

Richard Baillargeon, *Les marques de l'exsangue*, Galerie Expression, St-Hyacinthe, 15 mars au 27 avril 2008, Commissaire : Lianne Nadeau

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Pandora's Box, Mistress Catherine after the whipping I, The Versailles Room, New York, City, 1995

of Meisela's photos, boxed and heavily laden with interleaved sheets of "Lee colour-filter mirror silver 271," "Caliper 1 mm. natural rubber grade S," "Polyurethane-coated 100% polyester interlock," and other matrices of artificiality, was published by the German firm Trebruk in an edition of 1,650 copies.

Meisela gets in close – as she always did in the field. The Bulger exhibition, which featured a generous selection of the *Intimate Strangers* photographs (all printed in 2008), effectively walks the viewer through the Pandora's Box narrative, beginning with a positively medieval-looking shot of the "Dungeon," a sort of gothic locker room

with a strange assortment of lace-on, padded restraint devices hanging from coat-hooks, all of which look eerily reminiscent of the masks and vests worn by baseball catchers. This leads – logically, one supposes – to a photographic encounter with a comely but clearly world-weary creature clutching an almost-empty coffee cup, who seems to represent what Meisela has identified as *Pandora's Box: Reception II*. The viewer is then admitted, photographically speaking, to the dramatic centre of the Pandora's Box enterprise: the transactional S&M intercourse between client and sex-worker, between dominated and dominant. So poignant is Meisela's *Pandora's Box, Awaiting Mistress Natasha, The Versailles Room*, with the naked male client kneeling on a floral floral carpet in the middle of an absurdly kitschy, faux-elegant drawing-room, so vulnerable and strangely baby-like is he, that the photograph offers a sad tenderness rather than any hint of voluptuous impropriety.

But, as Count Leopold von Sacher-Masoch dutifully reported in his novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), "In love, there is always the hammer and the anvil." And being a hammer is hard work. The finest, most troubling, most touching photo-

graphs in *Intimate Strangers* are those that have to do not with fearsome bristling masks and headdresses or high-laced boots and the brandishing of whips, but with post-punitive exhaustion. Meisela's *Mistress Catherine after the Whipping I, The Versailles Room* is emblematic in this regard. Mistress Catherine, having dropped heavily into an ornate chair (in this relentlessly ornate room), appears to be asleep. Still laced into her thigh-high silver boots, she dozes beneath a big, awful, ersatz-historical painting of heavy, lush female nudes, flanked, as if she were a queen in her throne room, by carved plaster pedestals. And here is the telling detail, the punctum, as it were, of the photograph: resting on the pedestal to Mistress Catherine's right is an hourglass, its sand almost all run out.

Toronto writer, critic, and painter **Gary Michael Dault** is the author, of ten books. His art review column appears each Saturday in *The Globe and Mail*.



Marques de l'exsangue, polyptyque 1, 2006-2007
Photographie argentique et numérique,
impression au jet d'encre, 91,5 cm X 457,5 cm

Marques de l'exsangue, polyptyque 4, 2006-2007
Photographie argentique et numérique,
impression au jet d'encre, 91,5 cm X 457,5 cm

Richard Baillargeon

Les marques de l'exsangue
Galerie Expression, St-Hyacinthe
15 mars au 27 avril 2008
Commissaire : Lisanne Nadeau

Dans cette exposition, plus que jamais, même si cela était déjà son propos en des séries antérieures, Richard Baillargeon pose la question du potentiel narratif de l'image photographique. Évidemment, il le fait clairement lorsque des séries d'images se trouvent entrecoupées de brefs polyptyques, eux aussi photographiques, dont chaque partie montre un simple mot, lettres blanches sur fond noir. Cet ensemble compose dès lors un syntagme haché, une phrase indécise à agencer. C'est ainsi qu'un pronom personnel

(«elle») peut servir de sujet à trois verbes («retient», «trouve», «ouvre») et accompagne trois substantifs («tempête», «serment», «poussière») dont on peut penser qu'ils pourraient former complément, selon des associations variables à déterminer, à inventer. Un autre polyptyque à placer entre deux autres séries opère de semblable façon.

Les autres compositions assemblent des images photographiques en provenance de diverses sources. Car il y a en effet assez peu d'images de première main dans ces séries. Ce sont des images photographiées dans des encyclopédies, reprises de cartes postales ou en provenance d'un atlas du XX^e siècle de 1964, ou encore un lot d'images issues de la presse imprimée et recueillies par l'artiste. Chacune fait 91,5 x 91,5 cm et les séquences sont créées par cinq d'entre elles, mises côte à côte.

Ce peut être une image de crâne de couleur rouge sang, devant un ciel aux nuages duveteux; des femmes vêtues de tchadors; une allée urbaine du début du siècle ou un couple dans l'escalier d'un chalet tout droit sorti des années 1950.

À les regarder, on devine aisément que ce sont des motifs très différents qui ont présidé à leur mise en série. Certaines ont des textures dissemblables, selon qu'elles sont de première ou de seconde main, ou encore en raison de leur datation. En d'autres cas, ce sont les variations entre les plans qui frappent : gros, moyen, éloigné. La couleur est aussi à prendre en considération. Le crâne rouge, au centre d'une série, entre une image de ciel aux nuages éthérés et un monochrome noir et blanc de femmes partiellement voilées, vient aplanir l'ensemble. Car il est un autre élément qui prête sa voix au concert de ces variables :

la profondeur des images. Certaines, prises dans des livres, livrent leur planéité. Elles se réduisent à cette surface, renchérissement sur leur caractère bidimensionnel. Elles étalent, en quelque sorte, la sériation, insistent sur la mise en à-plat, sur la séquence, sur une sorte de linéarité narrative. Elles mettent en syntagmes les composantes des polyptyques, les organisent en phrases. Pour créer cet effet narratif, il faut aussi que les éléments se présentent en une sorte de discordance fonctionnelle. Sujet, verbe, adjectif, pronom, complément permettent la lecture, par cette variabilité des fonctions. Il en va de même des composantes différenciées des images. Un syntagme se déploie ainsi par ces variables, dans cette discontinuité signifiante : images de plans et de provenances différents.

Vouloir ainsi «lire» ces séquences, d'après de tels éléments, relève du défi. Est-ce là, de toutes façons, ce que l'on doit faire? Si l'on croit que oui, alors il faut s'en remettre à ce que nous suggèrent les polyptyques scripturaux. Il faut lire autrement, comme cela nous est proposé. Comme il faut en même temps retenir que nous avons là des représentations picturales de mots. Ils sont donc aussi, à leur manière, à comprendre à un second niveau. Ce sont là des images de mots, avant

d'être des mots, et c'est à ce titre, photographique, qu'ils sont déconstruits. Librement, devant eux, on se laisse imprégner par ce que ce désordre active : penser, trouver, retenir (capter, je comprends!), ouvrir, remous, naufrage, traverser, lointain, tempête et serment. Des images d'eaux, de courants, de retenue, de captation et d'ouverture. Il y a là le fait de prendre et de garder, devant les remous et les aléas. Et comme les images réelles en polyptyques

sont des images de mémoire et de nostalgie, il faudrait croire que ce sont là les aléas de la mémoire active de la photographie dont il est question («poussière» en fait aussi état selon moi : «poussière» comme la granulation argentique de la photographie d'origine).

Cette libre lecture, il faut en faire bénéficier les autres pièces. Là aussi, il faut lire en discontinuité. Nous avons là les images de l'inactualité. C'est par le recours à la

mémoire qu'elles s'activent. On les déchiffre selon sa propre sensibilité, certes, mais aussi guidé par leur potentiel narratif. Ainsi tout spectateur est maintenu dans une appétence narrative que la série instille.

Sans doute est-ce ainsi qu'il faut comprendre ce «serment» qui est l'engagement conclu entre la réalité et la fiction, entre le matériau et l'artiste et entre celui-ci et son spectateur. Serment qui touche à la nostalgie et à la captation intuitive des

événements capables de mouvoir la sensibilité humaine. Serment logé dans les replis de ces mises en série d'images volées et envolées.

Sylvain Campeau a collaboré à de nombreuses revues, tant canadiennes qu'européennes. Il a aussi à son actif de nombreuses expositions au Canada et à l'étranger.

Geoffrey James

Utopia/Dystopia
National Gallery of Canada
May 30 – October 19, 2008

Geoffrey James describes his photographs as the outcome of “walks with purpose.” His approach is both methodically and philosophically in opposition to the wanderings ascribed to other photographers interested in the landscape and in urban environments, who trust in happening upon inspiration in their journeys. Capitalizing on the evocative abilities of place, James instead strides toward his subject matter, presenting the viewer with arresting images of the vestiges and adaptations that the human presence has wrought upon built environments and the implications that these looming footprints, traffic, and shadows play out upon the natural world.

Utopia/Dystopia is a major retrospective of James's photographic ruminations from the late 1980s to the present day. Divided into eight thematic sections, the exhibition draws from the full range of formats that the photographer has employed over his career, from the exquisite small-size panoramas that “read” like visual short stories, to large-scale works that halt viewers in their tracks. James's photographs are gorgeously produced; scale is thoughtfully employed for its ability to draw the viewer in and to address issues around the sublime in the landscape. Moreover, as the exhibition title proposes, James's imagery explores the complexities of a place between two extremes, underscoring that even an earthly paradise cannot be constructed without wreaking structural and sociological consequences.

In his groups of *Panoramas*, James has created small, carefully crafted views, each sparking the imagination like poetic verse. Overlooking the Seine in the western suburbs of Paris, the ruins of the Château de Saint-Cloud and the surrounding park have been fertile ground for photographers' imaginations; Atget's iconic views spring prominently to mind. That James holds Atget in high esteem rests in the margins of his particular approach to this place; rather than create an image in opposition to deny all traces of the other's gaze or as a quotation of the previous view, there is



Viaduct of the Ohio Turnpike over Cuyahoga National Park, 2005. Collection of Lewis Auerbach and Barbara Legowski

here instead a sense of walking alongside another traveller. James's small gelatine-silver panorama print argues eloquently for the larger project that James has envisioned for himself, that of shared spaces and their collective impact on individuals.

James's *Olmsted* photographs represent a seven-year project to create a comprehensive series of images of Frederick Law Olmsted's landscape designs. Credited with the birth of modern landscape architecture, Olmsted is best known for public spaces such as Central Park in New York City and Mont-Royal in Montreal. Conceived to provide respite to the city dweller, his urban



Conservatory Water, Looking North, Central Park, New York, 1994, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal

environments share the hallmarks of winding paths, impressive views, and large expanses of open space. His steadfast belief was that these places necessitated public use. The outcome of this enjoyment is of keen visual interest to James – in photographs such as *Tree Roots and Rocks, Looking towards The Dakota, Central Park, New York*

(1993), some of the disentanglement and fraying of Olmsted's tightly constructed designs is shown for all its ragged beauty.

In another section of the exhibition, James proposes several large-scale photographs of trees, each image tightly cropped in vertical orientation. One seldom looks so closely at a single tree unless it holds some personal significance; moreover, in James's photographs, almost the entire tree trunk stands squarely at eye level, a vantage point unparalleled in nature. James offers the viewer the luxury of an opportunity to look closely at something commonplace, isolating each tree as a rare object worthy of contemplation.

Running Fence represents some of James's most political works, although arguably his entire body of photographic work exhibits aspects of social commentary to varying degrees, not only through the subject matter but also through his many approaches to landscape and its societal implications. In works such as *Settlement along the Fence, Tijuana* (1997), the way in which land is defined, divided, and protected is emblematically rendered by a flimsy, dilapidated expanse of fence with a vast, empty terrain on one side and a densely populated group of houses jutting up against the corrugated metal barrier on the other. The territorial divide proves to be largely psychological in its purpose; in another image, James exposes for all to see that the fence actually comes to an abrupt end, ultimately throwing its very purpose into sharp, sardonic irony.

Most of the works in the exhibition are in black and white, with the noteworthy

exceptions in an ongoing project called 905, marking James's first series in colour. The title refers to the area code for the ever-growing outlying areas around Toronto; “905” is now almost shorthand for mass urban expansion and its repercussions. In the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, James posits that the subject matter possessed a vulgarity that “demanded” colour. Indeed, James takes full advantage of the lurid quality of the hues in dye-coupler prints of housing developments and asphalt roadways – an impossibly and oppressively blue sky frames the rooftops of a development in *New Housing, North of Highway 7, Toronto, 11 September 2001*, with a billboard beckoning prospective occupants, prophetically, to “Buy Before Time Runs Out!”

As a parting image, *Untitled, North of Toronto* (2003) depicts a boarded-up old home at a crossroads of highways. The farmland surrounding the dwelling, a relic of the area's agricultural heritage, is now marred by telephone poles and topographical markers along the roadside, foreshadowing the inevitable development projects on the outskirts of the frame. Through James's lens, we are confronted with the evidence of population and place jutting against one another, each coming away from the experience irrevocably altered.

Johanna Mizgala is a curator and critic based in Ottawa. Her current research includes a study of the first appearances of the subject's sense of humour in early photographic portraits.