

# MARC STRAUS

## NEW YORK

### The Sound of On and Off

Glenn Adamson

*Click.*

The lights turn on. You are in the newly renovated loft of Marc Straus Gallery, in downtown Manhattan, for an exhibition of work by Jeanne Silverthorne. At one end of the space is a massive chandelier, hanging low above the floor. It is made of black rubber. It gives off no light (although, and it may be your imagination, you think you can smell it). Extending from the fixture's bulk is an array of what appears to be loose wiring, connected to a mysterious junction box and an EXIT sign on the wall.

At the other end of the room is a book, whose heavy covers are also formed from black rubber. On the front, in cast letters, is the single word FRANKENSTEIN. Page through it, however, and it's blank. Near the book sits a fly. On close inspection (as it doesn't move) it proves to be a handmade sculpture, each little leg fashioned in wire.

*Click.*

A black light turns on. Not the chandelier – an actual black light. Under its ultraviolet illumination, you see that the book actually does have writing on its pages. Lots of writing. 220 pages worth of Mary Shelley's gothic novel, exactly half the text, have been inscribed in a glow-in-the-dark, somewhat antiquarian Palmer script. Reading the softly luminescent blue text, you are reminded of *Frankenstein's* progeny – the innumerable works of science fiction that have adopted its central conceit – and also of psychedelic graphics. This means of transcription seems perfectly suited to Shelley's unprecedented leap into the imaginary.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Back home, basked in the glow of your computer screen, you find out what there is to know about this artist.

For the past few years, it seems, invisible writing has been one of her primary *métiers*. In 2016 she commenced an ambitious project in which she copies out texts about the unseen, among them Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and the second book of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>1</sup> The writing is executed in archival invisible ink (only readable under UV light) on stacks of white paper, 1000 sheets exactly. When the words end, the blank

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<sup>1</sup> An essay of mine, entitled "Absent Minded," has recently been accorded the honor of invisible transcription by Silverthorne's hand. It can be read at: <https://www.glennadamson.com/work/2017/7/31/absent-minded>

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pages keep going. Once completed, the reams of paper are packed up in handmade rubber boxes, which also are accompanied by a rubber light bulb (on which more in a few clicks).

The effect of these works is reminiscent of the artist Vija Celmins' sculpture *To Fix the Image in Memory*, which consists of an armful of river stones and precise copies of those stones in painted bronze. The naked eye cannot discern which is the natural object and which the artificial one, which is "found" and which the result of many hours of patient and skilled labor. In a comparable way, Silverthorne's *Invisibility Project* merges textuality indistinguishably with its antithesis. The border dividing those two states of existence – meaning and the abyss – is literally paper-thin.

As for the chandelier, it is apparently over twenty years old. It was completed in 1994 and exhibited widely – each time connected to its architectural surroundings by its attached conduits. Subsequent exhibitions (including at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, both in 1999) extended this theme of haywire electrics, described by curator Debra Singer as "labyrinthine tangles that dead-end at every wrong turn."<sup>2</sup> That's not a bad description of the internet, as it happens. But that is not what Silverthorne had in mind (the internet, it's shocking to recall, had not yet touched most people's lives in '95). Indeed, the chandelier is oriented as much to the past as the future. Its heavy baroque form – which Silverthorne modeled in clay then cast (eight times in the case of the arms) – recalls the *décor* of an eighteenth-century palace or opera house. That's to say, the image is rooted in the time of the Enlightenment. An original chandelier of this type would have carried candles, which were expensive in their own right. (Time, when lit, was money.) Their flames would have reflected against the gleaming curves of the metal fixture – each point multiplied many times over. Silverthorne's version, by contrast, hangs matte and obdurate, offering no illumination. It is adrift in the present.

*Click.*

A connection: *Frankenstein*, too, is a work about the Enlightenment and its discontents. It does indeed anticipate our own anxieties – about artificial intelligence, for example – yet Shelley's tale is very much of its own time, a response to the rationalist empiricism that swept Europe during her life. And though the book is a work of extraordinary brilliance (well worth copying out by hand) it also mounts a vigorous attack on the very notion of genius. Shelley wrote in the shadow not just of Voltaire and Diderot, but also the French revolutionary terror, and the Napoleonic wars. She knew that when genius is left unchallenged, like any great power, it makes monsters.

*Click.*

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<sup>2</sup> Debra Singer, "Perseverance in the Face of Absurdity," in *Jeanne Silverthorne: The Studio Stripped Bare, Again* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 1999), p. 1.

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Lights out. It's late. Silverthorne's chandelier is still out there, somewhere, shrouded in darkness. This is when the work takes on another life: as a recollection called to mind. In this condition, in the mind's eye, the contradictory image can flip into incandescence. During waking hours the chandelier has a deliberate muteness of affect, moderated only by its approximate, wonky form (Silverthorne modeled it from memory). But at night, in dreams, it can come alive.

And there, nagging at the edges of consciousness, is that inexplicable fly.

*Click.*

Jeanne Silverthorne enters her New York City studio, circa 1994. Switches on the lights. The place is rented cheap. It is a wreck, run-down, provisional. But she likes it that way, or at any rate, sees the appropriateness of the state of affairs.<sup>3</sup> Art history has already, by this point, entered its "post-studio" phase. We are two generations on from the advent of Conceptualism. Social practice and relational aesthetics are the order of the day. A good deal of skepticism – not entirely ill-founded – attends the commodity status of the art object. And yet there Silverthorne is, making stuff out of rubber, becoming expert in its technical features. She knows how to color it, how to cast it fine or rough, formulate it to varying degrees of stiffness, even make it fluorescent and phosphorescent. Her studio is an artisanal space, infused with work ethic. She can see parallels between her own artistic activities and the miscellaneous light industries that once existed in the neighborhood.

She can also see the absurdity of carrying on in this way. Her methods are as outmoded as the big black chandelier that takes up a large part of the studio but can't be switched on. The rubber used to make it has a retro, industrial quality to it. Working with it like this summons up images of its early handling by the Victorians: the rubber-lined waterproof raincoats and boots of Charles Macintosh, the vulcanization experiments of Charles Goodyear, and (not to be forgotten) the horrible labors of the indigenous people who harvested the material in South America.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "When I made the chandelier back in 1994," Silverthorne wrote recently, "I had been thinking about the studio as a site of collapse, as something out of the past. Already a lot of rubber light bulbs and rubber copies of the outdated electrical elements and wiring in my real dilapidated studio had found their way into the work—part of the rubble of the archeological site."

<sup>4</sup> An edited and slightly altered sequence showing rubber extraction from Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, appears in Silverthorne's film piece of that same title, part of "Still and Moving," an on-going collection of tiny framed black and white videos and photographs about the studio and its process, materials, architecture, myths. She writes, the Herzog film "is about a would-be Peruvian rubber baron who hopes to bring art to the backwater using profits from rubber harvested by indigenous Amazonians to build an opera house... Seemed perfect for my purposes."

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More proximately, one thinks of rubber hitting the road. The roar and belch of roadway traffic. Wondrous in its properties, rubber is also ubiquitous, and it has a lot of ugliness in it. Making it the center of a studio practice circa 1994 feels willful, quixotic.

Nevertheless, she persists. One of her preferred motifs is the light bulb, of the type that float above the heads of cartoon characters when they have a bright idea. Silverthorne's bulbs don't turn on either, though. Some do glow in the dark, but only enough to illuminate themselves and nothing else – a wry joke at the expense of Conceptualism. Many years hence, in 2017, she will make a work called *Self Portrait As A Fly With Glasses* that perfectly captures this feeling of resignation. By that time, her oeuvre will be crowded with flies, perched on flowers and plants, flitting round light bulbs, or just swarming on a white wall. You could say each one is a little self-portrait... or maybe that's too closed a reading. Better to say that they are the residua of rational structures in general, including those that insist art should mean anything at all.

*Click.*

The television comes on. It's David Cronenberg's version of *The Fly*, from 1986. The plot involves a scientist, played here by Jeff Goldblum, who has invented a teleportation machine. It actually works, but a bug enters the system. At the crucial moment of its first test, a housefly is present in the device. Its DNA merges with Goldblum's. He soon sprouts wiry hairs from his back, becomes superhumanly strong, and craves sugar. Gradually he devolves into a nightmarish creature, half human, half insect. It's not for nothing that the film spawned the now commonplace phrase "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

It is easy to see *The Fly* as just another sci fi flick. But that's not how Silverthorne views it. Notice how this buzzing, freakish descendant of *Frankenstein* speaks to our concerns about genetic manipulation, and more generally, the hell that we so swiftly reach via scientific intention. Of course, it's also a film about miscegenation. The hybrid has a central place in Silverthorne's art. Her sculptures are often seen caught in the act of transformation, and occasionally beset by invasive species. This is most evident in her biologically-themed works, but true too of the way she treats technological apparatus. Her black chandelier exists not in splendid isolation, but as a node within a network. Everything in the work seems like a parasite on everything else.<sup>5</sup> Juice runs in and out.

Wherever you are now, most likely, you are connected to that same energy. We feel that we can control it with switches – but that's somewhat misleading. In fact, we are largely swept along within a whirlwind of contingencies. This big picture is the ultimate subject matter of Silverthorne's work. Clicking the lights off, letting the darkness descend, doesn't dispel anything.

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<sup>5</sup> My reading here is indebted to Michel Serres, *Parasite* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1980).

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The complex dependencies, the terms on which we buy our hours of illumination, are always there. We are inside the machine, all of us. And so are the droning flies.

*Click.*

The last lock on the box of this essay opens. Inside is a quote from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1888 autobiographical essay *The Lantern-Bearers*, which tells of his charmed upbringing in "a certain easterly fisher-village" called North Berwick, where he and other boys "tasted in a high degree the glory of existence." The essay's title alludes to a night-time custom observed by the children of carrying a small tin "bull's eye" lantern, of the type used by police officers, concealed under the coat. Only by the smell of burning oil could one boy detect another's membership in the society of lantern-bearers. Finding those others was the premise of the game, but not its true pleasure:

*The essence of this bliss was to walk by yourself in the black night; the slide shut; the top-coat buttoned; not a ray escaping, whether to conduct your footsteps or to make your glory public: a mere pillar of darkness in the dark; and all the while, deep down in the privacy of your fool's heart, to know you had a bull's-eye at your belt, and to exult and sing over the knowledge.<sup>6</sup>*

The innocence of youth is typically pictured as luminous: children with glowing cheeks, shining happy faces up at dawn. Stevenson's story reminds us that youth is also about secrets. Refusing to "make his glory public," the lantern-bearer nonetheless makes a passable metaphor for the artist, who also holds a light within, and knows that it must be sheltered.

Jeanne Silverthorne is not a boy from North Berwick, but in this respect she and Stevenson are on the same page. Her work has a fateful air about it, to be sure. The funereal chandelier – made all those years ago, put away in a crate, and now brought out into the light – still serves as a suitable emblem. Let's not neglect to notice, though, how odd it is. How very *funny*. Gallows humor, maybe; but humor nonetheless. So too with gallery-goers reading *Frankenstein* in inky blackness, like kids at a sleepover trying to frighten themselves. At any stage of life there is terror, but also joy. Silverthorne sees it all. And if she has a message for us, it's this: Click your heels. It's better than to curse the darkness.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Lantern-Bearers" was written in 1888 and included in Stevenson's collection *Across the Plains, With Other Memories and Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892). It is widely available online.