

## Michel Campeau: Lights on Darkrooms Galerie Simon Blais, September 17 - October 11, 2008

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# MICHEL CAMPEAU

## LIGHTS ON DARKROOMS

Interviewed by Marine Van Hoof

WE ARE PRESENTED WITH AN IMAGE OF A FORM LIKE A MYSTERIOUS TURQUOISE BLUE "PLANET" COVERED IN RUST IN THE SHAPE RESEMBLING THE MAP OF THE WORLD, OF A BLOOD RED RECTANGLE STRIATED WITH WHITE WHICH COULD BE THE BOTTOM OF A SINK OR SIMPLY A CLOSE-UP OF OBJECTS AND DEVICES THAT SERVE AS TOOLS IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESS. TAKING AS THEIR THEME THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE DARKROOM, MICHEL CAMPEAU'S PHOTOGRAPHS ARE AN INCISIVE COMMENTARY ON THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION.

EXPOSITION

Galerie Simon Blais  
5420, boul. Saint-Laurent  
Local 100  
Montreal  
Tel.: 514 849-1165

September 17 – October 11, 2008

His first series titled *Chambre noire* shown at Galerie Simon Blais, and its accompanying publication, are based on the simple idea of photographing darkrooms as a means of documenting this unique environment that is slowly disappearing. Having visited 75 darkrooms across Quebec, the artist continued his research in other places.

Focusing an "expertly grim" eye on myriad details (bits and pieces of piping, electrical wiring, floors, collages, draft proofing...), captured at unusual angles, these images evoke the craftsmanship side of photography from its inception, bringing into the foreground the obsolete nature of the darkroom. In a single flash of light, Campeau reveals recesses with objects hidden in perpetual darkness, their dilapidated, rundown state testifying to a situation of critical vulnerability. The artist's "crime", is that these images are taken with a digital camera. Michel Campeau, who made his transition to digital after working with traditional photography for 40 years, is aware of the ironic and iconoclastic aspect of his endeavour. What he aims to do through his images, which are also born of a "feeling of lost memory and personal history", is to take part in the debate on the importance of digital revolution and to contribute to the visual history of photography.

**VDA:** *Why have you chosen the darkroom? What led you to this subject?*

**Michel Campeau:** The darkroom offers a particular sensory experience, it's a place like no other, and I wanted to inscribe it in the history of image making. It's a place synonymous with labour, sweat: for the series *Les tremblements du Coeur*, I worked with

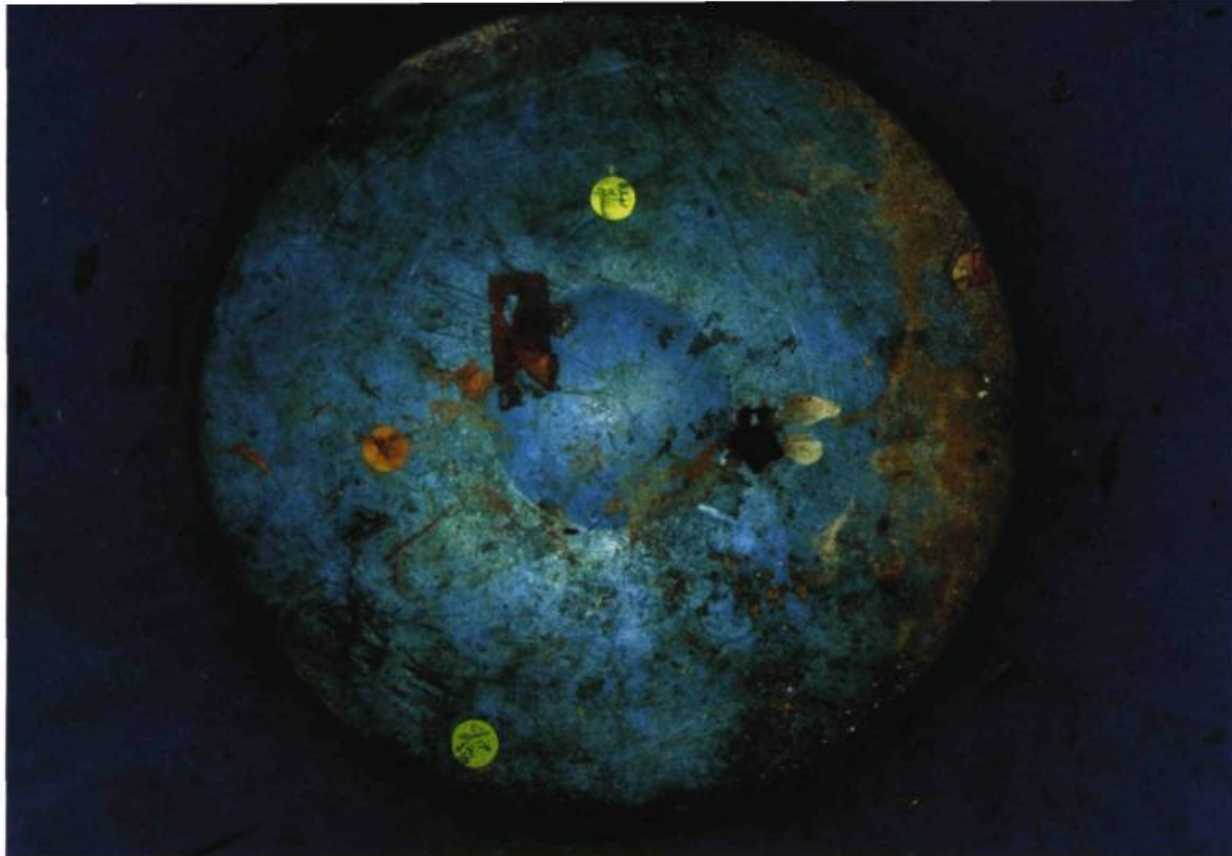
five enlargers, with words, I made paintings. This was an intense experience of dealing with different materials, demanding great precision and attention, a lot of note taking and an enormous amount of time. It's an experience outside time, one can spend 14 hours at a stretch in a darkroom, in a murky atmosphere, soaked in chemicals, but also in music.

**VDA:** *How did you arrive at this particular subject? What is its link with your previous work?*

**MC:** The darkroom became part of a postindustrial series that I undertook during my stay in Kamloops in 2003, where I was filming a mining equipment graveyard (refusing to use colour at first). When I came back to Montreal, I was shooting in a wood pulp factory using an amateur digital camera and thus discovered its possibilities as a complete system. I had the revelation about the possibility of using a flash in the axis of the lens, to create an effect of sedimentation of colours and neutralize the hierarchy of the different elements. I discovered the aesthetic of a flash applied systematically to the object, the idea being to illuminate an unseen space. Next, I tried to retain the flash; it is sometimes obvious, and sometimes not. I was also interested in the amateur digital camera as a device for simultaneity of large angles and macro-photography. One can capture subtle elements in an enlarged field, be in the detail and in the space. I used it to show objects as larger than life, as in the series on gardens, for example.

**VDA:** *How did you come to shoot darkrooms?*

**MC:** The idea to photograph them came at the moment when I wondered how to



continue my work on postindustrial artifacts. I seized on the idea immediately and visited a darkroom of a friend (as at the time my own darkroom was not installed); I began this lengthy work on the archeology of the darkroom by being interested in everything, all the way to the very ceiling of the place.

**VDA:** *What is at the heart of this project?*

**MC:** At its heart is the obsolescence of the darkroom. It's obvious: the dismantling of darkrooms has begun everywhere. Soon, black and white film will be in the domain of the *artisan*; the privilege of a few amateurs, a kind of last resistance. The transition from analog to digital created quite an upheaval. Kodak doesn't produce photographic paper anymore, and Polaroid has ended its production.

In Montreal, there are only one or two workshops for professionals that develop colour film. We are witnessing a period of effacing, which can be seen, moreover, as a prelude to what will take place in the cinema industry when we stop using film. The inventory I have started is also a kind of homage to the toil of the individual, to the inherent resoluteness of the darkroom, wherever it may be.

**VDA:** *The idea of photographing the analog domain that is the darkroom with a digital camera is rather provocative; speaking of your work, Martin Parr used the term "sacrilegious act". What, according to you, is so shocking?*

**MC:** This approach is provocative for several reasons. To enter a darkroom one has to pass through a door, insinuate oneself into an intimate space. The use of the flash is an anathema, since the darkroom by definition, protects itself from the smallest ray of light. I also play on an anachronism, since the intrusion into the analog realm is accomplished using a digital camera, and an amateur one what's more. At the same time, the way I use the flash suits ideally my aim to create an inventory, and this "grim expertise" that marks my work.

**VDA:** *Have you encountered decidedly negative reactions?*

**MC:** I could gauge the provocative aspect by certain reactions to this work: a curator I contacted abroad did not accept my project too well, finding the idea of photographing darkrooms with a simple digital camera too iconoclastic. At another time, some students did not allow me to shoot their darkroom, seeing the analog system as still viable. I see this reaction as romantic, even though I understand their attachment to the analog, which can at times signify a desire to stand out from the crowd. During my exhibition in New York, I realized that despite everything, digital technology is still a kind of taboo in the photographic milieu. The preference is for numeric colour printing, rarely for ink jet prints.

**VDA:** *You have worked on darkrooms in Havana, and Niamey in Nigeria. Why, and what was your work like, once done in another country?*

**MC:** I would like to compile into a book all the images of the darkrooms I have photographed around the world. After Niamey and Havana, there'll be Berlin, Saigon... The basic idea remains the same – commemorate for thousands of photographers this special place we share -, but from country to country, the cultural differences affected the result and I find that particularly interesting. In comparison to the first series of pictures taken in Canada, they offer a tighter view, there are fewer large spaces, they are more restrained, more structured. The series taken in Niamey is titled "Studios and darkroom", as the two are often confused there. Behind the pictures is also the story of a very different situation: in Niamey, the conditions for the production of photography are deplorable, with limited means and access to materials. The only pictures that can be taken are photos of identity or those from weddings and baptisms. In Havana, where for that matter there is a greater number of occasions for artistic photography, it takes an enormous effort to obtain materials. They have to be brought from abroad, and the authorities' stranglehold on all the resources, makes things very difficult. □