

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Harren, Natilee, "Sharon Lockhart," Artforum, March 2010

LOS ANGELES

Sharon Lockhart

BLUM & POE

The photographs and two films composing Sharon Lockhart's latest project, "Lunch Break," 2008, focus on the shipbuilders at the ironworks in Bath, Maine, a subject somewhat at odds with that of "Pine Flat," 2002–2005, her previous film and photographic series, which portrayed rural California youths. When the characters are manual laborers rather than children and the setting is industry rather than nature, play becomes work and leisure time is highly structured. In fact, the project is closer in theme to a topic Lockhart explored more than ten years ago in documentation of museum workers in Mexico, Japan, and Scotland: the role of labor in arts institutions. That body of work is referred to in the photograph *Untitled (David Gonzalez, Trabiley Drywall, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, November 17, 2009)*, which hangs like a supertitle above the exhibition entrance. In "Lunch Break," however, Lockhart follows the subjects of the heaviest of

labors back to their work site. They are the electricians, welders, pipe fitters, machinists, tinsmiths, and insulators who build 9,500-ton ships for Maine's largest private employer.

Lunch Break is also the name of one of two films associated with the project, a tracking shot through a factory corridor during the workers' midday rest that has been digitally slowed from its original eleven minutes to last eighty. Departing from Lockhart's signature static-camera "still films," *Lunch Break* seems to introduce a new format, the "moving still." The artist isolates a speed slow enough to maintain a sense of photography's arresting flatness; it is as if the camera presses forth with the aim of consolidating all the corridor's visual incidents into a singular two-dimensional image. If it is remarkable that Lockhart's camera travels for the first time, the snail pace still enables the contemplative, detail-oriented viewing experience for which her work is known. One begins to examine the factory's intri-

cate machinery: levers, cords, labyrinthine pipes, and pressure gauges looking like so many little clocks. The unidirectional movement emphasizes the restrictive nature of the workers' space of reprieve, its ill-suitedness to the activities we see them engaged in—eating, reading, conversing, and napping. For some viewers, the film is excruciatingly slow, practically eternal, for the camera does not reach the end of the passageway before looping back to the start. The effect is of sinking headfirst into an infinite, viscid time-space that induces an almost nightmarish sort of absorption, aided by the composer Becky Allen and filmmaker James Benning's sound track of machinelike humming subtended by pulsating drones. The noise pervades the gallery, so that when audiences first encounter the freestanding screening space, it seems like a hidden machine room.

Photographic tableaux and still lifes further illuminate the material conditions structuring nonproductive time at the factory. An engrossing series reveals the countless telling details of employee-run concession stands. One observes the fluctuating price of coffee (an index of the economy) and printed-image idols of the machines the workers would rather be operating (muscle cars and motorcycles). In other photos, weathered lunch boxes personalized with union, veteran, and navy ship decals function as portraits. Like break time, the lunch boxes (and the cigarettes, medication, newspapers, and lottery tickets held within) represent modes of parceled pleasure to be meted out through the day. These vessels of comfort appearing one after another begin to look like rows of little houses.

"Lunch Break" engages a history of photographic meditations on the worker by figures such as Eugène Atget, August Sander, and Lewis Hine, but despite first appearances there is nothing anachronistic or

quaint about the renderings, nor is there anything politically revolutionary about the employees of Bath Iron Works themselves, who are in fact building the US Navy's "most technologically advanced surface combatants." Proudly displayed veteran and USS emblems (referring to vessels labored on) indicate that many of these men and women have spent their entire working lives within the public and private sectors of the military-industrial complex. When subtle details coalesce, Lockhart's view onto the workers' lunch break ultimately suggests more than simply a moment of respite from a day's work; it reveals a pause taken from the immense mechanizations of war to reclaim a modest sense of self-possession by partaking in simple comforts.

—Natilee Harren



Sharon Lockhart,
*Lunch Break (Assembly
Hall, Bath Iron Works,
November 5, 2007,
Bath, Maine), 2008*,
still from a 35-mm film
transferred to video,
80 minutes.