

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sholis, Brian, "Parts and Labor", artforum.com, January, 2009

Parts and Labor

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Left: Sharon Lockhart, *Lunch Break*, 2008, production still from a color film in 35 mm transferred to HD, 83 minutes. Right: Sharon Lockhart, *Exit*, 2008, production still from a color film in 16 mm transferred to HD, 41 minutes.

SHARON LOCKHART'S LATEST FILMS depict employees at the Bath Iron Works in Bath, Maine. *Lunch Break* (2008), the longer of the two, is notable first for the artist's decision to set the camera in motion, something she has not done in any of her previous films. (*Exit* [2008], a related, forty-one-minute study of repetition and difference that depicts workers leaving the facility on five consecutive days, maintains a fixed camera position.) In a long, uninterrupted tracking shot, the camera in *Lunch Break* traverses at midday what appears to be the spinal cord of the shipyard—a long, uninterrupted passageway—as several dozen employees eat, read the newspaper, and talk in small groups. Most of the workers (all but one are men) do not engage with the camera, perhaps a result of the fact that, as with *Pine Flat* (2005), Lockhart's study of children in a small California town, the artist spent considerable time conducting quasi-ethnographic research to familiarize herself with the "community" of shipbuilders, electricians, welders, and pipefitters before capturing it on film.

Though the camera moved, the footage it gathered has been slowed down dramatically: Six minutes pass before the first figure is beyond the frame, and another seven elapse before the camera reaches the next trio of relaxing employees. As it progresses, every detail of the claustrophobically hemmed-in environment is revealed in sharp focus: dented garbage cans and putty-colored lockers, some adorned with stickers; olive-green tool chests and brightly colored plastic coolers; gauges that cling to pipes stretching from floor to ceiling; and tubes and hoses that extend every which way, all beneath drab, uniform fluorescent light. The dilatory pace emphasizes the sheer amount of material (and visual detail) packed in to this place, and highlights how successfully 35-mm film can capture that plenitude. But the unhurriedness also imparts a monumental solemnity to each of the workers' gestures, which can undercut the film's tight structure in both negative and positive ways. A man sitting to the left of the aisle with a water bottle in hand, momentarily looking at the floor, becomes, when slowed down, a despondent ruminator seemingly lifted from one of Bill Viola's histrionic video installations. On the other hand, when, midway through the film, another man reaching above the lockers pulls a bag of popcorn out of an unseen microwave, the humor of his banal action deflates the portentousness that can cloud such snail-paced scrutiny.

Lockhart's deadpan gaze, it should be noted, is in fact far removed from Viola's schmaltzy recent work. *Lunch Break* is more closely related to films such as Tacita Dean's *Kodak* (2006), a poker-faced threnody that memorializes the last days in the factory in France where Dean's preferred film stock was made, or Mark Lewis's *Children's Games*, *Heygate Estate* (2002), in which the camera glides seamlessly along an elevated walkway through a south London housing project, capturing children at play on the sidewalks below. All three infuse sharply delineated formal parameters with content extraneous to that structure. (As Michael Ned Holte has noted elsewhere, Lockhart does not make strictly *structuralist* films; the same can be said about Dean and Lewis's rigorous work.) *Lunch Break* is described as part of Lockhart's new series "about the present state of US labor," but the film discloses little concerning this ambitious remit. (For example, nowhere is it explained that the Bath Iron Workers' labor is put to very particular ends: The company is part of the General Dynamics conglomerate and a major supplier of destroyers to the US Navy.)

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The employees' idleness might be seen as a metaphor for the way in which our economy has ground to a halt, but Lockhart remains a better portraitist and formalist than analyst or polemicist.

The same can be said of James Benning, who is perhaps the single greatest influence on Lockhart's moving-image corpus and who edited *Lunch Break* and helped supervise its sound. (For example, *RR* [2007], his wondrous latest film, is diminished somewhat by its didactic sound track selections.) He has, with composer Becky Allen, given *Lunch Break* a deep, consistent, ambient industrial drone (similar to Dean's *Kodak*) that is punctuated occasionally by the clang of metal against metal. Snippets of conversation and, at one point, a Led Zeppelin song bubble up to the surface of the mix as the camera passes by plausible sources for the sounds. The disjunction between edited sounds seemingly played at normal speed and a slowed-down image helps articulate the constructed nature of Lockhart's elegant, if seemingly transitional, film.

Sharon Lockhart's Lunch Break and Exit were recently on view, alongside new photographs, at the Secession in Vienna. Lunch Break screens at the Sundance Film Festival on January 16, 17, 21, and 24. For more information, click [here](#).

— Brian Sholis