



Michael Snow
Walking Woman/Carla Bley, 1965
Essay by Charlene K. Lau
2014



Michael Snow, *Walking Woman/Carla Bley, 1965*, photolithograph with rubber stamp. Gift of Douglas Hill.

Michael Snow's influential and prolific practice has spanned over half a century across disciplines including avant-garde film, jazz, painting, and sculpture. Perhaps the most recognizable of his oeuvre are the iconic *Walking Woman* works. As the subject of over 200 pieces made in Toronto and New York between 1961 and 1967, the *Walking Woman* contour enacted a system of repetition as visual variations on a theme. In its original form, the *Walking Woman* existed as a 152 cm cardboard cut-out—in positive and negative form—of a woman walking in profile. Drawn from Snow's imagination, the shape was eventually represented in many different sizes and used both as a tool in stencil form, and as subject matter. Although Snow began experimenting with the *Walking Woman* figure in 1960, it was not until 1962 that the first works were shown in an exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto. In a review of the show in *The Telegram*, art critic Paul Duval wrote:

His silhouetted woman is vulgar, like a cardboard figure standing outside a burlesque house, or a character in an old-fashioned comic strip. She exists in two-dimensions only; there is not even a hint that she might have substance. (1)

Despite this description, Duval was complimentary of the exhibition, and concluded that the works were “among the important accomplishments in Canadian art.” (2)



In his text “A Lot of Near Mrs.” (1962-63), Snow acknowledges the historical subject of woman in art, but insists: “My subject is not women or a woman *but* the first cardboard cutout *Walking Woman* I made.” (3) Yet, the repetition of the *Walking Woman* contour in its varied forms creates a Platonic image of woman. Snow explored this singular subject in numerous two- and three-dimensional media including collages, prints, photographs, and sculptures, as well as in acrylic paint, ink, graphite, and oil on surfaces like canvas, wood, cardboard, aluminum, and various articles of clothing. While some *Walking Woman* works were exhibited in galleries, many also took the form of interventions in public spaces in New York and Toronto. Known as “lost works,” the interventions included imprints of *Walking Woman* rubber stamps placed in books, stickers adhered to furniture and subway cars, and small stencil paintings affixed to posters and subway advertisement panels. In 1967, Snow showed his final *Walking Woman* work—an eleven-part sculpture—in the Ontario Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal.

Walking Woman/Carla Bley belongs to *Toronto 20* portfolio (1965), a collection of twenty artists’ prints in editions of 100 commissioned by the University of Toronto Press in association with five Toronto commercial galleries. Snow’s print is composed of a black and white photolithograph of two images, and the impression of a rubber stamp. In the main photograph, the woman depicted is Snow’s friend, jazz musician and composer Carla Bley. Wearing in a raincoat and a handkerchief over her hair, she is shown in an interior space (possibly a studio), mimicking the stride of the *Walking Woman* negative cut-out that frames and is propped up in front of her. This main image was just one of many variations that appeared in Snow’s 1964 live action 16 mm film *New York Eye and Ear Control*. Functioning like the film’s protagonist, the cut-outs were shown along with footage of real women and men, and accompanied by a free jazz soundtrack featuring tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler and trumpeter Don Cherry.

Bley’s appearance in this *Walking Woman* work imbues an otherwise anonymous “everywoman” shape with individuality and character. The image is simultaneously flat and illusionistic, and Bley’s real-life appearance serves to further convey the flatness of the cut-out. This juxtaposition between a real woman and her likeness reveals literal gaps in representation as white space from the wall behind Bley shows through the cut-out that frames her. In the lower left-hand corner of the print is a small photographic landscape print of the positive *Walking Woman* cut-out from the foreground in the main image, standing alone in the middle of a deserted New York City street. Sun streams onto a section of the street, emphasizing the cut-out’s dark silhouette. To the right of this photograph is the imprint of a small rubber stamp of the *Walking Woman* silhouette, which Snow hand-stamped onto the print. These combined elements—the main image of Bley, the small photo of the *Walking Woman* figure on a New York City street, and the rubber stamp—form multiple layers of reality and representation tied up in the conceptual subject of the *Walking Woman*, all the while questioning the two-dimensional nature of print as a medium.

(1) Paul Duval, “Accent on Art,” *The Telegram*, March 24, 1962.

(2) Paul Duval, “Accent on Art,” *The Telegram*, March 24, 1962.

(3) Michael Snow, “A Lot of Near Mrs.,” in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994), 26.



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