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WEEKEND ARTS GALLERY GUIDE

Leslie Hewitt Dives Deep Into the Civil Rights Movement By Randy Kennedy — April 21, 2016



The artist Leslie Hewitt at her studio in Harlem. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

WHEN the artist **Leslie Hewitt** was growing up in St. Albans, Queens, she worked at a branch of the public library. The extra money was nice, but she was particularly taken by the way libraries embodied history in tangible objects, towers of paper, ink and buckram that rose almost surreally into the air. “I think I was drawn to the physicality of the stacks,” she said recently. “I wanted to be among books.”

Ms. Hewitt has become highly regarded for spare photo-based artworks that operate in the widening 21st-century gulf between images and objects, where history can behave in strange and unexpected ways. Beginning **May 1 at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens**, she is bringing to New York for the first time one of the most ambitious pieces of her career, “**Untitled (Structures)**,” which revolves around one of the most photographed and contentious eras in American history, the civil rights movement.

The work, a two-channel film made with the **cinematographer Bradford Young**, was begun not long after the Menil Collection in Houston, in 2010, received a major archive of civil rights-era photographs put together by the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter and his wife, Adelaide de Menil, a photographer and daughter of the collector and philanthropist Dominique de Menil. Michelle White, a Menil curator, started to think about how the archive — with works by important photographers like Elliott Erwitt, Danny Lyon and Bruce Davidson and images of many movement leaders and pivotal moments — could be used in ways other than just exhibiting the prints. And she invited Ms. Hewitt to come to Houston to look through the photographs.

Ms. Hewitt did, and later brought along Mr. Young, known for his work on the movies “Selma” and “A Most Violent Year.” The deep dive they took into the archive resulted in their plan to try to step into the images conceptually, as if onto a stage — a stage whose curtains were drawn before Ms. Hewitt or Mr. Young, both 38, were born.

With a movie camera, they revisited several places shown in the images — Memphis, Chicago and the Arkansas Delta — and reimagined them, recreating some of the pictures’ contours with the help of locals and acquaintances, but zooming in on details barely noticeable in the original images, or using the camera to create

African-American workers) are often difficult to trace back to their sources, which serve as something like fertile seeds.

“Our generation thinks about what our responsibility is to that era, and how we’ve come to understand that era,” said Ms. Hewitt, who is African-American, as is Mr. Young. “So part of my thinking was: How do we make a visible trace connecting us to that past?”

She spoke recently while on a break from working on new projects in her modest two-room studio on West 138th Street in Manhattan, not far from where her grandfather worked as a police captain in the 1950s amid a growing force of black officers, many of whom had been born in the South. (Her paternal grandmother left Macon, Ga., in the Great Migration, arriving in New York in the ’30s.) The images in “Untitled (Structures)” — which at times seem like projected still photos, except that the people in them breathe and blink and the camera sometimes moves — in a sense follow that migration, in which more than six million black Americans left the rural South for the urban North, Midwest and West.

Ms. Hewitt’s work is often made by photographing photographs arranged in layers and presenting the images in large frames so that they appear sculptural. She said that she and Mr. Young talked a lot about the creators of the images in the archive, all of them white men who went south to document, and sometimes to participate in, the civil rights struggle. She stressed that race and gender did not play a large part in her thinking about the photographs — “The images in the archive are breathtaking in all accounts,” she said — but such considerations did give her room to move around as an artist. How would a photograph have been different if a black man or a black woman had taken it? What wasn’t pictured? Would certain images have been as beautiful and formally poised if they had been taken by someone else?

“To aestheticize the Freedom Riders can kind of feel sacrilegious, if you look at it one way,” she said. “It makes you think: ‘Hey, Julian Bond looks so slick here, like a movie star.’ How could that have been different, and how could it have shaped the way we think about these images now?”

Mr. Young, who has collaborated with Ms. Hewitt before, added in a telephone interview, “Once we entered a space when we were filming, it was like trying to inoculate ourselves from the pull of the original image.”

The experience of visiting some of the sites immortalized in the civil rights photographs was its own kind of recalibration, often a jarring one, he said. “You would think that a lot of those places would be memorialized, but they’re not. They’re dilapidated and falling apart. And it makes you think: Where’s the historical residue of these images in the world, in architecture? Is most of it going to be gone?”

At SculptureCenter, “Untitled (Structures)” — originally commissioned by the Menil Collection, the Des Moines Art Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago — joins another previous work of Ms. Hewitt’s, “Untitled (Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again)” from 2012, and a new work by her and Mr. Young, based on their shooting in the South and Chicago.

Mary Ceruti, SculptureCenter’s executive director, said she was drawn to Ms. Hewitt partly because of the way she has inherited the spirit of the Pictures Generation — artists like Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and Sarah Charlesworth, who began rummaging in the great American image bank in the 1970s and ’80s — but has made their strategies her own.

“I think the stakes are high for Leslie with this kind of work,” said Ms. Ceruti, the curator of the show, which runs through Aug. 1. “It’s not just an intellectual musing, and it’s not really about media culture. It’s a personal — and personally political — pursuit for her.”

Ms. Hewitt, who also has work in the group show “Signal to Noise,” closing on Sunday at the Simon Preston Gallery, said: “I think there’s so much more that people could do with this archive. Each image had a kind of strong sonic register, and there could be so many more ways to make them echo.”

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