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The Art of Sandy Skoglund Between Nature and Artifice

A Total Work Combining Sculpture, Painting, Photography, and Digital Art

By Milena Cordioli

Abstract

This monographic essay analyzes several works by the contemporary American artist Sandy Skoglund, who, in 2012, came to present her work at the SantaGiulia Academy of Fine Arts in Brescia, particularly focusing on the piece *Winter*, which was still in progress at that time. Completed after a long, multi-year effort in 2019, this work now reveals its complexity, shedding light on the significance of the artist's research, whose main goal is the preservation of the memory of vision in a reality where images flow ever more quickly and elusively.

Keywords:

Installation, Photography, Magic Realism, Vision, Memory

The American artist Sandy Skoglund (Quincy, 1946), whose works are on display until June 2, 2024, in the historic setting of the Palazzo del Duca in Senigallia, is the subject of a retrospective exhibition titled *Sandy Skoglund – The Imaginary Worlds of Photography 1974-2023*. This exhibition traces her entire artistic production from the 1970s onward, establishing her as a unique figure in the contemporary art scene.

Her artistic language emerges from an extremely intricate creative process. The various stages of her work's evolution—first, the technical and material construction of the photographic set, followed by the directorial staging of the “characters,” and finally, the

freezing of the image in the photographic shot—operate as distinct phases condensed into a single artwork, where memory and vision merge.

The visual outcome of her work, which can be described as “photo-pictorial,” represents the final stage of the process. However, conceptually, what is most crucial is that Skoglund creates actual spatial installations, within which she directs her subjects like chess pieces on a board.

Chance also plays a role in her work, as the subjects are in motion, and their actions are halted at the very moment the artwork is finalized, captured in a photographic instant that suspends any further performative process.

Due to the significance she places on the entire process leading to the final photograph, Skoglund has documented her work in a series of films^[1], showcasing the creation of her pieces from scratch. These films reveal the complete production process: the artist, who is also a sculptor, crafts certain elements herself, sets up the installation, dresses mannequins and actors with materials of various kinds, and ultimately captures the “perfect” photographic shot that crystallizes the temporal progression of all these sequential acts.

The crystallization of time is a central conceptual theme in her work. However, Skoglund also attributes aesthetic value to the process itself, to time in action. While the final

artwork is the photograph, it results from an imaginative creation that blends reality with surrealism.

“Without photography, conceptual art would fade from human memory. In this form, my art can be perceived as a painting, as a window open to another world. That, after all, is the reason I work with a camera. The large format suits the burlesque aspect of my work.” [2]

The classical composition of her images, which follows the principles of painting, ensures that they leave a lasting impression on memory. As the artist herself states, without this process of visual fixation, the very concept would be erased, and the image would slip away from our eyes—already oversaturated with stimuli.

The artist, first and foremost, preserves memory by engaging with the art of the past. She is acutely aware that only the creation of images structured around thoughtful research into the meaning of represented objects and the relationship between the human figure and space will leave a mark on the observer’s memory. The visual culture of the present, in dialogue with the universal value of past forms, is the only salvation from the oblivion of ephemeral imagery.

Sandy Skoglund’s works reveal worlds dominated by the fragility of existence but imbued with a lasting sense of meaning. This is evident, for instance, in her *Eyesflakes*, where eyes are trapped in snow crystals. In a 2012 interview, she stated:

“Yes, in the final photographs of my work, the human figure exists in a precarious balance. It is as if the human being is trapped, like an animal caught in a snare. But humans are trapped in reality itself. I agree that Renaissance art is a model for me, where the

center of gravity and perspective emerge from the human figure.”[3]

Her academic background includes studies in painting and art history. It was only later, in the 1970s, that she became interested in photography. She recalls learning photography techniques through commercial photography methods, using multiple light sources and large-format cameras, and subsequently applying this principle of photographic objectification to her sculptures. She also explains that photography allows her to “paint sculpture” since the photographic studio process closely resembles that of painting. Both involve a careful manipulation of light and shadow, which is essentially the technical approach to staged photography—the genre that defines her artistic practice.

The works of the 1980s are particularly intense, both due to the violent chromatic contrasts and the anxiety-inducing atmosphere of a space overwhelmed by myriads of objects or animals that fill the rooms entirely. This creates an evident dark irony with surrealist influences and constructs “virtual” worlds where the artist seems to overturn the rational order of reality as if wielding an irreverent magic wand.

Regarding the limits imposed by a magical vision of reality, in 1932 Massimo Bontempelli, who theorized Magical Realism in Italy, wrote:

“The magical spirit is antithetical to the tragic spirit. Magic is the partial and temporary control that man can exert over forces ordinarily superior to him [...] The victory of man over certain superior forces is, in magic, merely apparent. Moreover, the superior elements, seemingly defeated by the magician, always maintain a certain ironic stance within the magical act.”[4]

Revenge of the Goldfish (1981) (fig. 1), for example, transforms an entire house into an aquarium: everything turns blue, the color of water, and the fish roam in an apparent freedom. Upon closer inspection, however, they follow the perspective lines of a space that seems enclosed within a box. In each of these images, the chromatic contrast amplifies the tension between the dynamic postures of the animals and the frozen movement of the overall composition. This contrast is further emphasized by the perspective construction, which underpins the pictorial and compositional structure of the image—a structure discussed earlier—which generates a paradoxical order in chaos and chaos in order.

By merging reality with imagination, concreteness with abstraction, Skoglund shapes her vision of the world and attempts to express her thoughts on the human condition in an era of great complexity, particularly in relation to other living beings and nature.

“My images seem like dreams to others, but not to me [...] I don’t see my work as directly related to Surrealism. Rather, I believe it reflects the contrast and complexity that define the United States today. No, I don’t think of these images as dreams. There is only one dreamlike element: ‘intrusiveness.’ My images contain both a realistic and an unreal component that, by invading reality, interferes with it.”[5]

In her works from the 1990s, Skoglund began incorporating food as a material in her installations. This might suggest a connection to the themes of American Pop Art; however, the artist remains consistent with her own visual language. The food elements are transformed into intricate pictorial textures, abstracted from their organic softness to become solid and radiant materials.

Regarding her use of food, the artist explains that she constantly seeks a meaning beyond the ordinary. She deliberately selects everyday American foods, such as bacon and the chips commonly served at cocktail parties. And what could be more banal than popcorn?

In 2001, she created Raining Popcorn, inspired by a local news story: the discovery in the United States of ceramic popcorn dating back approximately 2,000 years—preserved like crystals, mineral forms frozen in the passage of historical time. Skoglund transforms this inspiration into a poetic image dominated by the whiteness of the corn kernels/flakes. The notion of crystallized nature becomes central in her later works, marking a transition from the confined spaces of rooms to the vastness of natural landscapes.

Skoglund had already pushed this concept to the extreme—revealing, incidentally, her deep affinity for sculpture—by attempting to “trap” the soft matter of the world, particularly food, in her 1992 work Spirituality in the Flesh (fig. 2). The title itself is a declaration of intent: to seek the spirit within matter.

In this case, she had to battle time in the most literal sense: the ground meat covering both the mannequin and the surrounding space (walls and floor) deteriorates rapidly, losing its pinkish hue and darkening over time. The flesh ages, but the spirit remains incorruptible in its eternal present.

Once again, the depiction of this suspended moment in time—one of perfect, magical harmony—is conveyed through form and color. The woman’s blue dress contrasts with the red of the meat. Blue has traditionally symbolized spirituality, appearing as the Virgin Mary’s mantle in medieval art. Additionally, Skoglund plays with material effects: the trembling

softness of the meat is arrested in the plastic folds of the dress. Finally, the cast shadow serves its purpose, anchoring this absurd yet tangible presence within the magical space of the installation—an entity that, as the title suggests, is both flesh and spirit.

The Cycle of the Seasons

“I see us humans as something suspended between nature and artifice. I feel that the more I examine nature and artificiality in my work, the more they transform into each other.”[6]

The solo exhibition of Sandy Skoglund, held in 2012 at the Paci Contemporary Gallery in Brescia, aimed to present the world premiere of her latest work, begun in 2008 and now completed, titled *Winter*. On display were the first pieces of what was to become a large spatial installation, like all her previous works: a series of ceramics hanging on the walls, with geometric-crystalline forms at the center of which an eye was placed, aptly called *Eyesflakes* (literally “Eyes/snowflakes”).

These strange forms, both natural and surreal at the same time, are created as individual sculptures, already carrying a meaning in themselves but destined to assume a deeper, more complete significance within the entire installation and in the final photograph that resulted from it in 2019 (*Winter* - fig. 3). The frozen atmosphere of the whole is essential to grasp the oxymoronic meaning of these *Eyesflakes*, in which consciousness (the eye) does not belong to the subject (after all, eyes are not only human but also animal), but disperses into the wonder of the many forms of reality, symbolized by the crystal.

The artist starts from a scientific basis to

rework this natural element in a fantastic way: the snowflake, which has the “mathematical” form of a crystal but, unlike minerals or stones, is made of water. It thus expresses fragility, despite the geometric hardness of its form (it is an oxymoronic image, as, according to the artist, while working on these “eyes of snow” she felt both the terror and the beauty of freezing consciousness into crystalline forms). This contrast fascinates Skoglund, and as she states, she intends to expand it to the work in its total visuality.

The technique is complex: the snowflakes are digitally designed, the eyes are all photographed directly by the artist; the final ceramic comes from the process of merging the two images on a computer, then transferred onto the glossy (glazed) surface of the object-sculpture (the artist defines it as a “photo-ceramic”) through a kiln firing that permanently fixes the image. The process of objectifying the subject in the world is completed in these works by Skoglund, who had already expressed the idea of a spirituality captured by things, by the “flesh of the world,” to paraphrase the thought of French philosopher Merleau-Ponty*[7], and had played on the material contrast between organic and plastic rigidity. In the snowflake, the contrast moves from matter to form, and irony gives way to a cosmic sense of existential fragility.

The artist explains the insertion of the eye into the crystal as follows:

“I am looking for ‘consciousness in the crystal.’ The idea of the snowflake is connected to that of clay due to a common sense of material fragility. I made many attempts; it is a very long process of cutting the ceramic shapes that house the *Eyesflakes*. The result is a kind of photo-ceramic. The *Eyesflakes* represent my only gaze on the winter landscape: each form

is different, and the images of the eyes are alternated and repeated.”[8]

A single gaze, fragmented into crystals with a thousand facets: the eyes of others. This is undoubtedly the most alchemical and magical work created by the American artist.

Skoglund started the project on the seasons in 2004. The work directly preceding *Winter* is dedicated to spring and is titled *Fresh Hybrid*, completed in 2008 (fig. 4).

The title speaks for itself: the spring freshness appears to us as something hybrid, and the contamination is that between the natural and the artificial, human bodies and trees, living beings and mannequin sculptures. The image presents itself as very surreal, “Magrittian,” we could say, and with Magritte, Skoglund is in perfect harmony when talking about a “truthfulness of imagination.” Color always plays an essential role in the compositional balance within the final image, often performing a function of re-adjustment relative to the acrobatic poses staged by the artist. She herself declares that she employs a kind of fictitious randomness:

“The final image corresponds to the creation of an event that coincides with the moment of the photograph being taken, but the style I use is constructed beforehand and controlled: the interesting thing for me is the small accidents that happen when I leave the human beings inside the installation to photograph them.”[9]

The choice of materials is always fitting to express the concepts:

“Just as for winter, I reflected on what is the first sensation that comes to mind when thinking about spring: softness; so I chose soft materials and familiar objects: pipe cleaners that are used for craft work. The idea of chicks to express softness and familiarity. I took the

chicks and asked myself the meaning of these objects: who invented them? Why do they exist? Their function traces back to the original iconography of bunnies, which can be found in the Renaissance, especially in North European Celtic art, to express the continuous renewal of life.”[10]

The renewal of life is linked to the cycle of the seasons and to the theme of time returning upon itself: one season ends, dies, and then is reborn in an eternal circular process. Time moves forward, yet the moment of arrest in the photo-painting image pulls it into the immobility of the instant. Skoglund indeed argues that photography is the moment when the process is completed because in it she can distance herself from the matter and reach the conceptual level of the work, managing to bring everything to a perceptive synthesis of the different dimensions.

The Relationship Between Temporal Development and the Photographic Instant

Sandy Skoglund does not digitally assemble her images. She uses digital creative support only for the creation of certain elements in her latest work; yet, the compositional principles of the image and the relationship between photography and painting make us perceive her imaginary worlds as true “virtual” creations.

“I am often asked why I don’t create my images on the computer: it would change the meaning. Knowing that what we are looking at actually existed changes our perception of the image. Think about Hollywood films: if we know that the background was created on a computer, our experience of the scene

changes; an electronically created image is perceived differently from a photographed one. I'm not against computers as a tool per se, but as far as my work is concerned, the mirrored image of the installation has a decisive value.”[11]

The last two works by Skoglund examined here seal this principle, as they extremize the conflicting relationship between installation and photography (“the mirrored image”), the two different spatiotemporal concepts involved, and essentially, the transformation of reality into image when it is reflected in the mirror of vision.

The fundamental importance of the mirror-like quality of the image between reality and fiction, which heightens the distance between installation and photography, is found in the work *Breathing Glass* (2000) (*fig. 5), that is, the perception of a reality under glass and the absence of vital breath. The work was created by Skoglund just two years after *Shimmering Madness* (“*Luccicante Follia*”), with which we will conclude this journey through her images, and conceptually continues it, even could be considered its development: there are insects (this time dragonflies) “animated” on the background wall, moving in contradiction with their crystallized forms in the glass; there are three mannequins covered with shiny, faceted elements, irregular pieces painted with various shades of blue, like fragments of a shattered mirror, accompanied by a series of little figures scattered on the floor (which then becomes the ceiling in the photograph); finally, there are two living beings (also crystallized in the glass breath) defying gravity, with their feet placed on the ceiling. However, this last consideration applies only to the photographic work, the final image that overturns reality. The relationship between the actual placement

of the two actors/models in the installation space, guided by the artist, and the imaginary dimension of the photograph that reverses reality confirms the distance between the two different natures of Skoglund’s work.

At the presentation of her work at the Academy, I asked the artist: “Regarding *Breathing Glass*: the idea of putting the living models upside down can be an anticipation of the idea of circularity and gravity loss that you are now pursuing in the *Winter* work?” Her response was, verbatim: “The sensation of falling and being disoriented is correct. This is always present in my work.”

The loss of gravity in this image indeed generates a sort of spatial circularity between the mannequins, which seem correctly placed but have their feet suspended in the void, and the two actors, who are dangling from the ceiling: the space dilates, and the view of the “perspective box room,” from which Skoglund always starts her installations, is compromised. Another essential aspect identified from the beginning of this journey is the reintroduction of perspective in a disorienting key.

Photography, in this sense, then functions as a magical mirror that reverses reality and does not merely reproduce it, repeating the ancient metaphor of the virtual space of pictorial representation. For Skoglund, photography can be perceived as either a window or a mirror; in either case, it plays an essential role in contemporary times, as it is used to create images that reflect our relationship with the world, much like painting did in the past. Time halts in the dilation of space, which becomes immeasurable, and the fragility of the existential condition, expressed by gravitational emptiness, crystallizes into plastic and gleaming forms.

When asked about the crystallization of form theorized by Franz Roh*[12]* in his 1925 essay on Magical Realism, the artist responded in these terms:

“Franz Roh was interested in how the concrete physical world constitutes a magical experience for human beings. I feel the same way. Every object, including snowflakes, is a reflection of our consciousness. As you say, the crystallization of form in my work is an attempt to stop time. The medium of still photography naturally does this.”[13]*

Shortly thereafter, in relation to *Breathing Glass*:

“Yes, I see the effect of human presence entering momentarily into the scene as a final performative act. The entrance of the human being into a perfectly organized, crystallized environment is a disturbance. For me, the final exaltation in my work is this introduction of the human being into a frozen reality, which represents nature’s indifference toward us.”[14]*

Shimmering Madness (fig. 6) is a work from 1998, exhibited in 2012 at the Paci Gallery in Brescia during the artist’s solo exhibition. In the setup, the photograph hung in dialogue with the three-dimensional installation displayed in the same room, as was recently done for the exhibition of the *Winter* work in Senigallia. This way of exhibiting her works, often employed in Skoglund’s shows, brings into play the relationship between the imaginary space of photography and the concrete one of the sculptural and spatial work.

The peculiarity of this work is the presence of mechanical elements that move on the background wall: a series of butterflies flapping their wings, thus creating an incessant

noise. The immediate contrast between the mute immobility of the mannequins and the noisy mobility of the butterflies in the background is striking. The precariousness symbolized by both the real presences (it is interesting how the artist shapes the positions of these bodies, transforming them into puppets in her hands) and the sculptures, seems to indicate a condition of fragility, as if they had lost the spatial-temporal coordinates of their actions and being in the world. The madness in the title, however, is shimmering, luminous, and seems more like a cosmic senselessness represented by the hard, sugary candies that coat the bodies and floor. With this work, the artist aimed to create a kind of hyperstimulation in terms of color and imagery, one that would evoke our times. She herself stated that she wanted to generate a “black-out from overload,” and for this reason, the figures appear as if they feel upside-down. Despite this evident chaos, the final image, as always, conveys a sense of order—a necessary, ancestral need to measure a portion of the world, of reality, amidst the chaos of events and the overwhelming abundance of images that populate our contemporary reality.

“[...] A typically postmodern idea, that reality itself is ultimately chaotic and dangerously alien to our actions as human beings, and that it is our limited perception that allows us to consider only a portion of the chaos and continue our lives like this.”[16]

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- <https://www.sandyskoglund.com/> (consultato il 27 ottobre 2024).
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- The translations from the interview and the conference of 2012 are by the author.

- 1)** Partly collected in the DVD *The Camera's View & Shimmering Madness Installation* (2005), S. Skoglund.
- 2)** S. Skoglund, in C. Larrain, «*ZOOM*», April 1983, in Sandy Skoglund. *Magic Time*, exhibition catalog curated by G. Paci, Brescia 2008, p. 2.
- 3)** Online interview conducted by the undersigned in 2012, included as an appendix in the PhD thesis M. Cordioli, *Poetiche dell'incantesimo. Dal Realismo magico alla pittura digitale*, PhD in Cultural Heritage and Territory, University of Verona, Verona 2014.
- 4)** M. Bontempelli, *Limiti della magia*, in *Realismo Magico e altri scritti*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Abscondita, Milan 2006, p. 36.
- 5)** S. Skoglund, in D. Paparoni, *Il corpo parlante dell'arte*, Castelvechi, Rome 1997, in Sandy Skoglund. *Magic Time*, cited work, p. 2.

- 6)** S. Skoglund, in G. Foschi, Sandy Skoglund. *Mondi Ibridi*, cited work, p. 5.
- 7)** M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'occhio e lo spirito*, SE, Milan 1989, pp. 26-28.
- 8)** Direct quotation from S. Skoglund taken from the lecture held by the artist at the Academy of Fine Arts of Brescia SantaGiulia, to present her entire creative path, from the beginnings to the "Winter" project, on March 30, 2012.
- 9)** Ibidem.
- 10)** Ibidem.
- 11)** S. Skoglund, in D. Paparoni, *Il corpo parlante dell'arte*, cited work, p. 2.
- 12)** F. Roh, *Post-Espressionismo-Realismo magico. Problemi della nuova pittura europea*, edited by S. Cecchini, Liguori Editore, Naples 2007.
- 13)** Online interview conducted by the undersigned in 2012, included as an appendix in the PhD thesis M. Cordioli, *Poetiche dell'incantesimo. Dal Realismo magico alla pittura digitale*, cited work.
- 14)** Ibidem.

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