grand illusion (Things to Come: OUTLINES, 1941–1947, part iii)

Jasmine Gregory, Sophie Kovel, Fernand Léger, Brianna Perry, Louise Pershing, Paul Pfeiffer, Teak Ramos, Hélène Yamba-Guimbi

with archival material from Rockwell Manufacturing
co-curated by Brittany Reilly

On March 2, 1942, from her modest Outlines gallery of modern art and design on Pittsburgh's Boulevard of the Allies, Elizabeth Rockwell screened Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937), the filmmaker's elegy imagines a fictional society in which human solidarity might transcend the national and class divisions of war. Borrowing Renoir's title, this third and final chapter of *Things to Come: OUTLINES, 1941–1947* revisits impossibility and futility through the afterlife of modernism's visual forms. *grand illusion* brings together historical artists who exhibited at Outlines with a later generation that collectively takes up disobedient riffs on modernism's formal rules and social ambitions, after the broken mechanisms of the machine have outlived the machinery itself. Working in the wake of decades of scholarship that dismantled modernism's foundations, these artists turn to form as a container for the movement's psychic afterlife. Restating its formal tropes with material poetics and deadpan humor alike, in which geometry and formalism cease to promise universal solutions, or are deconstructed without tools for rebuilding, form instead becomes a container for persistent failure.

The exhibition's engine is a montage of fractured gears, pendulums, wine bottles, carnival rides, and a Cheshire-cat lipstick-lined smile in Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924). In 1944, Rockwell screened the artist and war veteran's only completed film. Its choreography combines workaday objects and hardware assemblies designed to assist humankind with kaleidoscopic sequences drawn from machine aesthetics. Splicing modern life's acceleration with modernism's vocabulary of line and motion, *Ballet Mécanique* rehearses the desire for order without ever containing the delirium the quest produces. First position. Second position. Third. Lights. Labor. Leisure. Wagon wheels that become abstract circles and industrial gears, that become flashing light bulbs, and wheels of fortune. Motifs of illusion and games—and perhaps attempts to game the system by burying those emotions in the forms' constituent parts—also repeat throughout the exhibition: Teak Ramos's meticulous starburst wall relief, informed by antique make-your-own parasol designs, reads as both official national crest and invented ornament; Paul Pfeiffer's immersive gameboards from *The Price Is Right* stripped of cash rewards; Hélène Yamba-Guimbi's light box of artificial currency; and Brianna Perry's checkerboard "painting," studded with two quarters and a dime as game pieces that total the work's title, *60 Cents*, offers a poker-faced answer to the perennial question of painting's commercial status.

Jasmine Gregory, burying Expressionist gestures from her disposable palette in plastic and silver tinsel, suggest that the party has long been over. But who was it for anyway? Sophie Kovel's imitation cupcake confectionary monochromes, rendered in Yves Klein-and-corporate blue, commemorate the final office party of Tripp Lite before its owner donated the company as a tax shelter and it was ultimately sold for $1.65 billion. Nearby, a selection of 1960s product photographs from the archives of Rockwell Manufacturing by Pittsburgh commercial photographers Royal Kane and Harold Corsini depicts floating, branded valves and hand drills arranged in serial repetition.[1] Filtered through a hazy pink advertising lens, these industrial artifacts become their own frozen corps de ballet, pointing to an era in which the flow of power was labeled on surfaces rather than invisible vessels for capital.

If *Ballet Mécanique* is the show's motor, Louise Pershing (1904–1986), a Pittsburgh-based artist and designer who exhibited at Outlines, is the emotional center.[2] In *Inner Bound* (c. 1950s), her early industrial scenes evolved into color-block abstractions. The work's title evokes the engineering-mathematical concept defining a proven geometric limit, akin to the strict upper limit on what is achievable. Indicating, perhaps, a shift to interiority as inseparable from both structural and cosmic forces perpetually beyond our control, *Inner Bound* resembles a machine cog, a transcendental halo, an empty void with no center of gravity to hold. It also looks like a moon.

1) Out of a loft on Third Avenue downtown, studio photographer Royal Kane, often with a fantastical eye, captured the products of companies including Kaufmann's Department Store, Alcoa, Westinghouse and U.S. Steel, crafting their image across print ads and product packaging. In his lens, Rockwell Manufacturing power tools, arranged in repetition, become their own freeze-frame corps de ballet. Artist, documentarian and advertisement photographer Harold Corsini chronicled the pulse of industry including interior settings, workers and technicians.

2) Student of Hans Hoffman and of Alexander Kostellow, pioneer of Industrial Design pedagogy, Pershing was exhibited at Outlines in 1942 as part of Pittsburgh Moderns. Pershing's period of 1950s oil on Masonite works included depictions of radar towers, transmitters, reactor components, flagpoles and aerial perspectives of a football field or military airbase. Beloved friend, urban designer David Lewis felt Pershing "did not belong to her generation...remaining on the exploratory edge of hard-edge sculpture." Completed primarily during the 1960s, her later works in brass, stainless steel, aluminum, and marble combined machined shaped plates and segments into tidy forms that teased at having a practical purpose or function, but often remained static, at times with adjustable elements.