

## On Christina McPhee's SHED CUBED / Louis-Georges Schwartz

Christina McPhee's *Shed Cubed* holds gallery goers amidst four screens of desaturated, low-contrast, time-compressed video images depicting the walls of her workspace. The walls in the video, inside the shed McPhee uses as a studio, have sheets of paper tacked on them upon which she draws the contour of the light reflected from the windows. Visually, the video's dim, soft illumination and the messy, intimate, yet impersonal content of the images make the installation space feel protected and slightly apart from the world. Conceptually, *Shed Cubed* strips the space and time of the gallery away and sends the viewer spiraling into the embodied and gendered material conditions McPhee's work emerges from. *Shed Cubed*'s haptic beauty comes from its counter-punctual architecture of images which hold viewers in the space bodily, and content which spills away — a subtle contradiction between centripetal and centrifugal forces converging on the viewers.

*Shed Cubed* makes the situation of bodies within its spatial enclosure unfamiliar because, in Western liberal democracies, social and biological reproduction consist almost entirely of the appropriation of women's unpaid domestic labor in direct proportion, paradoxically, to their having entered the waged work force. As a consequence, women artists work under constant threat of being confined to a domestic sphere devoid of any space in which to practice public cultural production. McPhee's shed is positioned between her house and garden, which she also uses as a workspace and produces its own mediations between domestic and public space as well as between built and "natural" environments. McPhee has involved the garden in her process, weathering and water drawings there for example. McPhee's drawing in and on the studio-shed marks both the possibility of cultural production at and on the limit of the domestic sphere and turns the architecture of confinement into a means of cultural production. The name "shed" when heard as a verb rather than a noun suggests a process of casting off or exfoliation or a constricting carapace.

Although *Shed Cubed*'s video depicts McPhee in the act of drawing, one cannot watch it as if it were a "studio visit" film that happens to take the form of a video installation. In such films, and in documentaries about artists in general, footage of the artist making something functions to explain a work outside the film one is watching — a more important, more primary work of art. Unlike such documentaries, *Shed Cubed* presents itself as work like any other in McPhee's oeuvre. By the same reasoning, *Shed Cubed* cannot be seen as documentation of a drawing performance. While the drawings re-presented in *Shed Cubed* may have become finished works in *Teorema* or another of McPhee's series of drawings, and while McPhee's practice of drawing has its own integrity as a preformed action, *Shed Cubed* suspends their independence by enclosing them within its own aesthetic autonomy. *Shed Cubed* re-stages the mark making, or ma(r)king, within an artwork that has its own integrity and cannot be construed as secondary to McPhee's work in other media. By absorbing the autonomy of the works it re-presents as work, *Shed Cubed* gives form to a confrontation with the limit between the private, domestic, "feminine" sphere of social reproduction and the public, "male" sphere of exchange. (These effects were of particular interest when the installation premiered at Krowwork, a gallery in Oakland housed in a former industrial building whose interior preserves many of its original features. There, the particularities of the walls remained visible through *Shed Cubed*'s video, suggesting the displacement of a space of 20th century industrial production by a space-time of artistic production at the limit of the domestic sphere.)

*Shed Cubed*'s time-lapse and layering of compositional materials make each moment of aesthetic production assert itself in order to be suspended in the next. The materials McPhee used to construct the installation (a shed, light, herself drawing, drawing, video, projectors mounted in a certain way, specific gallery spaces, etc.) all become part of a composition outside themselves. McPhee's drawing of each line asserts itself as a gesture only to lose its integrity as the drawings' compositions become strongly manifest. The performance of each gesture gets subsumed as the ma(r)king of each drawing. The drawings, in turn, become elements in the composition of the video, which becomes a compositional element in the architecture of the installation. The drawings McPhee works on in the videos might have "resulted" in finished pieces in one of McPhee's serial projects, but in *Shed Cubed* they function as compositional materials for the installation. The desaturation of the images in *Shed Cubed* differentiates the drawings in them from any that McPhee could finish or market since

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much of her skill and work express themselves chromatically. Mistaking the drawings seen in the installation for finished, salable, art-commodities drains Shed Cubed of its powerful, immediate sense independence. By re-presenting her drawings, not as works, but as work in and on specific material conditions, McPhee is able to distance Shed Cubed from the market relations of art consumption and thus to think the relationship between the conditions of her practice and capital's demand that it result in a product destined for a market.

By suspending the independence of the drawings it shows McPhee working on, Shed Cubed virtually takes them off the market to enact the intolerable relationship between McPhee's work and the art market, or better the intolerable relationship between the process of creation and markets as such. The spatiality of galleries tends towards the white cubed neutrality of sites of exchange that ordinarily eclipse the time and space of making upon which Shed Cubed insists. McPhee's will to defer the moment of exchange in order to activate all the potentials for ma(r)king within the material limit between the public and the domestic can be felt in her use of the video projectors to partly peel back the gallery walls and re-present the process by which it was made. Shed Cubed re-articulates capitalist subsumption, which absorbs skill in order to create a market for ready-mades, so that the installation's absorption of McPhee's skilled ma(r)king resists the moment of exchange by making the means of ma(r)king delay and defer the end of exchange by valorizing itself.

The interior of McPhee's shed materializes an original relation between the drawings and the conditions from which they emerge. The shed becomes a camera within which McPhee is an element. Her mastery of line expends itself tracing shifting lines produced by natural illumination. Her skill refuses any already recognized mode of expression. Re-marking the lines made by sunbeams on the shed's walls means working on a line that only exists in particular place at a particular time that McPhee's line indexes. It also means working on the fissure of the figurative and the abstract. The great skill required to trace the line of light and shade leaves a mark that can appear to be a casual abstract doodle.

McPhee elaborates an idiom situated in relation to the longer history of drawing as a skilled practice. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh accounts for Raymond Pettibon's drawing practice as an assertion of skill in order "to rescue as a practice of counter-memory the mnemonic spaces of language and visual representation under the conditions of their systematic extinction by techno-scientific rationality and spectacle culture ... [taking place] at precisely those social sites where the resistance against techno-scientific rule and the results of its most advanced devastation are the most evident." Extrapolating Buchloh's argument, one might radicalize its form and turn it a bit against itself and towards a critique of deskilling: an expression of skilled mark-making resists the conditions of contemporary cultural production to the extent that matrix attempts to subsume skilled mark making and render it impossible. Pettibon asserts his skills using comic book forms associated with men and the forms of subsumption his work resists seem to be those shared by working commercial artists and the world of "high art."

McPhee asserts her skill over and against its subsumption in the sphere of social reproduction, which remains coded as feminine. She had to build and convert a shed in order to have a workspace. Her studio-shed marks the triple limits of domestic and public, social reproduction, and cultural production, the process of creation and the obligation of the market. The power and beauty of Shed Cubed rises from McPhee's assertion of skill to mark the space-time of those limits — to articulate their chronotope. When McPhee traces the sun's line on the shed walls, she captures an originary index of time, the sundial before sundials: she draws time passing in the problematic site of ma(r)king as cultural production which itself constitutes the limits of the domestic. McPhee's hand-made marks of time's passing come close realizing the cinematic dream of a recording of pure time without events or object. She has invented a moving-image proper to drawing. Shed Cubed materializes McPhee's means and conditions of drawing that moving-image mark in order to manifest and resist everything in those conditions that seek to suppress or dominate her creative process.