

CV Photo

Holly King

Gary Michael Dault

Number 44, Fall 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/21185ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1196-9261 (print)

1923-8223 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dault, G. M. (1998). Holly King. *CV Photo*, (44), 7–14.

Article abstract

Bien que toute photographie soit une construction - d'abord en tant qu'appréhension perceptive et conceptuelle, ensuite en tant que fruit de diverses manipulations, chimiques ou informatiques, et en définitive en tant qu'artefact - les photographies de Holly King renversent le cours normal des choses. Elles sont à l'origine artefacts - paysages construits ou environnements factices - et deviennent par la suite des théâtres perceptuels où vient s'abriter l'imaginaire. Dans ses oeuvres antérieures, qui découlaient de sa pratique de performeuse, l'artiste elle-même apparaissait au sein de ses mises en scène construites. Puis elle remplaça sa présence physique par des artefacts investis de sa présence. En général, elle les plaçait dans de vastes et mystérieux paysages, de toute évidence artificiels. Après le décès de sa petite-fille en 1994, King paraît canaliser sa tendance vers le sublime en des symboles, objectifs et corrélatifs, d'un manque infini. On le remarque à travers des paysages aux horizons inaccessibles, ou des avant-plans qui languissent vers un incorrigible lointain. Ce nouveau retour à la couleur laisserait-il présager un sentiment d'acceptation, de guérison ? Dans ses paysages récents, l'observateur se retrouve de nouveau en terre ferme, au seuil d'un panorama accidenté (arbres, sols rocaillieux, événements météorologiques), où s'entrouvrent de fragiles voiles (dans *The Veiled Forest*, 1997, par exemple) qui permettent d'accéder, par le biais de l'imaginaire, à un monde renaissant. Traduction Francine Dagenais

HOLLY King

Every photograph is constructed. In the usual order of events, however, a photograph is “constructed” first perceptually, then chemically – or is otherwise processed in the tiny silicon bath of the computer – and, finally, as an artifact.

Holly King’s photographs represent an amplification and a reversal of this order of events. Whatever the imaginative *parti* that quickens into a new work for King, there is, when she begins, nothing to see. She starts with the physical contriving of her constructed landscape or faux environment, lights it (hovering, omniscient, over the scene like a film director), and then photographically assists it into objecthood. A tide of perceptual engagement with the work at last brims toward the artist herself only shortly before it reaches us.

Not since the early 1980s have King’s photographs incorporated the presence of the human figure. Her first staged photoworks, such as those from the *Hellenic Winds* series (1982), were derived from her earlier role as performance artist. The photographs were like large theatrical stills of live events featuring King herself. When she withdrew from her photographs, King replaced herself with built surrogates, traces of culture abandoned in the wilderness of a nature of her own devising – such as the eerily lit, out-of-focus gazebo occupying the middle distance of *Place of Desire* (1989), a scale-less, ambiguously located, unknowable gazebo, attainable, as Francine Dagenais noted in *Canadian Art* (Winter, 1989), “only through oneiric paths.”

In her later works, there are not even shards or ruins of the human fact to cling to, no fabricated passages of socialized flotsam and jetsam by which to calibrate one’s imaginative trajectory into the works. Free of the perceptual slowdown generated by recognizable domesticated artifacts in her photographs (in this regard the cardboard railing in the foreground of *Lookout*, 1988, represents a virtual jumping-off point for King), the artist was now able to freefall into the larger vistas of her new homemade/handmade sublime. Works such as *Approaching Disturbance*, *Vanished*, and *The Viewless Winds*, all from 1995, are majestically bleak and empty, often (in *Vanished* and *The Viewless Winds*) structured around an endlessly receding horizon toward which the foreground

appears, formally speaking, to yearn (this is especially so in *Vanished*, where ribbons of some wet, shiny material flow like rivulets toward a vanishing point in the dark, ersatz, boulder-like contrivance that appears to mark Land’s End; the picture always replays, in my memory, Swinburne’s lines to the effect that “even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea”). Here, amid these unreal rock islands emerging from King’s mirror-and-Saran-Wrap oceans – so far removed, in the impress of their artifice, from the mnemonic – is a contrived lunar pull toward the unknowable. These vast black-and-white photographs have always struck me as stately embodiments of an almost overwhelming emptiness and loss (where loss is presented geographically as unremitting distance) – which may well be some manifestation of the death of King’s infant daughter, Olivia Rose, in 1994.

And King’s employment of colour may also be emblematic of a sense of acceptance and recovery. Her first constructed responses to her dreadful loss – in photographs such as *Memorial Rose* (1995) – used brilliant colour almost as overcompensation for the memorializing blacks and whites that had gone before. Here, in trumpet-loud, hot-hued proclamations of emotional struggle, the temporariness of rose petals contests with the eternal hardness of bright jewels in the hope of eternal remembrance. In *Rose Remembered* (1997), the lost child is a perfect glass sphere of infinite wholeness, encircled by a penumbra of her namesake roses.

In the later landscapes – works such as *The Veiled Forest* and *The Stillness of Absence*, both from 1997 – there is more slippage and contesting between foreground and background than before, more hard visual incident: the trees, solid as plasticine, with stunted broccoli-esque tops like props for a model railroad layout, punctuate landscapes strewn with styrofoam-like rocks, unconvincingly heavy. The new skies crackle luridly with willed lightning (*The Stillness of Absence*), or are occluded with febrile membranes (*The Veiled Forest*), rent for us so that we might gain (the curtains now drawn apart) imaginative entry to the tableau. The memorializing impulse is now, touchingly, modulating into a sullen kinetic burn energizing enough to fuel a new progress into the unknown landscape lying ahead.

Gary Michael Dault

Toronto-based writer and art critic **Gary Michael Dault** is an adjunct associate professor at the School of Architecture in the University of Toronto. He is the author, most recently, of *Flying Fish and Other Poems* (Exile, 1996). He is a regular contributor to a number of Canadian arts and culture magazines and to *The Globe and Mail*.



Rose Remembered
Épreuve en couleur, 1997



The Stillness of Absence
Épreuve en couleur, 1997



The Veiled Forest
Épreuve en couleur, 1997



Approaching Disturbance
Épreuve argentique, 1995



The Viewless Winds
Épreuve argentique, 1995



Vanished
Épreuve argentique, 1995



Memorial Rose
Épreuve couleur, 1995

Résumé

Bien que toute photographie soit une construction – d’abord en tant qu’appréhension *perceptive* et conceptuelle, ensuite en tant que fruit de diverses manipulations, chimiques ou informatiques, et en définitive en tant qu’artefact –, les photographies de Holly King renversent le cours normal des choses. Elles sont à l’origine artefacts – paysages construits ou environnements factices – et deviennent par la suite des théâtres *perceptuels* où vient s’abriter l’imaginaire. Dans ses œuvres antérieures, qui découlaient de sa pratique de *performeuse*, l’artiste elle-même apparaissait au sein de ses mises en scène construites. Puis elle remplaça sa présence physique par des artefacts investis de sa présence. En général, elle les plaçait dans de vastes et mystérieux paysages, de toute évidence artificiels. Après le décès de sa petite

filles en 1994, King paraît canaliser sa tendance vers le sublime en des symboles, objectifs et corrélatifs, d’un manque infini. On le remarque à travers des paysages aux horizons inaccessibles, ou des avant-plans qui languissent vers un incorrigible lointain. Ce nouveau retour à la couleur laisserait-il présager un sentiment d’acceptation, de guérison ? Dans ses paysages récents, l’observateur se retrouve de nouveau en terre ferme, au seuil d’un panorama accidenté (arbres, sols rocaillieux, événements météorologiques), où s’entrouvrent de fragiles voiles (dans *The Veiled Forest*, 1997, par exemple) qui permettent d’accéder, par le biais de l’imaginaire, à un monde renaissant.

Traduction
Francine Dagenais