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# ARTFORUM

## Isabelle Cornaro



View of “Isabelle Studies,” 1984–85. *Cornaro*,” 2014. From left: *Premier rêve d’Oskar Fischinger (Part II)* (Oskar Fischinger’s First Dream [Part II]), 2008; *Figures*, 2011; *Film-Lampe*, 2010.

The establishing shot arrives almost halfway through Isabelle Cornaro’s *Figures*, 2011. It’s not much of a wait; the film runs only two and a half minutes. But with this long shot comes a delicate shift in tone and, seemingly, in intention. The scene could almost pass for the Hollywood trick (familiar from *Body Double*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and a dozen other movies about movies) in which an opening sequence is abruptly revealed as a film take: We’re not where we thought we were; we’re on set.

Cornaro is an artist of drifts and quiet permutations, and her version of this maneuver is miniaturized and, significantly, depopulated. The set consists of a spread of antique tchotchkes: buttons, figurines, coins, compacts, vials. The early impression of someone’s dressing table is quickly dispelled as the film takes on an increasingly analytic quality, scrutinizing the aged articles with variations in light, angle, and movement. This study of forms, presented in a filmic language so simplified as to be monosyllabic, manages to monumentalize the baubles: Lipsticks become obelisks. Yet when it arrives, the belated establishing shot offers up the full array of copper, glass, and ivory relics with a bald facticity: Here they are . . . *things*

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*on film.*

In fact, *Things on Film* would do just fine as the title for any of the very short films in Cornaro's recent show at LAXart, "This Morbid Roundtrip from Subject to Object." *Premier rêve d'Oskar Fischinger (Part II)* (Oskar Fischinger's First Dream [Part II]), 2008, presents blown-glass paperweights from varying angles and proximities, drawing out the psychedelic nebulae of vitric colors and the overlapping textures of air bubbles and film grain. *Film-Lampe*, 2010, shows a collection of lightbulbs of various sizes and styles. They go on and off, the surface on which they rest begins to shake, and, as in all these works, the boundaries between the material content and the medium become blurred. Who's the star here? Who's being upstaged?

These formal studies come off as archaizing, with their grain and filaments, not to mention procedures that languidly recall structural film. Returning, for a moment, to that establishing shot in *Figures*, we glimpse a complicating dimension to the nostalgic tones of Cornaro's aesthetic. Bringing to mind an overstuffed vitrine of antiquities or ethnographic objects, the shot leads us from a sequence of gentle transformations of appearance to the simple truth that the way we see art is always bound up with where and when and how we see it. Context and presentation are often constituent of form.

Given Cornaro's interest in the determinative force of display and context—distantly related to the formal typologies of found objects in Gabriel Orozco's "Sandstars," 2012, and to Haim Steinbach's careful presentation of commodities—it is only fitting that the show was installed with a reverence and an almost monastic simplicity that exaggerated the properties of the work. The only illumination in the room was provided by the projections and a set of filtered pink and blue lights above *Orgon Doors (edition)*, 2014, a plaster sculpture cast from a still life of stones, jewels, a chain, and a sheet of faux snakeskin.

The sculpture shares the films' concern with the de- and recontextualizing of found materials—the slippages between the object as a subject of fascination, curiosity, or seduction and the object as an object of a medium. While the very name of the exhibition attests to this ambiguity, it suggests as well the greater uncertainty glimpsed by Cornaro's work, conjuring appearances on the shifting sands of meaning. The materials and preoccupation here may look like those from the past, but they seem to signify something very different—if only, perhaps, the Sisyphean curse of having to endlessly reenact the battles of twentieth-century art in a fog.

—Eli Diner