

Greg Staats, *Condolence*, Article and Oboro, Montreal, January 14 to February 20, 2011

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Kassell, 1967), what touches the photographic paper is clear and sharp, while other bodily outlines and features are blurred, creating a surreal, otherworldly effect. There is something of performance art in Neusüss's approach. He even produced a life-size photowork revisiting Lacock Abbey to capture the lattice window that inspired Fox Talbot's 1835 photogenic drawing.

Nature comes through in ways that most photographers would never conceive of. As Neusüss comments, "In the photogram . . . man is not depicted, but the picture of him comes into being by an act of imagination." Fabian Miller works on the margins of photograph, finding his own visual path with a reverence for nature. Although the geometrics of Miller's compositions seems akin to Wassily Kandinsky's or Bruno Munari's, the circle and square motifs, for Miller, represent nature and thought, respectively. The sense is of a transitory space, an emergent form; these photographs are places you go into, and their very simplicity is striking and brings a focal strength to them. Not everyone will like Miller's photographs because they are so esoteric, symbolically trapped, and removed from straight photography. A kind of process photography or intensive fieldwork study, Miller's *Year One* (2005–06) and *Year Two* (2007–08) involved creating a camera-less photo each day for a year, then selecting the best. Ninety-nine from this project became the book *Year One*.

Susan Derges is very much aware of the staging aspect of camera-less photography. Living close to nature in County Devon, Derges makes works that walk the line between invisible forces and the visible manifestations of life that are part of her everyday environment. Witnessing spawn on a pan, and its reflections in the lower depths of water, Derges effectively recognized this phenomenon as a photographic print made by the sun. Water became a key to everything in Derges's photography. Her early pieces reference birth – the forming and beginning of things – while her more recent pieces focus on the dissolution, loss, or reconfiguration of elements of nature, and their complex interweaving of energies make for a very interesting, somewhat romantic approach to art. One considers Wordsworth and the Romantics, as much as contemporary photography, a potential



Susan Derges, *Arch 4 (summer)*, 2007-2008, digital c-print, 220 x 150 cm

reference point for Derges's art. She notes, "When I made the final photogram, I floated all the layers of material in water – so you get a little distortion, some cusping round the seed-heads. This gives a slightly ambiguous, magical quality to the image. The arch-shaped frame was inspired by Italian frescoes I saw in Siena; in my mind, it suggests a portal to another world. It also evokes the state of reverie and imagination that is triggered by the Dartmoor field. That, for me, is as important as the place itself. I wanted to evoke the feeling of lying down low in grass – a child's perspective, or an animal's." We feel our place in the process of nature, as if we ourselves are invisible observers witness to change, entropic processes, captured by light on paper.

Pierre Cordier, aka Mr. Chemigram, is anti-nature and pure art. While in military service in Germany, Cordier experimented with making his first chemigram, using nail varnish, to create a photograph celebrating the twenty-first birthday of a young German woman named Erika. The varnish caused a chemical reaction in the developer. Brassai wrote to Cordier in 1974 about how anti-photography his process was, stating, "The result of your process is diabolical – and very beautiful. Whatever you do – don't divulge it!" Cordier's quasi-scientific approach caused him to refer to himself as a faux-photograph, but the alchemical aspect is comparable to the "chemical naturalism" of German painters Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer. The magic is uncontrolled, and the

results are often surprising for their hypothetical geometries and patterns, often featuring light/colour grids.

The best known of all camera-less photographers, Adam Fuss was attracted to application of the photogram outdoors. The world of nature becomes a theatre of life, expanding our place in the cosmos in



Adam Fuss, *Invocation*, 1992, unique cibachrome photograph, 101,6 x 76,2 cm, courtesy of Cheim and Read, New York

a way that the traditional photographic image, even if it is Photoshopped, cannot. The camera-less photograph becomes a metaphorical valley into which we step, just as Fuss has, never to return to standard

photography. Fuss sees his art as a potential link to experiential tensions and as an endless transition, an invisible world that is revealed through the processes involved. *Snakes and Ladders*, a project that has recently absorbed him, plays with the biblical snake metaphor and its associations with evil. Fuss's image of the snake, both beautiful and threatening as it moves through water, captures motion with great eloquence, and the physics of the camera-less approach sensitively links the subject to the environment. The power of the mythology and the real life of snakes fuse into a photowork that involves a chance element. Even as these photoworks are meditations on our spiritual links to recurring ancient motifs, they are also recordings of a living and enigmatic moment in time.

While new technologies are redefining the content and process of imagery in twenty-first-century society, camera-less photography follows another path that involves interactivity just as new technologies do, but with nature and the physics of the world we are a part of, in a low-tech way. The site-specific light-gathering processes involved in camera-less photography liberate the photographer by forging a reconnection with the world around him or her in a very direct way. "Shadow Catchers" brings together a rare assortment of camera-less photographers whose sensitivity to the forces of nature, to the forces of physics, and to light and shadow on paper extends the language of photography back to its point of origin. Nature co-produces the imagery, and therein lies the magic!

John K. Grande is the author of *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (State University of New York Press, 2007), and *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* (Pari Publishing, 2008). He is co-author of *Natura Humana*; Bob Verschueren (*Editions Mardaga*, 2010) and *Le Mouvement Intuitif: Patrick Dougherty and Adrian Maryniak* (Atelier Muzeum 340, 2005), and co-curator of *Eco-Art with Peter Selz at the Pori Art Museum* (2011) in Finland. Soon to be released is *Homage to Jean-Paul Riopelle Gaspereau/Prospect 2011*. grandescritique.com

Greg Staats

Condolence

Articule and Oboro, Montreal

January 14 to February 20, 2011

Grief and loss are guiding principles in Greg Staats's exhibition "Condolence," but so, too, are more complex notions of alliance and reconciliation. The exhibition, co-presented by Oboro and Articule galleries and split between these two sites, offers Montrealers rare access to the work of an artist whose works are not often seen in this city. And while Staats does not mourn a specific human relationship, the exhibition's

multi-pronged expression of condolence is just as raw and affecting, and just as complex, as the tangle of emotions that arise from the death of a loved one. In his most recent work, Staats, who is Mohawk, grieves the loss of language among First Nations people, the void that it has left in his own life and culture. Navigating how he aestheticizes this experience of loss as linguistic, visual, and embodied ritual is a challenge, albeit one with rich dividends for the invested viewer.

With the work gathered here, Staats extends his reach, exhibiting video, a silk-screen, and installation in addition to his more familiar photography. At Articule, the exhibition opens with a display of items

drawn from the artist's personal archive. Family photographs, taken in and outside of the home, lie alongside a reel of tape and a stack of journals with notations of date and place – apparent references to funeral services – belonging to Staats's father. These family intimacies are also historical artefacts, records that link the Toronto-based artist and his practice to the Six Nations Reserve where he grew up. Family photographs are a prominent trope in contemporary First Nations art practice, used to great effect in the work of Rosalie Favell and George Littlechild, for example, as intervention in a history of representation by outsiders or to counter stereotypes of First Nations people. Staats complicates this

association by exhibiting his archival material with work that more obliquely weaves loss, mourning, and memorial with place, culture, and worldview.

An older work, *Auto-Mnemonic Six Nations* (2007), presents a series of six black-and-white prints, among them images of a denuded, colossal tree, a wooden folding chair, and planks propped against the side of a house. The five prints that comprise *Presage* (2010) expound the sense that, collectively, Staats's photographs are monuments to sites ordinary and precious, as further images referencing wood recall both the natural world and built environments. Unpeopled, these photographs bring to mind a sense of loss and abandonment

while also evincing the artist's studied familiarity with place.

Less familiar is Staats's video work, in which he more directly explores the role of language, Mohawk condolence ritual, and embodied traditions. Two recent videos, *Untitled* and *Vocode Condolence*, both 2010, are shown at Articule, while at Oboro, visitors can view *untitled liminal effort* (2011). In this video, based on the artist's opening-night performance, Staats recites a series of seventeen Mohawk phrases of condolence. While his voice remains strong, his breath sounds laboured and at times he hesitates, stumbling over diction and phrasing. Shot close to the body, the visuals remain largely abstract, as they do in the similar *Vocode Condolence*. As he passes a string of wampum through his fingers, the artist's hands come in and out of focus. Like his fist, the swaying vertical line of the wampum string sometimes disappears into a bright flash of light or into shadow, then re-emerges; the wampum remains where the body fades and when the voice falters. The use of wampum here galvanizes the dual themes of mourning and alliance, emphasizing heir intractability. Wampum is significant in Iroquois culture as a medium of exchange and as a device for recalling events of consequence, notably inter-tribal or inter-cultural alliances. This mnemonic capacity is apparent as the artist grasps at the string of shell beads, searching for language that he does not possess or no longer possesses. Wampum, too, can be used to externalize the pain of loss or as a condolence offering,



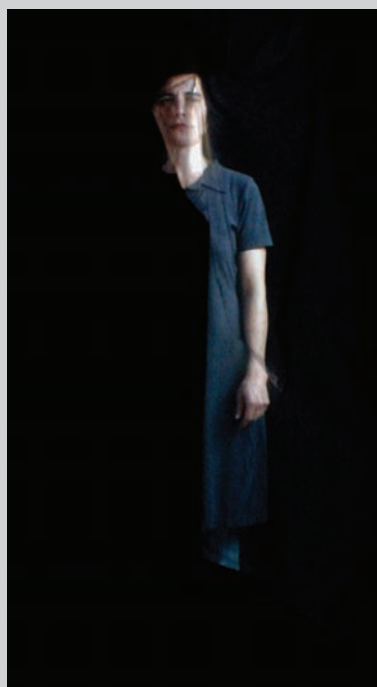
a meaning deployed to powerful effect in this context.

Staats's use of Mohawk condolence rhetoric points to the complexity of his expression of grief and its inflection in his photography. The photographic work *where submerged bushes tremble – tashina general* (2010) memorializes a young woman murdered on the Six Nations reserve, her likeness distorted and ribboned in horizontal bars. The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace, from which the artist draws the titular phrase, also has roots in both alliance and grief. Through his speaking voice, Staats's sadness in *untitled liminal effort* fills the room, engulfing a trauma here only gestured at. The potential for reconciliation remains unresolved.

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Fiona Tan

Rise and Fall
Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal
Du 25 février au 2 avril 2011



Projection, 2010, projection vidéo, permission de Frith Street Gallery, Londres

Fiona Tan, artiste multidisciplinaire née en Indonésie mais élevée en Australie, demeure maintenant aux Pays-Bas, où elle réalise la plupart de ses œuvres. *Rise and Fall*, l'exposition consacrée à son travail à la Galerie de l'UQAM, pose la question de notre relation, trouble ou non, avec notre passé. Nos souvenirs, qu'ils soient reliés à un événement important ou anodin, s'additionnent inmanquablement pour former notre personnalité, qui est donc appelée à se transformer à mesure que nous traversons les torrents de la vie.

En début d'exposition, l'installation nommée *Provenance* nous invite à découvrir des portraits d'individus que tout semble éloigner. Inspirée des portraits hollandais du XVII^e siècle, Fiona Tan a filmé en gros plans et en noir et blanc des personnes de son entourage, telles des natures mortes et des portraits filmés. Tan propose d'abord un questionnement sur la spécificité des formes d'art, tentant de relier peinture et cinéma, ou du moins de forcer le visiteur à créer un parallèle entre ces deux façons de représenter le visage humain.

Les personnages représentés sont sa belle-mère, un ami, son fils. Ils fixent l'objectif, le regard dur et l'air distant. Plus qu'en peinture, il semble que le regard direct dans l'objectif soit très perturbant, probablement parce que plus vivant. Il y a également des personnages qui nous semblent moins statiques, qui bougent, comme cette femme qui se prépare pour



From the series *Auto Mnemonic Six Nations*, 2007, toned silver print, 76 x 76 cm

un spectacle de cabaret, ou la jeune femme déambulant dans un appartement, décrite comme représentant la fille illégitime de Rembrandt.

L'aspect spécifique du cinéma par rapport à la peinture étant le mouvement, le fait que les personnages puissent nous regarder intensément tout en vaquant à leurs occupations quotidiennes donne l'impression au visiteur d'être voyeur, de contempler ces gens par le trou de la serrure. Car l'artiste n'a pas tenté de reproduire des toiles connues ou même le style des peintres du XVII^e siècle; plutôt, elle a modernisé le médium en utilisant un thème commun (un être humain), mais en changeant de procédé technique. Ainsi, en conformité avec le sujet de l'exposition, Fiona Tan chamboule les temporalités et remet au présent l'art de faire un portrait, interrogeant du même coup l'aspect historique de ce genre artistique.

La seconde installation, *Rise and Fall*, est composée de deux écrans sur lesquels sont projetées des images représentant d'abord des torrents d'eau. Filmées aux chutes du Niagara, en Belgique et aux Pays-Bas, ces images et les sons associés à l'eau pourraient symboliser le temps qui passe. En effet, suivent d'autres images montrant deux femmes, l'une âgée et l'autre jeune. Est-ce la même femme à deux époques éloignées? L'une est-elle la fille de l'autre? Peu importe, car dans les gestes quotidiens représentés (le

maquillage et le bain pour la dame âgée, l'amour et les promenades pour la jeune femme) nous prenons conscience de nos propres vies qui passent.

Il s'agit de petits moments de vie volés par la caméra, que l'on soit au printemps ou à l'automne de notre existence. Les portes qui s'ouvrent et se ferment, la force vitale des éléments naturels comme l'eau et les arbres sont autant de témoins silencieux du temps qui fuit inexorablement. Les rêves et les souvenirs pouvant parfois, avec le temps, s'entremêler, on en vient à se demander si ce que l'on croit être un souvenir ne serait pas plutôt le produit de notre imagination, si les souvenirs de cette femme, par exemple, ne sont pas magnifiés par les années, si les événements qu'elle a oubliés n'ont pas été remplacés par des fantômes transformés en souvenirs.

La troisième et dernière installation, *Projection*, revient sur l'idée de la réinterprétation de l'art du portrait. Devant cet autoportrait à trois niveaux – l'artiste s'est filmée dans son studio, puis a projeté la séquence sur un drap de lit, qu'elle a filmé¹ – nous sommes portés à nous interroger sur la perception que nous avons de nous-mêmes et sur celle que les gens ont de nous. Comme le drap est en constant mouvement et que l'image de Fiona Tan est parfois floue, il est facile d'en conclure que nous avons assurément une vision altérée de notre personne et que nous