

MODELLING CHARLOTTE PERRIAND A PROJECT BY SADIE MURDOCH

3 March – 27 May 2017

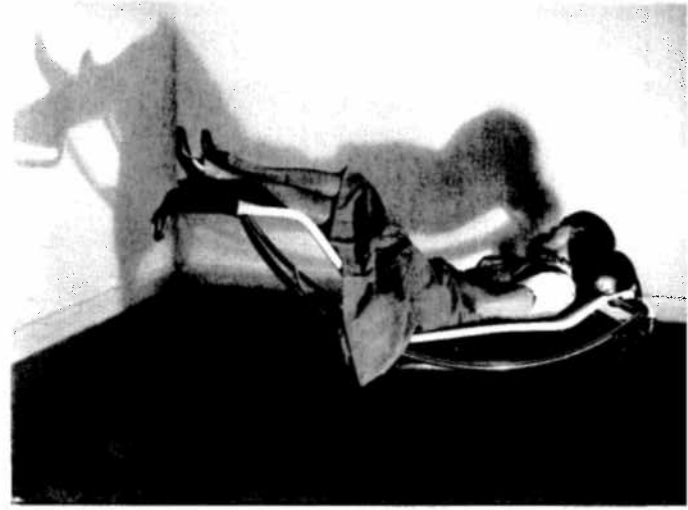
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text: Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret
Charlotte Perriand on the Chaise Longue, 1928
© FLC ADAGP Paris and DACS, London 2016 courtesy Archives Charlotte Perriand, Paris

over: Sadie Murdoch, Untitled, 2016
spray paint, tracing paper, layout paper, pencil and photograph © the artist

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THE SPACE BETWEEN DREAM AND DESIGN

In 1928 Charlotte Perriand staged various photographs of herself in chairs she designed with Le Corbusier and his brother Pierre Jeanneret. Describing these images as ‘staged’ understates their uncanny effect, however: they share several remarkable attributes, not the least of which is that each features Perriand in a nearly identical pose. In the photos, Perriand relaxes in the chaise longue’s recumbent tubular steel and leather form; dressed stylishly, her stockinged legs and delicate pumps are arranged comfortably by the chair’s fluid lines. Curiously, every photograph depicts Perriand’s face turned away from the camera so that only the back of her head, one ear, and a sliver of neck are revealed.

By averting her face, Perriand distanced these images from conventional self-portraiture. Withholding apparent expression, her photographs avoid the chipper affability or cool scrutiny typical of publicity portraits. Indeed, the photos initially appear to adopt codes of seduction familiar to advertising or fashion – here is a young, trim woman arrayed languorously for the camera’s delectation. Yet still the hidden face troubles. In presenting herself indirectly, Perriand opened up a space that challenged, if only in a gesture of repudiation, previous media depictions of women. Instead, she offered a new form of female authorship in which viewers were meant to envision themselves in her place, that is, in the dreamy, reclined space of the chaise longue.

The artist Sadie Murdoch discovered these images in her continuing research on early 20th century modernist architecture and design. She meticulously recreated one of the photographs depicting Perriand before a large, shadowy silhouette. In revisiting this material Murdoch scrupulously mimicked every detail of the image, from Perriand’s posture and attire to the black and white tones of the photos, applying monochromatic makeup that exactly replicated the high contrast atmosphere of the original. Certain details are tellingly different, however. In lieu of Perriand’s looming shadow, Murdoch created a fragmented backdrop in which sections seem to harden and break away like so much old plaster. Additionally, Murdoch subtly disrupted Perriand’s previously impeccable deportment – she has broken Perriand’s signature ‘ball-bearing’ choker, its silver beads joining the fractured shadow to form a mysterious constellation across the floor.

Recovering the strangeness and quiet introversion of her source images, Murdoch considers a different side of modernism: one of leisure, distraction, and even reverie. As Murdoch states, the chaise longue ‘is an ambiguous piece of design’ not amenable to now corporatised uses of early-century classics like Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Chair or Marcel Breuer’s Wassily chair. Today it is easy to forget that one of the promises of ‘good’ (read modernist) design was a reduction, and possibly the total cessation, of work. Part of the project of an often-euphoric utopian technophilia, design was intended to ameliorate – though perhaps only to placate – the rigorous demands of everyday life.

In the 1920s German cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer called for forms of ‘radical boredom’ to oppose the capitalist compulsion towards entertainment culture, in which even desire is instrumentalised as a way to sell things. Kracauer noted that an enervating labour of attention was the disappointing feature of so-called leisure: most people were not afforded the time to experience a truly relaxed sense of self outside the ‘vulgar boredom of daily drudgery.’

In rehabilitating the Perriand imagery Murdoch enacts such a radical boredom – proposing a dream space of plenitude, ease and bodily indulgence opposing the pressures of capitalist productivity. Murdoch disturbs the original photograph’s spare ambience with unexplained alterations appearing as emanations of a surreal musing, of consciousness attuned to its mirror image – the daydream unrecuperated by labour. Against the expedient haste of workaday life, Murdoch proposes the chaise longue as a form of design that increases the length and complexity of experience, in both Perriand’s presentation of it and in her own. Murdoch probes a lost thread of modernism in which the production of dream spaces free of alienated labour was the pre-eminent imperative of design.

Eva Diaz

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