

BY **SIMON LEWSEN**

If you are not looking for the Little Shop, a vintage curio store in Montreal's Parc Ex neighbourhood, you might pass it without noticing. It is housed in a three-storey home, flush with the property line, its entrance a few steps above street level. The sign is so faded that you have to come within two feet to read it. But if you're in the market for oddities—perfume dispensers that resemble Fabergé eggs, horn-shaped gunpowder flasks or saltshakers fashioned like campesinos with sombreros—you already know where the store is located. Little Shop patrons come from across the city, even the country, seeking novelty.

Photographer Celia Perrin Sidarous is a Little Shop regular. "I love second-hand stores," she says. "I see them as places of repose for things that are in between lives." She also frequents street sales, loading docks and church bazaars. Her collecting habits can be a time suck and a headache, but she has no desire to rein them in. "At least I'm less of a garbage picker than I used to be," she says.

Over the past decade, Perrin Sidarous has amassed a horde of seashells, weird vases (shaped, say, like shoes or the letter C), travel books and 1970s informational volumes about sports, hobbies, family life and sex. "I'm interested in things that belong to another time, things that had another life that I can't pinpoint," she says. "It's not nostalgia, just a fascination for things that don't really exist anymore." She curates her collection the way other people make Spotify playlists: throwing things together, seeking cohesiveness without following explicit organizing principles. She chooses items because she's drawn to them and argues that the items choose her.

This collecting practice feeds into her photographic work, which is getting artworld attention. In 2013, when Perrin Sidarous was a 30-year-old Concordia MFA student, the Art Gallery of Ontario purchased two prints, from her *Les choses* series, at Art Toronto. (One depicts eight wooden plinths, assembled like skyscrapers in an abandoned city. In the second, the plinths hold surreal vases, giving the vacated metropolis a ghostly kind of life.) This past fall, Calgarians had a chance to see Perrin Sidarous's new work at Esker Foundation and in January she will mount her first solo exhibition at her Montreal gallery, Parisian Laundry.

Perrin Sidarous says that she could never be a commercial photographer, because she needs to work alone, beholden only to her unorthodox way of looking. Last summer, she showed me a picture from Norway's Viking Ship Museum, taken during a 2013 semester abroad at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. The shot depicts a diaphanous curtain over a mezzanine that's bathed in sunlight. "Clearly, I was not photographing the Viking ships," she said, preempting my obvious question. (She also told me that she loves

Celia Perrin Sidarous *Grey II*
2015 Ink-jet print on matte
paper 50.8 x 59.6 cm
IMAGES OF ARTWORKS COURTESY
PARISIAN LAUNDRY





Sets and Sensibility

The collecting practice of CELIA PERRIN SIDAROUS

Celia Perrin Sidarous
Eight cubes with ceramics
(from the series *Les choses*)
2013 Ink-jet print on matte
paper 60.9 x 79.4 cm

Norway, the world's leading recycler, because it's "full of second-hand stuff.")

Perrin Sidarous found her passion for still life during a 2011 Banff Centre residency. She gathered items—logs, branches, an orange from the snack table, a photograph of a bespectacled man sniffing hydrangeas—and built a tableau. She was elated with the resulting picture, *Logs, An Orange, Things in a Box, Some Images*, and for months afterwards found herself chasing the dragon, striving for the euphoria of that initial discovery. "For the entire summer I made really bad photographs," she says.

She continues to labour by trial and error, marshalling an extraordinary work ethic toward a comparatively small body of work. The majority of her pictures are duds, she thinks, but the keepers are just that. They are airy and naturally lit, often with sorbet colour palettes. The items they depict include readymades from her collection, found photographs, textured fabrics (curtains or sheets of diaphanous tulle) and various purpose-built oddities (including a series of colourful wooden squiggles, which, to me, resemble brushstrokes). There is nothing autobiographical about Perrin Sidarous's photographs, but spend enough time with them and you will find yourself synching up with her unique way of seeing. You can sense her invisible presence in every shot.

I visited Perrin Sidarous in Montreal last August, when she and three other artists were renting a seventh-floor industrial studio in Mile End. I could instantly tell which corner belonged to her. Even the clutter seemed to have been fastidiously arranged, and there were lonely, plant-less vases everywhere. We sat at a wooden table, painted a few shades darker than robin's-egg blue, on which she'd set a floral-patterned serving dish with a bowl of strawberries. The napkins were angled to complement the rectangular contours of the tray. The arrangement seemed so deliberate that I felt vaguely guilty reaching for a strawberry.

Although Perrin Sidarous has her own visual language—the kind in which a translucent curtain is more interesting than a warship—the first thing you notice is not the strangeness of her pieces but their beauty. "Work like Celia's can be easily recuperated into decor or design or even advertising. Marc Jacobs would love to have these images," says Jake Moore, a McGill PhD candidate in art history and a member of Perrin Sidarous's Concordia thesis committee. "Celia's working within an arena that is typically coded feminine: the idea of tasteful arrangements of things," she says. "But in those actions—in the feminine role of place making, of homemaking, of giving pleasure within an environment—is exceptional strength, knowledge and control."

AGO associate curator Adelina Vlas agrees. "We talk about how art can be a lot of things, but if it's also beautiful, that sort of completes the package," she says. "There's this seductive surface to Perrin Sidarous's work that pulls you in, but the closer you look, the more you start asking yourself, 'What is this about? Why are these particular objects in front of me?'"

For Perrin Sidarous, it's impossible to answer those questions in words. Objects, she says, speak a language of their own. In her MFA thesis, she speculates as to what this dialect might contain: "emissions of waves,





emanations, magnetic fields, a force, energy." The argot of objects is mostly "unintelligible to us because it's outside of the sonic," she writes, but we can still tap into it, like conduits at a seance. An image from *Les choses* features two fake roses pinned to a wall, a small circular mirror leaning against it, and, on the floor, a large sheet of paper on which Perrin Sidarous painted salmon-coloured zigzags. "I was interested in the zigzags because they're inconclusive," she said. "They go back and forth." You might say that they speak a language of prevarication.

In the studio, Perrin Sidarous arranges and rearranges her assemblages, considering each piece and its relation to the others, paying close attention to what the objects want from her, until she enters a kind of altered state. "There is this moment when the things start talking back," she says. "It is difficult to get there, but if I am listening to what is actually going on, this really strange thing happens. Suddenly, I am not doing anything anymore. The things are arranging themselves, and I am just there to mediate." She cannot explain how this condition comes about, but she knows it when she gets to it—at which point she reaches for a camera, often a medium-format Mamiya Legacy RB67.

The resulting photographs are studies in synchronicity and contrast—

concepts that, in her work, don't seem antithetical. One image, from her thesis portfolio, *Objets épistolaires et autres formes*, includes an unfurled blue fan in the upper-right corner; leaning against it, there's a fashion plate of a woman, her face cut out, leaving a corona of luxurious hair; and to the left, Perrin Sidarous placed a travel-magazine image of the Greek deity Artemis of Ephesus, her chest covered with numerous bulges resembling breasts or eggs. There are no obvious resonances between these textures—the corrugated fan, the dense hair, the curves of the goddess's body—and yet there they are, interrupting and complementing one another, at odds but also at ease in each other's company.

That sense of tension and reconciliation plays out thematically, too. In several images from *Objets épistolaires*, Perrin Sidarous layers photographs of triton or conch shells overtop images from a travel book on Pompeii. The shells, which are spiralled, striped and ridged, once housed near-brainless sea creatures, whereas Pompeii, with its ruined villas and aqueducts, belongs to one of history's most fabled civilizations. "You're looking at two desiccated, highly decorated places that somebody or something used to live in," says moore. "So you have an equivalence between a human construct and an animal construct. Photography is at its best when it addresses things in multiple time signatures."

Moore is careful not to assign too much symbolic weight to each individual item. When objects become symbols, they lose their status as objects, and that's the last thing Perrin Sidarous wants. But some motifs are too resonant to ignore. Consider the theme of interiority, which plays out in the appropriately titled Esker exhibition, "Interiors, Other Chambers." There are the shells, angled so that their openings face the camera; a small geode, split in half, enabling viewers to glimpse a gem-encrusted cave; and clusters of black coral from Mexico.

"I am interested in things that are inwardly focused," says Perrin Sidarous. (She eschews digital photography, in part, because the cameras don't have interior space.) "I also like devices that lead from one area to another: the portals, the doorways and the staircases." The Esker exhibition features photographs of opaque curtains, which cordon off parts of the visual plane, and a picture of a small, ivy-covered passageway leading from Vår Frelzers cemetery, in Oslo.

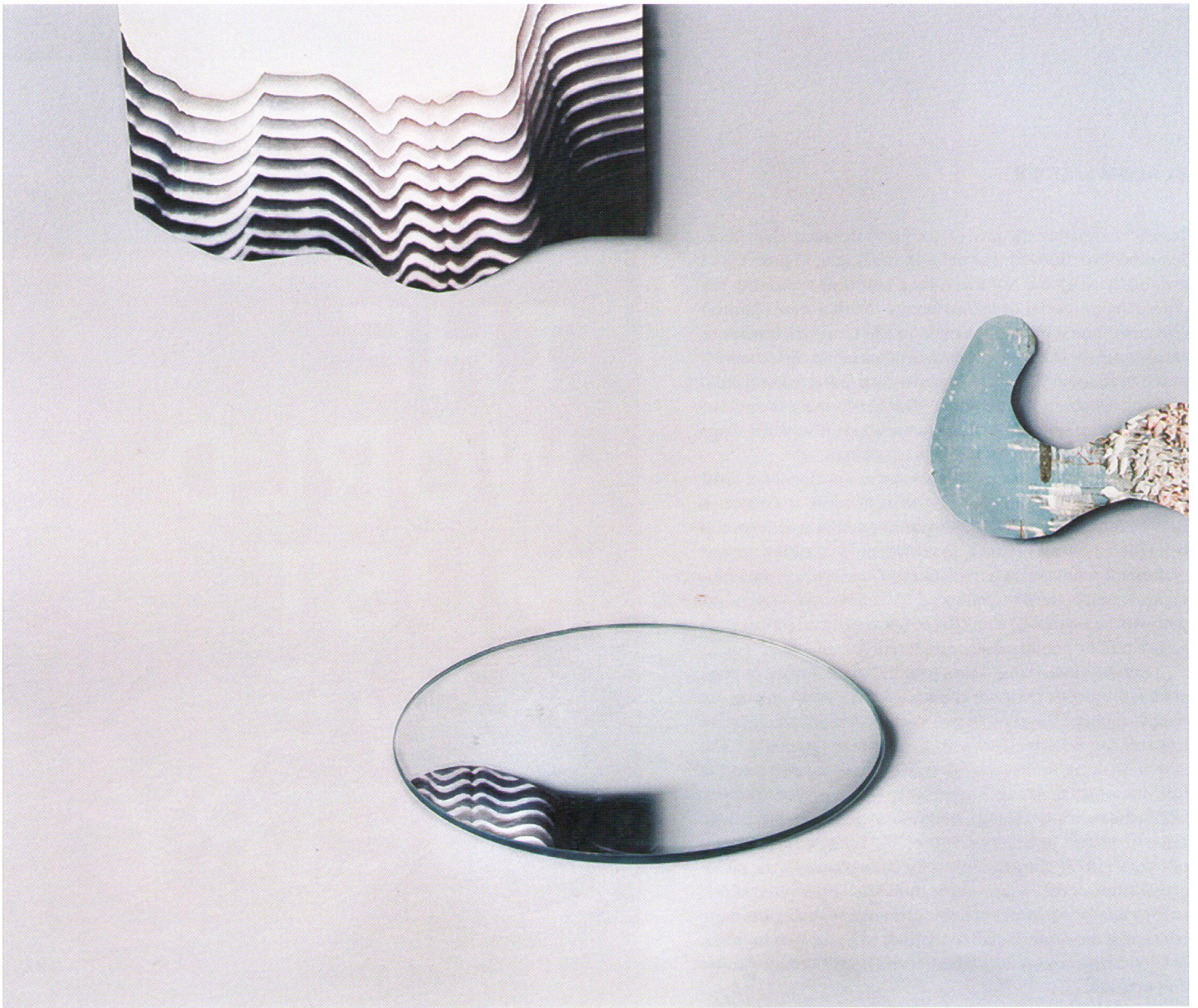
Portals and interiors. They're fitting metaphors, since each of her pieces offers an entry—or at least a partial one—into her solitary studio practice. For Perrin Sidarous, the studio is everything. "It's this place of incredible potential," she says, "one that you always go back to. It's the territory that you defend, because it's your territory and the territory of the objects." She's fascinated by how Constantin Brancusi photographed his sculptures at his Paris workshop, enabling viewers to see them in the place of their creation. She takes this idea a step further: for her, it is *only* through photographs that her assemblages have any life at all outside the brief, rarified moment of their existence.

As her art circulates in exhibitions, however, the gallery is becoming a kind of meta-studio in exile. For her, an exhibition is a large-scale assemblage. It is a chance to work through the same conundrums that



Celia Perrin Sidarous *Objets épistolaires et autres formes* 2015 Gypsum wall partition, framed and unframed photographs, two plinths and curtain panels Dimensions variable INSTALLATION VIEW AT GALLERY POPOP PHOTO CLARA TOUCHETTE LACASSE

OPPOSITE: Celia Perrin Sidarous *The waves* 2015 Ink-jet print on matte paper 76.2 x 89.9 cm



she encounters in her daily practice—problems of juxtaposition, symbiosis and texture.

Before installing her series *Three Stone Lions* at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery in 2014, Perrin Sidarous drafted computer models and cardboard maquettes detailing how the images would be displayed. The exhibition included a purpose-built, L-shaped wall. Some images were to be framed, and others were destined to hang flush on the structure or to lean against it. At Esker Foundation, she installed three tall plinths, varying in size; a small stairway to nowhere, like something out of a Magritte painting; and a wall that recedes “like a false doorway.”

For Perrin Sidarous, an exhibition is the last stop in a long journey—one that begins with tens, if not hundreds, of second-hand store sojourns, and develops over months of artistic experiments. In the gallery, as in the studio, Perrin Sidarous moves pieces around and subs things in and out, until parts come together to form a whole. “I am very, very specific about things,” she says. “If things are not right, I get uneasy, which is a discomfort—but also a joy.” ■

For Perrin Sidarous, the gallery becomes a kind of meta-studio in exile, and an exhibition is a large-scale assemblage.