

Mungo Thomson's "Sideways Thought" by Francesco Tenaglia October 20–December 17, 2022

Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris

December 15, 2022



View of Mungo Thomson's "Sideways Thought" at galerie frank elbaz, Paris, 2022. (Left) *December 31, 1999 (Person of the Century – Albert Einstein)*, 2022. Enamel on low-iron mirror, poplar and anodized aluminum, 188 x 142 x 6 cm. (Right) *January 1, 2000 (Welcome to a New Century)*, 2022. Enamel on low-iron mirror, poplar, and anodized aluminum, 188 x 142 x 6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and galerie frank elbaz. Photo by Claire Dorn.

Mungo Thomson is a California-born conceptual artist in the lineage of John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha. His works often appear in serial forms that change over the years, adapting to different display contexts and making a virtue of repetition itself—framing, editing, and magnifying found objects and images from popular visual culture.

At the center of his solo presentation at frank elbaz gallery in Paris is a strong example of this tendency. Projected in the gallery's darkened first room is *Volume 5. Sideways Thought* (2020–22). Part of the artist's "Time Life" series of stop-motion animations that draw on encyclopedias and other sources of found imagery, the video consists of a montage of every photograph of Auguste Rodin's sculptures available in books about the artist's work. The idea is to mimic, or allude to, the operations of a high-speed scanner while transforming paper archives into digital databases for universities or research centers.¹ Yet the breakneck speed of the editing also illustrates an artistic possibility: that an artwork can be generated from the processes of digital sublimation. Thomson's use of ancillary documentary

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Volume 5 is constructed around a set of carefully selected images. As such, watching the video can also feel like following an ideal guided tour around the individual works: a continuous tracking shot composed of many frames made by different hands and at different times. Our point of view changes both with every frame and more gradually, as the work of one photographer ends and another begins, moving from one sculpture to the next. As viewers, we register arbitrary stylistic devices or choices in the quality, grain, and coloring of the single pictures realized by various photographers at different times in the last century. In addition to documenting the sculptures—for purposes of dissemination, documentation, and illustration—these photographers have implicitly offered their own “reading” of Rodin’s works.

Margins are key to the video. The different sizes and layouts of the publications turn into compositional outlines, and the sculptures are captured in different moments, places, and ambient conditions (surrounded by spectators or staged alone, for example). Sometimes, we briefly glimpse the surface on which the scanned books rest, suggesting a breaking of the fourth wall. Yet Thomson keeps us in his succinct chronological narrative by means of a rhythmic, continuous soundtrack.

In the next room of the gallery stands *Snowman - Tower #2* (2022), a bronze cast of a vertical stack of various sized packages normally employed for carrying pictures, sheets of paper, and printing proofs. The work alludes to fungible and commonplace services and recalls the semi-modular art of Brancusi, who spent a few weeks in Rodin’s workshop before realizing he had to follow his own path; like Rodin, Brancusi became greatly interested in photography as a means of presenting “readings” of his own work. The final rooms of the exhibition feature several recent examples of Thomson’s ongoing “TIME” series of silkscreened mirrors. These magnified versions of the American news magazine replicate the iconic red border and logo, as well as phrases such as “Person of the Century,” replacing the cover photograph with mirror. Some of these works are displayed directly opposite one another to form *mise-en-abymes*. As the visitor’s image bounces from one mirror to another, it multiplies—like Rodin’s sculptures relentlessly pursued by the camera.

In terms of the themes and the approach to display, “Sideways Thought” visibly takes into account the space in which it is mounted in a carefully calibrated way. By creating echoes among the works, this show could be thought of as another piece in the oeuvre of an artist who prefers to modulate his practice gradually, rather than rupture it. In addition to the West Coast conceptualists, Thomson updates the themes of Pictures Generation and appropriation art. Using techniques such as mounting, erasing, and reframing, he successfully addresses issues such as the permanence of the image, its value and status, and the emergence of aesthetic practices from the diffusion of technological media. This exhibition is notable for addressing the issue of hyper-documentation—of not only hallowed artifacts but also every individual, self-aware gesture—in a manner that seems effortless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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