

A FORTIETH-ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION at the Corkin Gallery in Toronto

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By E.C. Woodley



Installation view (2019), Courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto

In a commercial gallery, an exhibition survives three or four weeks, but the longevity of the artworks it contains depends on materials, chance, and our collective will. The galleries themselves exist somewhere between the time of the exhibitions they stage and the time of the artworks they display. The galleries we most often love have a certain staying power. They must nourish their visitor's spirit. And because a gallery has something about it of domestic space and of the museum, if we are serious about looking at art and talking about it, we can inhabit these places for a time. These projects are not a "flavour of the month," and they usually go on for many years. That this depends on the will, cunning, and brilliance of the dealer who has brought the gallery into being, and that bears their name, is a poignantly mortal fact.

Corkin Gallery, founded in 1979, is currently one of the longest-running Canadian venues of this kind. For the first twenty-four years, its specialization was small-scale

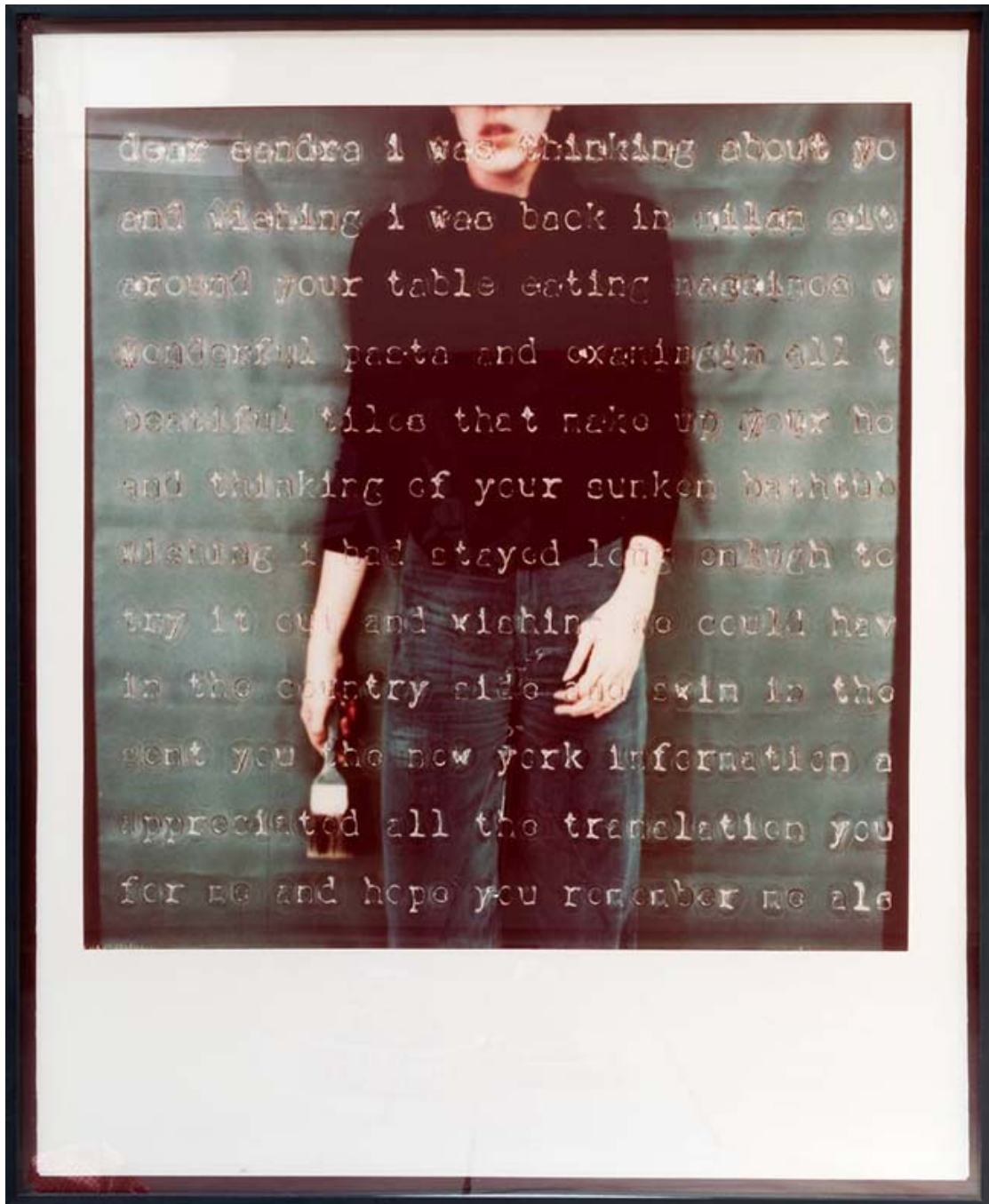
photography. On John Street in Toronto, during an exhibit of Eugène Atget's works, you might come across a number of Lewis Hine photos scattered on the gallery's interior window ledge. More recently, in its massive new Distillery District location, the gallery has added large-scale photography, as well as painting and sculpture. A fortieth-anniversary exhibition, *When the sun departs for a new horizon*, contained the work of more than twenty artists, among them photographers André Kertész, Brassai, Constantin Brâncuși, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Barbara Astman, Carol Marino, Frank Mädlar, Gerhard Richter, Sondra Meszaros, and Thaddeus Holownia. Works by three of the most profoundly ambitious painters in the country, Leopold Plotek, David Urban, and Gina Rorai, were included, as was, notably, a major work on paper from the Stellar series (2015) by Peruvian artist Giancarlo Scaglia, representing the gallery's recent involvement with South American art.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "Atelieraufnahme" (c. 1910), gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 x 4 3/4 in. Courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto

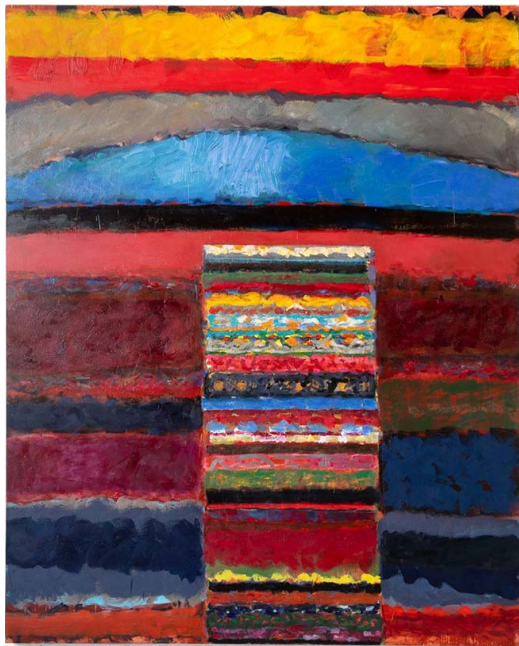
An unexpected dialogue arose when Kirchner's photograph *Atelieraufnahme* (c. 1910), an interior grouping of six or seven of his rough, robust figurative wood sculptures before an open window (perhaps taken during a summer on the Baltic island of Fehmarn), was installed beside Astman's *Untitled (Dear Sandra)* (1979) in which the artist appears, facing the camera, framed from just below the knee to just above her lips, holding a house-painting brush. Her pose is elusive. Is she on the edge of movement, of causal movement, caught (but not caught because she's posing, photographing herself) between movement and stillness? Or is it something else about not being fixed? A slightly nervous offhand expectancy, perhaps. Whereas Kirchner's photo is small, radiant and frail in its vintage printing, Astman's watery grey-green photomural enlargement of a Polaroid SX-70 snapshot—an excerpt of a letter to an acquaintance freshly typed into its emulsion—is just as evocative of a time, place, and sensibility. Both works are theatrical stagings of identity and declarations of the universal. Kirchner enacts an archaic, paradisiacal alternative to the horror of "bourgeois

monotony and paralysis.” Astman’s work has the vulnerable coolness of an emerging postmodern culture, and a familiar transatlantic ease. “Wishing I was back in milan sitting around your table” reads the letter, “... and hope you remember me also.” Hers is a concern with memory that is quotidian and unreliable; Kirchner’s memory is emphatic and primary. Both are somehow achingly distant from our moment early in the twenty-first century, and yet they are still— and not just materially—with us. Astman’s piece, made in the year of the founding of the gallery, seemed a fulcrum on which the exhibition turned, aligned between the “then” of the classic modernist works and the uncertain place where we find ourselves now.



Barbara Astman, “Untitled (Dear Sandra)”, series: “Thinking About You” (1979), ektacolour mural, 60 x 48 in. Courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto

Rorai's monumental abstract painting *Cappa Violet* (2015) is deep in dialogue with the history of painting, especially Hodler and Rothko in the twentieth century and Giotto's Scroveni Chapel murals. In Rorai's hands, the early Renaissance master's bands of storyboard have become something like fields ploughed with the colour of blood or iron, alternating with darker tones like those in a Persian carpet (something of the magical Near East but so domestic, for a time, to the West). These bands are capped by four more horizontal layers: a blue dome as much water as it is sky, an arch of grey storm over sea, a line of firm, bright red, and a resolution of golden, transcendent meaning of day. Within this thick body is set a series of very thin bands of colour in the shape of a narrow rectangle like a door or a window. Although there is much brushwork here, there is, as Ruskin observed in Giotto, no chiaroscuro. Perhaps all colour in a painting such as this is colour for its own sake. And yet, this is how memory, not otherwise accessible, is found within the viewer's own body. The rectangle in the painting seemed an opening *out onto* and *into* time, suggesting further layers of landscape and weather, but always representing paintings and the act of painting. It is a stack of days experienced, bound together away from their vastness as landscape and weather, objects collected and recollected, paintings made and seen.



Gina Rorai, "Cappa Violet" (2015), oil on canvas, 10 x 8 ft. Courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto

When the sun departs for a new horizon: celebrating 40 years of Corkin Gallery
Corkin Gallery, Toronto **September 14–November 21, 2019**

Artists : Barbara Astman, Constantin Brancusi, Brassai, Jota Castro, Jeff Chiu, Michelle Forsyth, Yakov Gakkel, Miles Gertler, Elisa Julia Gilmour, Thaddeus Holownia, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, André Kertész, Frank Mädler, Carol Marino, Andrés Marroquín, Scott Massey, Brendon McNaughton, Sondra Meszaros, Lick Observatory, Lori Newdick, Leopold Plotek, Gerhard Richter, Gina Rorai, Giancarlo Scaglia, Grit Schwerdtfeger, Sharon Switzer, David Urban

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