as Reliquary: The Art of Wendy Chidester

by Gail Leggio

Wendy Chidester's still lifes of obsolete machines are filled with reverence, reverence for the human ingenuity they represent and for the inherent beauty of the objects themselves. She treats them not as detritus from the scrapheap of technological history, but as relics, almost in the older sense of the word, like the wonder-working bones of saints. "The subject is portrayed," she writes in an artist's statement, "as if it were some kind of icon." She finds her specimens in junk yards and antique stores, as well as through a network of other collectors. But her images of typewriters, film projectors and other gadgets go far beyond simple documentation and appreciation of intricate detail and sculptural form. Her paintings play with realism and abstraction, dramatically isolating the carefully observed subject against luminous color fields.

Her recent paintings, in a show entitled "Relics," on view April 2–29, 2013, at Arden Gallery in Boston, exemplify this finely calibrated aesthetic. The subject of two paintings—*Blickensderfer No. 5* and *Blickensderfer on Blue* (both 2013)—is an antique typewriter borrowed from the collection of Don Gale, an editorial writer. The mystique of the old-fashioned typewriter is easy to



Wendy Chidester
*Blickensderfer on
Blue*, 2013

COURTESY ARDEN
GALLERY, BOSTON

understand. Gratifyingly solid, with ornate visible workings, it is also kinetic art, responsive to human touch. The reassuring clackety-clack of the keys has long provided the soundtrack to our mental image of the writer at work, as it does in Joel and Ethan Coen's film on screenwriters in 1940s Hollywood, *Barton Fink* (1991). The typewriter becomes a character in David Cronenberg's hallucinatory film *Naked Lunch* (1991), where the drugged-out protagonist's creative collaborator is an alien bug-machine hybrid.

If the Blickensderfer in Chidester's paintings is less sinister, it nevertheless bristles with personality. Its black and pewter-grey surfaces wear the patina of age, and the letters on the keys are blurred by use. Rather than lying passively flat, as they do on a computer board, the Blickensderfer's keys protrude from the body of the machine on slender stalks. The artist emphasizes the exuberance of this phalangeal display by viewing the typewriter from above. The machine is positioned dead center but casts elaborate shadows to the left. The color of the flat backdrop is important. *Blickensderfer No. 5* has a peachy beige field; the charcoal shadow is crisp and graphic. *Blickensderfer on Blue* has deep teal shadows on a robin's egg blue field, and those shadows seem to undulate. Chidester acknowledges modernist influences, citing Mark Rothko's "use of color as an instrument to communicate feeling and emotion."

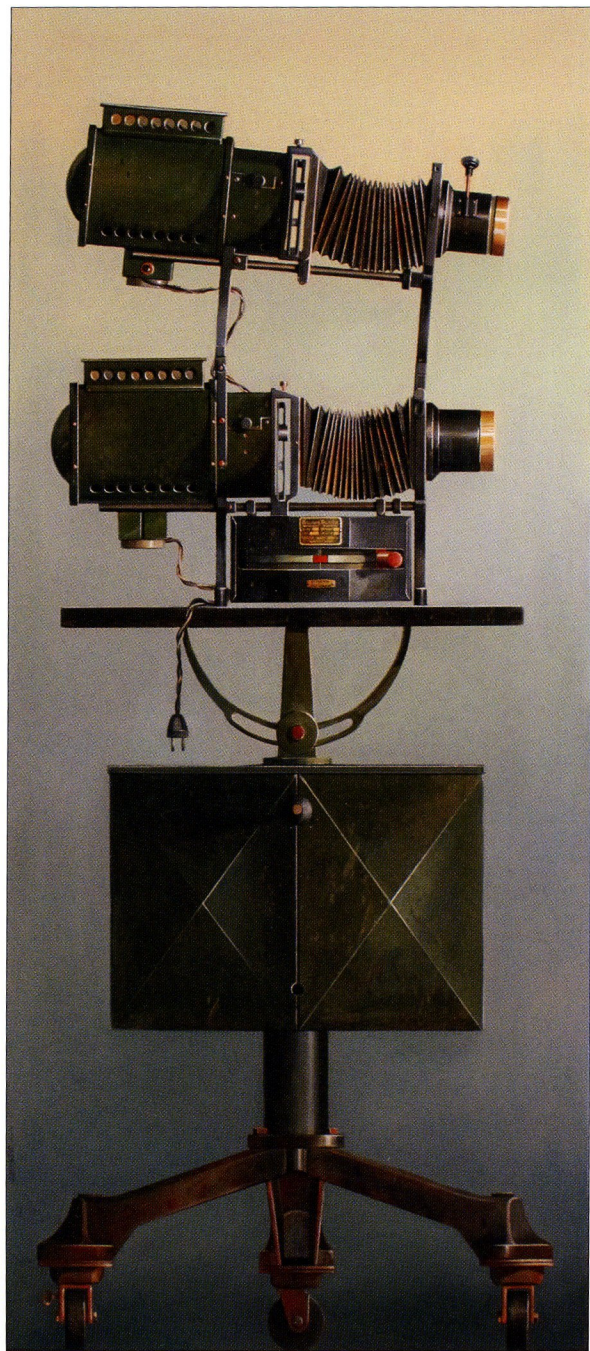
That emotional use of color is particularly striking in another typewriter portrait, *Hammond* (2012). The machine is presented straight-on, positioned at the center of the composition and resting on a brown ledge parallel to the picture plane. A crisp sheet of white paper, invitingly blank, waits. The artist demonstrates a realist's zest for the physical character of her subjects, painting directly from the object in front of her. The Hammond handsomely combines metal and wood, matte black and steel grey with warm reddish-brown. Details are meticulously observed: the keys are arrayed in tiers on their pedestals, like tiny barstools. There is, however, nothing clinical about her visual analysis. She captures the scratches, dents and wear of age through painterly means, by marking the surface, flicking paint and applying multiple glazes. One element of her presentation is crucial: the way she stages the object—formally, even regally. Some still-life artists cultivate the idea that a particular arrangement is serendipitous. Artist and viewer agree to the fiction, understanding that, however casual it seems, the composition has been deliberately constructed. Chidester presents her machine with the dignity of a court portrait. For *Hammond*, the choice of background color contributes very effectively to the sense of dignity. It is sunset red, darker at the top and lighter at the horizon, and luminously visible through the open fretwork of the machine.

Chidester collects other kinds of early technology, less recognizable than the typewriter, and depicts these more exotic specimens with respectful clarity. There are aspects of the nostalgic treasure hunter and steam-punk hobbyist in her enterprise. But Chidester might be more accurately described as a curator/anthropologist, studying the ancestor gods of modern technology. Two slide

projectors evoke totem poles. *Slide Projector—Front View* (2012) stares at us, with big single eyes. The components are separated by curvy supports, silhouetted against the sunset-red backdrop. *Brenkert Slide Projector* (2013) plays with our expectations about what constitutes a front view and what constitutes a profile. The support structure—a wooden tripod with metal castors that looks like a rather handsome piece of old furniture—is perfectly frontal and symmetrical. But the superstructure is an ungainly tower of dials and boxes, with a dangling electrical cord. The machine is oriented sideways, with gates and sagging accordion tubes and lenses pointed to the right. The background color shifts from pearly grey at the top to warm charcoal at the bottom.

Chidester exploits the head-on versus side-view dynamic more explicitly in two other projector portraits. *Filmo Sound* (2012) is a side view, with the big and small wheels of a reel-to-reel projector elegantly outlined against the light grey backdrop. The body of the machine is more wood than metal, even in the clockwork innards of the interior. The artist has opened the door of the housing so we can admire the intricacy; she has also taken the opportunity to paint the surface of the door, with its streaks and scratches, as a little brushwork abstraction in shades of red. *Ampro Projector* (2013) is a head-on portrait. The working parts are compressed into a narrow silhouette, like one of Giacometti's knife-edge human figures. Silvery lines of metal form a lattice around the darker metal plates, and even the protruding knobs are held, as it were, close to the body. The artist's painterly touch is particularly evident on the metal plates, worn and scarred in a subtle palette of black, grey and tarnished red-brown. The support for the machine is a broad, flat stripe, made slightly more believable as a shelf by the cast shadow of a serpentine electrical cord.

Often, the artist seems to be staring down her subjects, interrogating the mute and unmoving artifact of the past. At other times, the momentum of the object is compelling, even in stasis. *Garton Streamline* (2013) is instantly recognizable: a vintage tricycle, with scuffed tires and weathered green, red and silver paint. It is pictured in schematic silhouette against a warm backdrop, abstract but shaded darker enough at the bottom to suggest a suitable surface for the three-dimensional object. The cast shadows of the wire wheels reinforce the sense of solidity. With its dynamic thrusting curves, the tricycle seems poised for forward motion. A far more arcane object is the star of *Protectograph Model C* (2013), but the machine's prow-like profile gives it a propulsive quality. Its shape resembles both an old-fashioned flat iron and an alien space helmet, and the artist clearly enjoys its eccentric curves, silvery bolts and cogs, and big ivory calibrated wheel. The mysterious apparatus looks monumental against a bluish backdrop, sitting solidly on a grey support—here, the setting reads convincingly as a kind of abstracted landscape. Chidester's portraits of technological relics form the most distinctive and, for me, appealing part of her oeuvre. They capture the wonder and romance that permeates the pioneering history of technology. The charisma of these objects is palpable.



Wendy Chidester
Brenkert Slide Projector
 2013, COURTESY ARDEN
 GALLERY, BOSTON

While all the objects Chidester depicts are old, not all of them are relics of the age of mechanization. She arranges less-intricate items in groups, exploring relationships of color and shape. *Hoky Poky* (2013) builds a stack of baggage: a shallow bright blue trunk supports a ziggurat of two brown suitcases and a make-up case, alongside a pair of handsome round hat boxes. Whimsy is supplied by a flashlight and the eponymous child's toy, with two clowns operating a hand-car. It's an affable exercise but fairly straightforward. *Golden Rod* (2013), depicting a trio of battered oil cans (one bearing the improbably floral-sounding brand name of the title), is more interesting. At first, the three metal canisters appear to be floating in inky nothingness. On closer examination, a marginally softer black shelf

emerges from the gloom, like the subtle gradations in an Ad Reinhardt black-on-black painting. The three cans are dramatically front-lit, like cruddier cousins of the Baroque painter Zurbarán's baskets of lemons. Chidester emphasizes

Wendy Chidester,
Golden Rod, 2013
COURTESY ARDEN
GALLERY, BOSTON



the sinister siphons and nozzles sprouting in all directions from the bodies of the oil cans, giving them a weird biomorphic look. The colors of the cans—yellow, red and silver—are bright, but they are hardly cheerful in a Pop Art way.

The surfaces are, rather, so corroded and dirty that the viewer can almost read them as painterly expressionist abstraction. Here the influence of Chidester's University of Utah professor and longtime mentor, David Dornan, comes into play. Dornan's still lifes tend to be close-ups of flowers and paint jars, keenly observed, in simple compositions. Their most seductive quality is the laying-on of paint itself. Dornan's edges are sensual and giving, rather than crisp and hard. This technique inspired Chidester, who remarks: "I pushed the lost edges as far as I could without losing the form." In an interview in *American Art Collector* (December 2009), she continues: "It was amazing to see the number of edges I could lose and still recognize the form. It is discoveries such as this that keep me intrigued with my passion for painting."

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, artists recorded the physical evidence of the past, focusing on monuments, ruins and works of art, especially from antiquity. The preservationist instinct is resurfacing today in a quirkier way, as a number of realist painters record their impressions of humbler objects from the recent past. A small but vital community of contemporary preservationists are finding value, aesthetically if not always in utilitarian ways, in objects whose physical presence makes the current crop of miniaturized or

virtual tech seem disappointingly insubstantial. Perhaps they are protesting the planned obsolescence and addiction to novelty that drive consumer culture. Collecting the objects themselves and documenting them in photographs are two modes of preservation, but painters choose a more labor-intensive and imaginative way of paying homage.

A number of artists, discussed in past issues of *American Arts Quarterly*, favor certain categories of objects. John Morra depicts vintage mixers and other kitchen gadgets, renders them cleanly and arranges them in imposing ranks that simulate a cityscape. Andrew Jones is a connoisseur of New York City's graceful nineteenth-century stoop railings, but pushes the decorative motifs and patterns of light and shade toward abstraction. Ephraim Rubenstein chronicles the survival of physical books in the era of virtual readers and Internet information. He does not choose handsome fine bindings but rather shabby specimens, with torn spines and ratty pages, that no antiquarian would give a second look. Yet leaning in precarious piles and dramatically lit, the old everyday books have beauty and substance. Christopher Stott paints groups of old books, too, along with windup alarm clocks and vintage Kodak and Polaroid cameras. He lights his set-ups coolly, cleanly, favoring a paler, more naturalistic illumination than Chidester. But he is equally enamored of his subjects and honors them with the time he takes to depict them. Patience is a virtue with all these urban archeologists.

Chidester has carved out a special niche for herself, built on an almost obsessive fascination with tech oddities and a love of painting. The fascination is evident in *Mimeograph No. 78* (2013), picturing a cumbersome specimen of a long-supplanted piece of equipment for reproducing academic schedules and the like. The bulky body of the machine is covered in knobs and dials, cranks and levers sprout from it, and the ensemble is topped by a big green wheel. The apparatus stands on a slim wooden platform poised on neat little feet. A small metal plate reading "Made in the U.S.A." is bolted to the surface. This beast clearly required some physical effort to operate, but the artist gives it grace by backlighting it with pale ivory. Compared to today's click-and-print mechanisms, it is peculiarly impressive. The more familiar typewriter stars in *Remington Wide Carriage* (2013), a portrait of a square, upright machine with the usual barstool keys and a heavy carriage thrust far to the right. Here, Chidester's love of paint-handling and color harmonies predominates. The pale green background complements the warm tones of the rusted surface. Reddish-brown stains bloom on the grey, black and bronze of the machine; more, the warm color seems to saturate the space around the typewriter, like an aurora. Artists make us see things we may have overlooked or forgotten. Wendy Chidester is not only salvaging a piece of the past, she is transforming it through her painting. Arden Gallery, 129 Newbury Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02116. Telephone (617) 247-0610. ardengallery.com