

Lida Abdul, Centre A & Western Front, Vancouver. January 23 - March 1, 2008

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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*

(2005), in a landscape strewn with ruins, Abdul painstakingly paints the rubble of a destroyed building white. Invoking the idea of whitewashing history, for Abdul the most difficult thing is to move beyond the memory of an event, pointing to the loss of the navigational principles that determine our understanding of belonging, identity and place – the “contingent ethics of geographical emplacement in which we might jointly puzzle out the perils of the fantasies of belonging as well as the tragedies of not belonging.”²

With work that takes up the subjects of history and memory as Abdul does, there is always the possibility of resorting to familiar tropes found in popular media, and to use them in didactic and simplistically singular (neo-Orientalist) ways. By implicating herself within the complex act of memory making, Abdul avoids this; instead, she creates poetic spaces that allow viewers to interrogate the familiar and the personal. Her work combines ritualized formalism with mythology and playfulness, seeking to understand the surrounding world. In many

ways, witnessing her pieces is like attempting to make visible (but never resolve) the contradictions and the paradoxes of our understanding of her homeland.

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1973, Lida Abdul resides there now. Her most recent work has been featured at the Venice Biennale 2005; Istanbul Modern; Kunsthalle Vienna; Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, Netherlands; Miami Central; CAC Centre d'Art Contemporain de Bretigny; and Frac Lorraine Metz, France. She has also exhibited in festivals in Mexico, Spain, Germany, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan; She was a featured artist at the Central Asian Biennial 2004.

1 Lida Abdul, “Statement”

<http://www.lidaabdul.com/statement.htm>

2 Irit Rogoff, “Introduction,” in *Terra Infirma* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

Sadira Rodrigues is an independent curator and arts administrator based in Vancouver. She is currently involved in public programming at the Vancouver Art Gallery.



What we saw upon awakening, 2006, Installation view at Centre A, Courtesy of Giorgio Persano Gallery & Centre A. Photo: William W Ting.

Cheryl Pagurek

Ephemera, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa,
January 9 – February 3, 2008

Over the years, Cheryl Pagurek's art practice has gradually shifted from sculpture and installations to printed photographs and, finally, in the present exhibition, to the ultimate *Ephemera* of moving digital imagery. The more fleeting her work becomes, however, the more strongly it shows a desire to anchor familial memories, whether historical or personal, to a solid, tangible object or site, a stable place that would allow stories to evolve from somewhere, rather than shatter in the synchronic presence of fleeting images.

Anchoring the fragmented, dispersed imagery of Pagurek's photographs and videos in this exhibition are images of her present home and street. They form a background, a projection screen, for a whirl of archival video footage and family snapshots. In light boxes and a video, *Passage*, the artist traces a play of light and shadows on the walls and floors of her house – inside and outside, from morning to night. She interweaves this footage with glimpses of her own family life and images of Jewish life from pre-war Europe and the immigrant ghettos of America: portraits, children at play, marching troops, and horse-drawn wagons.

Similarly, every photograph in the series *Reflections* mirrors lampposts, trees, and houses on wet sidewalks and in puddles on Pagurek's Ottawa street, which lends the fragments of old family photos that they incorporate a certain stability. Framed stills from the video, which round out the exhibi-

tion, accentuate this longing for stability, the wish to stop time and hold a moment in place. In *Passage* and *Reflections*, both Pagurek's home imagery and the framing of the stills can be read as devices to create a real, concrete setting for dispersed, ephemeral imagery.

But the rippling puddles in *Reflections* make the street and its houses appear fragile, in danger of disappearing. And the interwoven family photographs appear upside down, which, at first sight, turns them into abstracted patterns. *Passage* is similarly unstable; the shadows do not

show the objects that throw them, thereby giving the “ground” that is home a fleeting quality, as if anticipating its passing.

There is a sense, then, in Pagurek's work that a stable reality, stable histories, will not be found, but can be created as imaginary constructs that have utopian¹ values. As Andreas Huyssen writes in *Twilight Memories*, “In an age of an unlimited proliferation of images, discourses, simulacra, the search for the real itself has become utopian.” Pagurek creates connections among the Jewish diaspora, the dispersal and lost identities of old family photographs, and a broader contemporary sense of unmooring in the unending flood of meaningless images. In the context of this exhibition, the photograph *Reflection 8* brings to mind a story from the Kabbalah. In this creation story, God's original universe is described as a shattered glass vessel forever in need of mending. The photograph shows the reflection of a tree in fall

foliage – bright orange and ochre against a blue sky – surrounded by hundreds of perfect circles created by the refracting light on wet pavement. In five of those circles, Pagurek inserted fragments of family photos: the face and feet of unknown relatives, bits and pieces of her grandparents' furniture, and a fragment of a photo of herself as a teenager.

If there is a positive outcome to the Jewish myth, in that the original disaster produced opportunities for humanity to be creative and caring toward the world, perhaps the splintering of photography into the endless and ethereal synchronic juxtaposition of images could produce a similar utopian desire to set things right. Pagurek's exhibition provides a site in which to explore a parallel between the splintered universe of Jewish mythology, and the shattering effects of unlimited reproduction. The Jewish tradition of constructing unity and identity in a shattered world pervades the work with a sense of hope.

Pagurek no longer counters the loss of materiality by using concrete materials in sculptural installations; instead, she works through the technological realities of contemporary life and attempts to provide a sense of the real, even within the material limitations of lens-based art. Her work provides hope that a shattered universe can be mended; she makes a beginning by artfully reassembling people's lives, piecing places to memories, providing homes and stories where none remained.

1 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge 1995) p 10.1

Petra Halkes is an artist and writer. Her book *Aspiring to the Landscape* was published by the University of Toronto Press in 2006.



Reflection 8, 2006, Inkjet print on semi-matte photographic paper, 43.4 x 65 cm
Courtesy of Patrick Mikhail Gallery