

## Parroting Modernism

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John Haber  
in New York City

### Martí Cormand and Sherrie Levine

#### *After the copy*

How long before an act of rebellion becomes a settled history? For Modernism in the 1980s, many believed, the time had come. Its very triumph, the story goes, had rendered it at best irrelevant and at worst a lie. Maybe, like many a revolution, it had rested on a lie all along. For Sherrie Levine in 1981, it was long since time to call it on its lies. With her photographs after Walker Evans, she sought to dismantle its claims to authenticity and progressive politics, so that she could reclaim them as a woman's own.

Still, the worm turns, and could it have turned against Postmodernism? "American Photographs," at MoMA in 1938, contained work by Evans for the Farm Security Administration, and a different selection appeared in book form soon after. Levine simply photographed twenty-two of its images and displayed the prints in Soho. Walker Evans's (really) Alabama Tenant Farmer's Wife (University of Texas, Austin, 1936) Now Martí Cormand copies Levine in her entirety. He did not quite wait another forty-three years like Levine, but the pace of change is faster these days. Is he piercing Postmodernism's myths, or is he, too, claiming the past for himself?

His small drawings sure look familiar, much as Levine, Cindy Sherman, and the "Pictures generation" traded on familiarity. They have the iconicity of the Dust Bowl, wood-frame churches, and a struggling family of five. And there is no mistaking solo portraits of the tenant farmer and his wife. The drawings could almost be photos, but that is the nature of a copy, and it gives new meaning to photorealism. They could also be directly after Evans, rather than, as the show has it, "after Levine, Evans" —but then how would one know? Score one more point for Evans or for Postmodernism, as you see fit.

Cormand is good at scoring points, from his grasp of technique to his grasp of history. His pencil has the spare precision of patterned dresses, the cross on a wooden church, or the raised collarbones on a tenant farmer's wife. It also has the softness and smudges to place them in a more comforting realm of memory. His subjects had their comforts, too, even in poverty, like the pictures on a wall or the portable clock on the mantel. Originally from Spain (assuming that one can talk here with a straight face about originality), Cormand is at home these days in Brooklyn, but these people were at home, too. Their churches stand empty, because Evans testifies to ordinary circumstances and not Sunday sermons.

He calls the show "Formalizing Their Concept." That could echo Modernism's demand for formalism, the conceptual art that rebelled against it, or postmodern jargon in discussing both. The gallery cites Lucy Lippard, who identified conceptual art with "dematerialization" in 1967. It then speaks of Cormand as *rematerializing* the work after Levine. The word evokes late Modernism's insistence on the art object, but then it places the original at a second or third remove. Besides, conceptual art often has a material element, especially today.

Levine, to me, has not held up half as well as many a contemporary, with a gratingly literal politics and strategy. At the same time, Evans holds up well indeed, with the idealism of the New Deal, an unsentimental eye, and even anticipations of Postmodernism in his postcards and penny pictures. His depth of focus hones in on the Depression with a frankness that could put even Cormand's fine graphite to shame. Call him a dead white male if you like, but the Farm Security Administration employed Gordon Parks, the African American photographer, too. Still, Cormand takes the risk of bringing the dead alive. Copy me on the next turn.