

Clara Gutsche & David Miller. *Retour de Rome*, Galerie Occurrence, Montréal, 20 octobre - 24 novembre 2007

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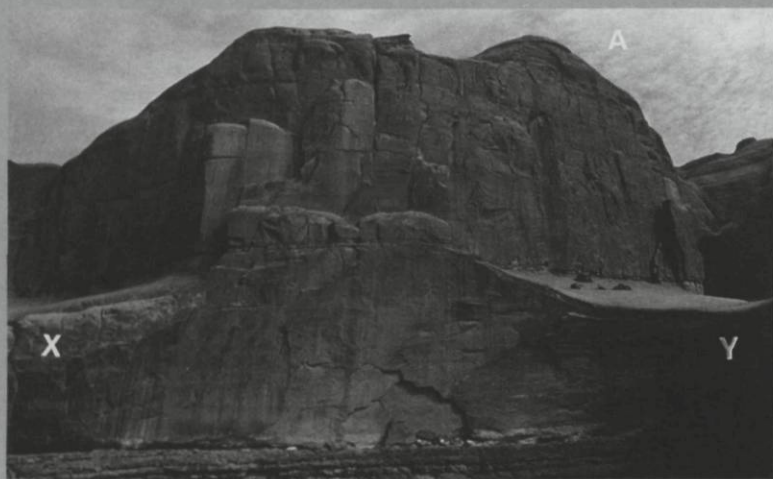
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Collage (Tape-grid), 1972
Collage and paint on cardboard
43,2x 50,3 cm
Photo : Paul Litherland

Myth III Untitled/Monument Valley Utah, 1998
Silver print
40,5 x 50,5 cm

facts as a fulcrum point for his own photographic work, bringing his own quintessentially cerebral optic to bear. He spent time in that landscape, used that earlier work as anamorphic prism, and then underscored it all with a singularly fresh and seductive conceptual grid all his own.

Gagnon was unusual in that he had two parallel and equally illustrious careers: he was at once one of the finest painters whom this country has produced and one of its finest photographers. The cross-pollination and tension between these parallel approaches was continual and dynamic throughout his lifetime. He once famously stated, "Art is not a means of communication. Rather, it is a form of communion." And he meant that equally, of course, for both his endeavours – and for all art.

In the later photographic work, Gagnon flirts with creative taxonomy (the insertion of letters and numbers into the landscape)

even as he reaches for a truth far beyond its ken. And this was nothing new, really, if one thinks of his integration of linguistic fragments into all periods of his abstract painting and earlier black-and-white photographs (such as the famous boarded-up and palpably enigmatic "blue room" window).

Gagnon always radically over-determined content – using an extensive inventory of means that he had built up over the years – in an effort to achieve the radically indeterminate. This is true of all of his work: photography, painting, prints, film, sculpture (his glorious box constructions). His playful markers and integration of tools of measurement (rulers and so forth) ironically point to the absurdity of fixing, tier-like, artificial hierarchical categories onto canons of acquired perceptual truth.

In his *Histoire naturelle* series (1991), Gagnon achieved a rare watershed in the formal invention of his work, pairing won-

derfully reduced chromatic panels (still showing the exalting and seductive brushstroking that was his hallmark from the early years on) with lustrous black-and-white-and-grey photographs taken in the wilderness of the southwest United States. These works were like epistemological switch-boxes between real and invented iconographies and thoughts, and they finally resulted in a stereoscopic merger of photograph and painting in one image. The epistemological and ocular-centric issues engendered by these works make them no less radical today than when they were executed those many years ago.

Works in the *Mythe III* series (1998–99) shown at Roger Bellemare (beautifully installed by gallery owner and curator Bellemare in a way that would, I think, have greatly pleased the photographer if he were still with us) lay bare his vibrant and still topical epistemological concerns and his lifelong search for beauty and mystery. Between seer and seen, knower and known, Gagnon interposed an otherworldly, haunting, liminal, and, finally, unavoidable truth. He always moved onto the threshold of the world, like Cézanne confronting his beloved Mont Sainte Victoire, and that threshold becomes ours, in turn, as we stare into and are seduced by his eloquent spaces of thought and vision.

Yet he never supplied pat or easy answers to the Parmenidean puzzles that he posed there. Always, and in all ways, he left the issue of resolution, if not resolve, with the viewer as fully complicit co-author of meaning and interpretive mediator. I think that he had more in keeping with a photographer such as Ralph Eugene Meatyard, that Kentucky optician and savant, than with any other. Gagnon was an admirer of that work – Meatyard was one of his avatars. I remember many conversations with him in that regard.

The seemingly simple clarity of his photographs was always deceptive – reductively "simple" compositions that hid a wealth of meaning in plain sight – and this wilful duplicity was shared with his paintings. In the latter, the laying on of paint was such an epiphany of making that it often disguised, like perceptual camouflage, his darker content. His work is really all about immanence. Hidden presence. Being and mind. Human finitude. The works exhibited at Bellemare constitute a fitting coda to Gagnon's lifelong project: to elicit the noumenal from the fabric of our lived experience and make it somehow palpable, nourishing, and enlivening to the thinking eye.

James D. Campbell is a writer on art and an independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of over a hundred books and catalogues on art and artists.

Clara Gutsche & David Miller

Retour de Rome, Galerie Occurrence, Montréal
20 octobre – 24 novembre 2007

Avec la série de photographies qu'ils ont présentée à la galerie Occurrence l'automne dernier, Clara Gutsche et David Miller poursuivent les recherches sur l'espace urbain qu'ils mènent depuis le début des années 1970. L'exposition *Retour de Rome* réunissait des œuvres réalisées en collaboration lors d'un séjour de six mois dans la capitale italienne en 2002, les dévoilant pour la première fois au public. L'ensemble de plus de soixante photographies dresse le portrait de Rome en reprenant les sujets de prédilection des deux artistes. L'architecture et les paysages urbains, saisis par leur regard incisif et pénétrant, révèlent les multiples facettes de la ville. En créant des contrastes entre des scènes d'intérieur qui

semblent figées hors du temps et des vues extérieures tout en mouvement et en effervescence, leur travail photographique représente à la fois la Rome historique, dite éternelle, et la Rome contemporaine.

Exploitant savamment l'éclairage et le rendu des textures pour affirmer le caractère antique des bâtiments et des ruines, les photographes utilisent par ailleurs le noir et blanc pour donner à voir Rome comme une ville prisonnière de son passé, suspendue entre Antiquité et Renaissance. Certains clichés montrent des statues et des colonnes empilées dans une cave, des vestiges de thermes et d'étranges jardins qui semblent abandonnés depuis des siècles. La composition des



photographies d'architecture met également en valeur la monumentalité des édifices, souvent accentuée par la petitesse des personnages, touristes qui envahissent la ville. De nombreuses photographies montrent les enceintes d'imposants

bâtiments religieux qui invitent au recueillement, en référence à l'importance de l'Église dans l'histoire de Rome. Dans ces espaces intérieurs désertés plane une présence humaine, notamment lorsqu'un temps d'exposition assez long enregistre

le mouvement sous la forme d'une silhouette floue. Nous pourrions y voir une métaphore du passage du temps, de la présence éphémère des hommes face à la pérennité des monuments. Rome semble effectivement avoir bien peu changé depuis plus d'un siècle, comme le souligne la similitude entre les œuvres de Gutsche et Miller et les photographies de la ville datant de 1870 qu'elles côtoient dans la publication qui accompagne l'exposition [toujours à paraître].

Le travail des photographes se partage entre ces vues qui représentent Rome comme une ville musée et des paysages urbains en couleur, surchargés d'éléments hétérogènes. Ces scènes extérieures mettent l'accent sur la superposition de multiples couches historiques, qui en viennent à créer des dissonances visuelles : des affiches publicitaires, des graffitis, des panneaux de construction, des néons et des voitures se détachent sur fond de ruines. L'utilisation de la couleur rend la ville plus vivante, ici les bâtiments historiques ont davantage l'air de participer du mouvement général qui anime l'image. « The complexity and layering of this city is amazing », déclare Miller dans une des correspondances électroniques que nous livre la publication, à la manière d'un carnet de voyage.

De fait, les photographes représentent la ville non pas en tant que citoyens, comme dans leurs précédents projets enracinés dans la communauté, mais comme des voyageurs qui posent sur Rome un regard



extérieur. Les artistes n'en saisissent pas moins certains moments de la vie quotidienne des habitants de la ville. Des gens font leurs emplettes dans un marché extérieur, un couple s'embrasse dans une ruelle, des religieuses se tiennent immobiles à l'intersection de grandes artères devant le flux des automobiles. Les habitudes de vie et l'imaginaire des Romains sont par ailleurs habilement révélés par les vitrines de commerces allant du magasin de tissus au marché alimentaire, de l'animalerie à la boutique de vêtements

féminins. Ces mises en scène de produits de consommation s'ajoutent à la collection des paysages vitrés de Gutsche. Ainsi, le monde intérieur des Romains est reflété non seulement par la piété qui habite les intérieurs religieux, mais aussi dans les espaces commerciaux. L'image d'une boutique de chandeliers et de statuettes de saints souligne au passage que la religion n'échappe pas à la marchandisation.

Comme en témoignent les titres en italien qui identifient simplement le lieu et la date des prises de vue, le travail photographique

PAGE PRÉCÉDENTE
Clara Gutsche
Via Nazionale, preso dalla villa Aldobrandini, Rome, 2002
Épreuve chromogénique
66 x 91,5 cm

David Miller
Santa Maria della Consolazione, Rome, 2002
Épreuve argentique
38 x 48 cm

de Clara Gutsche et David Miller s'inscrit dans une tradition documentaire qui s'attache à décrire un lieu à travers son architecture. Leurs œuvres expriment néanmoins une vision subjective qui s'attarde à rendre les diverses ambiances qui imprègnent la ville, de même qu'à évoquer la relation qu'un peuple entretient avec son histoire. Rome, qui à une certaine époque était un passage obligé pour tout artiste désirant asseoir sa carrière et fonder sa renommée, est ici plutôt un nouveau territoire d'exploration pour des artistes déjà bien établis.

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Julie-Ann Latulippe poursuit une maîtrise en étude des arts à l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Ses recherches portent sur le rôle de la photographie dans l'écriture de l'histoire et dans la constitution de la mémoire collective.
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White House, 2005, Film Production Still, Courtesy of Giorgio Persano Gallery

Lida Abdul

Centre A & Western Front, Vancouver
January 23 – March 1, 2008

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1973, Lida Abdul lived in Germany and India as a refugee after being forced to leave her homeland following the Soviet invasion of 1980. This brief biography seems critical,

as it is an integral subject in her two exhibitions concurrently on view at Centre A and the Western Front in Vancouver. Both shows are full of lyrical and poignant works that point to the impossibility of representing the past and ongoing ravages to her native country: "How do we come face to face with 'nothing' with 'emptiness' where there was something earlier. I was a refugee myself for a few years, moving from

one country to another, knowing full well that at every juncture I was a guest, who at any moment might be asked to leave. The refugee's world is a portable one, allowing for easy movement between borders. It is one that can be taken away as easily as it was given: provisionally and with a little anxiety on the part of the host."¹ Abdul refutes coherent narratives and signs that attempt to reflect straightforward relations among subjects, places, and identities.

Aware of her own state of mutability, Abdul explores relationships between architecture and identity in post-war Afghanistan through film, performance, and photography. Architectural ruins appear in her work as both real and imaginary sites, where the performative gestures of men, women, and children are set in an attempt to represent the residues of devastation and conflict. Through architecture and its representations, she poses questions about constructions of place and identity, specifically the West's collective imagining of Afghanistan. For her, architecture is subject and object; site of living social exchange and memorial to history; monument and anti-monument.

At Centre A, this focus is represented in a series of works installed in a considered and moving exhibition by curator Makiko Hara. Included are a group of beautifully shot photographs of Afghani landscapes that tread a careful balance between the monumentalizing images found in *National*

Geographic and the poetics of documenting a country where no image could ever encompass the breadth and depth of its people's experiences. These photographs are complements to performance videos shown in the rest of the gallery. In a monumental projection, *What We Saw Upon Awakening* (2006), Abdul documents a surreal performance of destruction of the ruins of a building. The performance begins with a close-up of men dressed in traditional black clothing, moving with Herculean effort. As the camera moves out, we become aware that the men are holding white ropes and pulling on the ruins of a house (one that was destroyed by a recent bombing in Kabul). Over the course of six soundless minutes, we watch this group in a dance that is poignant and futile – their actions a sorrowful metaphor for the attempt to survive amidst the ravages of war. The performance ends with the burying of a white stone that is perhaps an act of closure or a moment of communal healing. The ritual and repetition of their actions, combined with the looping of the work, seem an acknowledgment by Abdul of the fate of Afghans: despite their striving to gain control through acts of sheer resilience and compulsive gestures, she points to the complex processes of survival and recovery.

Abdul employs ritual and repetition as metaphors for healing and reconciliation richly throughout her work. In *White House*