

ALTERNATE PHOTOGRAPHY

YYZ
TORONTO

ISAAC APPLEBAUM

DAVID CLARKSON

STAN DENNISTON

PETER MacCALLUM

JAYCE SALLOUM

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BY Richard Rhodes

The title of this exhibition is much a pun as a polemic: alternate photography, a photography from the alternate galleries. Such word play is probably a lapse of taste, but it's also a convenience, a convenience for acknowledging the work's milieu. This is something that I wanted to do because the fact is simply that Toronto's artist-run spaces are where all of this work derives from. That's where most of it was first shown; that's where it's being shown again now. And that makes this something of a retrospective. My intention from the beginning was simply to gather up into one room some of the photographic work that I had seen in those galleries spread out over several spaces and several years, to gather it up, augment it with new work, and then stand back with the hope that some of the affinities and shared directions in the work would begin to push forward and become real in the room. There was the hope too that the exhibition then might become a sign for the level of accomplishment in these galleries and an indication of the vitality there.

That vitality counts for something. It counts especially in terms of the polemical focus that's the more dominant chord of the title. If indeed this is a "different" or an "alternate" photography then it is so largely because of the vitality within its milieu, a vitality that lets the milieu play a part in shaping the work. It shapes it in the sense that this is a photography surrounded by and made in the midst of art. These pictures compete with painting, sculpture, performance and video art for gallery space and attention. The work comes to reflect the concerns of these other arts, to pick up on their issues. And so it becomes that special thing: a photography grounded in the thinking of contemporary art. It's a photography that understands how other art gets made. It's not shy of experimentation, nor uninformed about the responsibilities of art. It understands that art-making is something more complex than just picture-making; that what's required is some kind of opening up beyond just the optical dimensions of an image towards conceptual and emotional ones so that the image becomes not only of the eye, but also of the mind and of the heart, so that it becomes like a living instance of a way of perceiving the world. It's a photography in a context where this is what counts, a context where art photography is considered art only if it shows itself to be as expansive as other modern art.

And of course this puts pressure on the work, pressure because there is a case to be made that usually art photography isn't as expansive. Seen from inside the art world, rather it often seems a lesser thing, something which hasn't quite understood modern art's revolution in sensibility, which is always to doubt the fixed and the static, to doubt closed images. At least this has been the drift of art ever since realism turned into impressionism and Cezanne's influence rise to the fractures of cubism; always there is the drive to achieve an immediacy and to layer surfaces or forms with an overcoat of subjectivity, with a breath of contingency. This is what gave us Jackson Pollock's exploded, serpentine

images, images we might say now are "de-constructed," and of course from Pollock comes the basis for virtually everything since.

But art photography often doesn't seem to understand this. The very earliest pictures, stretched technically to a limit of reception, had in their soft, frail vignettes something of corresponding openness. They were pictures that seemed like tokens of a joy of seeing, something akin to John Ruskin's exuberant visual descriptions in his prose, in fact an extension of the same spirit. This homage to the fullness of the world makes them, like most historical or documentary photographs, lastingly appealing, yet unfortunately it was a spirit that didn't last. Photographs began to get specialized and selective in their views. You can see this starting already in Atget, always looking where people aren't, always looking out of the present into the past. But mostly photography's specialization involved turning in on itself to take itself seriously as a controlled, organized picture, something which usually meant embracing a beaux-arts pictorialism to effect the control. Some photographers like Steiglitz and Evans could still produce images of freshness, as fresh as the photographs of artists like Rodchenko, Man Ray and Herbert Bayer who were taking pictures as extensions of their work, but by and large the photograph ground down into a game of composition and design, something which even a theorist and experimentalist like Maholy-Nagy couldn't break out from. His abstract photographs seem like pastiches of abstract painting, where the actual abstract presence, so alive in Kandinsky and Mondrian, et al, is reduced to being only a "look" or an "effect." And this is art's major problem with photography: this ease with which it seems to content itself with "effects," with "striking pictures," with images that seem only to live by their graphic wits. This, measured against art, seems a soulless type of enterprise, something technical, over-precious. There's none of the starting-from-zero grappling going on that marks art with its existential power. If anything, with photography there is the reverse: it seems to begin with everything and then work backwards until it finds pictures. And probably more than any other consideration, this one creates modern art's unease toward it. It's uneasy with the angling and editing needed to arrive at the pictures, to take them from the original flux of things. That seems proof of a kind of narrowness, of a giving over to stereotypes, to pre-established visual authorities, as if somehow the impulse was to turn the world into art, instead of making an art that would open up the world. In this, the photograph seems a manifestation of the very "fixedness" that modern art has challenged over its whole course.

So in a context that understands this, the photograph has a kind of self-critiquing job to do. In effect, it has to start over again, detach itself from the better-part of the last fifty years of photographic tradition. Even so-called "street photographs" no longer suffice to introduce the casualness of seeing that modern art looks for. They did when Robert Frank first took them twenty-odd years ago, but they have long since become a fixed genre, one that ends up in self-contradiction since the casualness, the catching things on the wing, is by now a studied affair, which empties it to its content: in effect turning street photography's discomposition into just another style of composition. Instead of

having cut itself free from pictorialism, it only becomes caught up in it again. The thoughtful spontaneity which is the life of this kind of photograph begins to slip under an increasing graphic sophistication.

That's why as this exhibition took shape, a certain nongraphicness to the work became something of a formal entry card. For me this is what distinguishes the work here as an "alternate" photography. By resisting graphic composition it doesn't fall into the trap of "in-building" the print, turning it into the precious kind of black and white jewel that art photography has so often used to signal its "artness" and which more often than not also usually entails some misapplication of Greenberg's two-dimensional purism. Instead, the idea was to assemble work that had a less materialistic self-consciousness about itself, work that showed a kind of restlessness with its own printhood in fact, work that seemed to press at its edges, showing somehow a desire to reclaim some of the original space that the print was a picture of. This was the key element of its anti-pictorialism: this pushing outward reversed the whole process of picture-taking turn picture-making, reversed it so that the images seemed to connect once again to the expansive sensibility that is modern art's.

For instance what struck me about Peter MacCallum's photographs was their equivalence of detailing, an all-overness to them that counters composition on a flat plane. Sure, they are composed, but oddly only in a way that prevents focusing in. They aren't pictures so much as windows, the space seems so immediate, so poised. Central motifs are part of something, not culminations. You roll off things, get suspended in the largeness of it all. In a very real sense, MacCallum leaves it up to you as to what to look at. The pictures simplify themselves until they are almost only scalar: images of spaces of a certain size, a certain expanse of interest. And this is why the motifs merge into plain space, why a corner view of a building, which is the most privileged, most form-enhancing view, somehow manages to turn into a look down both side-streets. MacCallum's focus is across the full frame of the image, extending in fact past it. He seems always to be involved in a consideration of what's fluid, what's on-going in any given space. This is why the cars, the roads, the intersections in his pictures, why for instance one series of photographs with Toronto's bank towers as its subject becomes more an essay on how they contract and expand like an accordion in space as the weather and the light changes over different times of day, different times of year. He is always looking towards this broader continuity. If he fixes anything, stops anything, it's that, and with you somehow made a part of it. His pictures don't seem to derive from a pointed, directed camera, the situation seems prior to that, or rather, if the camera is pointed then you are locked into a situation where there is that momentary pause before shooting where the image in the viewfinder is being checked for how it corresponds with the subject that is on the far side of the lens. His pictures are full of the fullness of space, any sense of a play on two-dimensionality is left far behind.

As is the case with Stan Denniston's Reminders too. Here, the prints are simply working tools. They are a bit like snap-shots, with only a limited pictorial

value in themselves. What's more important instead is the thing that they build towards. Each Reminder is a fusion of two prints. By themselves each would simply be a landscape photograph, Birmingham, Alabama for instance on the left, Montreal, Quebec on the right. But as Denniston sets them side by side, the two begin to connect. Both have a sequence of garage fronts, both seem to involve a similar curving to the road. With looking, it becomes clear that the two spaces are surrogates for each other, that despite a thousand miles of physical separation, there is a uniting sameness to them. Sometimes it's a sameness that's simply objective, a matter of parallel circumstances that can be pinned down in the pictures. But more interestingly at other times the sameness is clearly a bit forced, a matter of a subjective leap. Looking, you being to understand that the constancy of the gestalt and the handful of free-straying particulars is like a memory image, which is in fact precisely what the structure of the work sets out to generate. In the pairing of the two documentary prints it seeks to re-create Denniston travelling and seeing a new place that reminds him of an old one. The two spaces are shown as found, but what's particularly engaging about the work is that the real subject — the memory image, the reminding — is something more or less captured overtop and across the space between the two prints. It's something not in the pictures, but rather created by them. The pictures simply serve to generate something that gets taken up inside the head, they become party to a new kind of conceptualism in photography.

This process of bringing the image inside is something that David Clarkson's work has always centered on too. Unlike Denniston though, Clarkson builds the appearance of the internalization into his pictures. He does this through a collage technique. Each of the several dozen photographs that make up any given place is like an individual instance of seeing. They add onto one another, filling out space in fits and starts the way the eyes run and pause over a surface. His earliest work he called "Constructed Photographs" but what actually got constructed in the end was a kind of history of seeing the given subject. In Montreal Park Building for example, the actual outline of the building breaks down, or rather breaks apart as a consequence of Clarkson's rendering of it through the series of layered bits and pieces. There are overlaps occurring, as well as an assortment of slightly differing perspectives, and the building becomes the sum total of them. It becomes a composite of all this seeing, something no longer really separate or objective in the world. This overlap of the photographer and the scene becomes even more obvious in some of the subsequent work done in New York. In it, Clarkson begins to more consciously control the shapes that the various discontinuities engender, he starts using them as metaphoric responses to the venue, getting derelict buildings to seem to be imploding in decay or exploding with the implied violence of the environment. More recently the work has come even further inside, with *The Promise* being a kind of musing over a map of America, a musing complete with words written into the collage image, as well as a constructed heart metaphorically pumping away.

Jayce Salloum's work, equally engaged with registering a subjectivity on the surface of his prints, does this however without coming quite as far inside. He

stays out in the world taking pictures of it: but such oddly meditative pictures, pictures that seem to settle down on their own ephemerality, pictures that seem to lock that ephemerality in as a kind of finality or end truth. It's not easy to explain how this works. The pictures are so transient one doesn't want to weight them down with description that isn't as fleet as they are. I can only point at things like the blanket set down on grass, becoming a temporary stop, temporary home, or a carpet lit by window light that loses its pattern in the light, the one dissolving into the other, or the picture of fish in an aquarium, moving through water, moving behind reflections on the glass — all these things seem more than themselves, they seem parts of an allegory about picture-taking, at least his kind of picture-taking. This is an allegory that has come to take on an increasingly formal complexity too. First in a sequence of tableau set-ups which develop from image to image a story line of doll-house death and destruction, but secondly in his most recent work, where the pictures are of television images. In the latter, these images of images are without the usual play of one representational mode representing another. Rather, as the TV images are brought together they establish various continuities between themselves, narrative continuities of course, but also spatial ones. In the end the clump of pictures manages to spin out past itself, suggesting a kind of pervasive emotional continuity, a kind of TV space full of melodramatic flicker, climax after climax, and yet thin as air.

This kind of implicit environmentalism seeping from Salloum's work finds an explicit expression in Isaac Applebaum's work, particularly in a piece called *Man to Man*. It's a series of seven pictures, most of them provocatively set leaning as opposed to hanging against the wall. These are photographs occupying space, photographs meaning to carry their images into space too. Installed, the piece puts you in the middle of a sequence of head turnings, a sequence of glances that crystallize in the room, carrying the presence of the people with them. But in a complicated way, so that there's no equivalence: the man for instance dominates, seems foreground, the woman is remote, a kind of vision, and the photographer seems present too: invisible, but circulating, moving about, moving in. The precise relationship between these people remains a conundrum, something vague and yet how so unvague when they carry this kind of presence. Applebaum always seems to be able to generate this kind of kinetic energy in his pictures, whether the energy carries over physically into the room or not. His *Lovers* impact as they kiss, setting up a kind of contradiction in themselves, a contradiction something like his newest "found posters" which are literally just that — found posters, presented as the photographs they are, direct from the street — and which almost ask us to consider the contradiction of a camera-less photography, a photography that simply involves a selectivity and a sensitivity, a photography that in a sense is simplified down to its core components once the machine is set aside.

Of course this kind of descriptiveness of the work in the show could be extended and extended, but I'll bring it to an abrupt stop now. This is only an introduction, so let someone else finish. The theoretical dimensions have been set. What matters most is as I said in the beginning: those things made real in

the room. Rather than more words I prefer to say: look at the pictures, look at the progression from single photograph, to paired prints, to collage, to an incipient environmentalism, to an actual popping out into real space as you move from MacCallum through Denniston through Clarkson through Salloum through Applebaum. Starting flat but restless, things get conceptualized, taken up into the head, shown to be an immediate act of perception and finally bracket a space of their own. In a way it's a spiral continually curling outward from the old pictorialism. I like to think of this spiral as a kind of golden section of a different kind of photography; extend it or cut it, the progression has a constancy that remains. And I prefer to end there: on something fixed, but still open.

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associate editor of Parachute magazine

ARTIST STATEMENT

ISAAC APPLEBAUM

DAVID CLARKSON

"My pictures exist as public records of private responses to a place and not merely as maps of formal co-ordinates. They aim at a methodology of sight which will not limit what is seen. To do so, the sites and their images become as models of each other, however fragmentary or incomplete" — David Clarkson

STAN DENNISTON

"The Procedure: On occasion, an unfamiliar scene will cause the recall, immediately and specifically, of a scene from my past. I photograph the scene that has triggered the memory (CUE), then I travel to the remembered site (RESPONSE) and photograph it. The images are then processed and mounted side-by-side. To avoid contrived similarities in the images, I leave the printing of the CUE until after the RESPONSE has been recorded." — Stan Denniston

PETER MacCALLUM

"While some of my photographs may have documentary value, most were not taken for that purpose. I happened to be in the middle of reading Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" when I began taking the pictures shown here. While Proust had used the novel as an instrument to re-invent his own experience, I was unable to imitate him directly. Photography is a medium which is best suited to record the true appearance of the real world, not an imaginary one. I have tried to avoid the pitfalls of "artistic" photography by using a kind of "one-eyed" approach, staring hard at things with one eye firmly shut"

— Peter MacCallum

JAYCE SALLOUM

"A case for context
A means of exchange" — Jayce Salloum
