

Shadow Catchers Camera-less Photography, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England, October 13, 2010 to February 20, 2011

John K. Grande

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Pascal Grandmaison

Galerie René Blouin, Montreal

November 27, 2010 to January 8, 2011

Blue-tinged icebergs? Handmade plaster sculptures? The sleek, cool signature of Pascal Grandmaison is hard to discern when we first enter his recent exhibition at Galerie René Blouin. His new works hold several surprises: while they continue his investigation of the mediated photographic act, the figure-ground relationship, and the representation of the invisible, the three works included here are rich in metaphor, melancholy, and artistic modesty.

The “icebergs” that occupy the main space are collectively titled *Desperate Island* (2010). Cast in Hydrostone plaster, they are undeniably massive and unmoving, and yet they appear light, as if floating on the gallery floor. Like over-blown crumpled paper balls scattered by some disgruntled writer, or sculptures by John Chamberlain without the chrome and gloss, the nuances of their creases and shadows quietly await exploration. The passage of time is more geological than performative in face of these “islands,” which has the effect of making our own movements seem manic and disconnected. This effect is central to the conceptual integrity of *Desperate Island*: Grandmaison used blue photo-studio background paper to make the moulds, traces of which are embedded in the surface. However, if we extend the logic of the actor’s dissociation with the matrix of action that background paper is designed to facilitate, then not only are these islands awaiting their contemporary castaway as an unexplored ground (rhetorically represented by the paper), but they themselves also embody the figure of the castaway, lost in the ground of a context-free white cube.

Unlike islands “desperate” for human action, the islands featured in Grandmaison’s latest video, *Soleil Différé* (2010), were literally built as a stage: Montreal’s Île Sainte-Hélène and Île Notre-Dame – the latter the site fabricated for Expo ‘67. Shooting in documentary style with a (seemingly) dispassionate eye, Grandmaison offers a non-narrative sequence of stunning video extracts: a leaf caught in mid-air by a spider’s thread; birds chirping on their woodland perches; waves coursing around a boulder in opposing directions; the Buckminster Fuller dome shrouded in fog; crumbled concrete caught in a tangle of cobwebs; leaves lapping against stone; water running over walls; and a black-clad surfer riding the

giant waves that crest in the canal due to the artificial islands. Over all, the video points to the forces of nature at their most elemental – the collision of water, rock, and air, and the potential of the plant and animal kingdoms to thrive despite human intrusion.

In light of this modern ruin, the site’s name, *Terre des hommes*, seems ironic: rather than serving as showcase of human action and potential, it is seeing the forces of nature eroding its shores and overgrowing its edifices. But it is an irony that is more melancholic than humorous, as it points to a failure to follow a straight arrow of time into an era of technological ease and leisure. Grandmaison taps into the Romantic preoccupation with ruins – in this case, the loss of the promised future – but he does so without crossing the line into didacticism or kitsch. As such, *Soleil Différé* manages to leave a place for the derangement that the beauty of “natural” imagery can instigate in stale aesthetic codes.

It is this point – that the particular power of beauty or, generally speaking, the aesthetic lies in the fact that it is available only to intuition and remains forever outside the faculties of comprehension and the frames of representation – that the final work in the show, *Void View* (2010), addresses, albeit (over-)aggressively. Composed of twenty-eight photographs of ashes – the powdery residue of images taken by the NASA Hubble space telescope that Grandmaison destroyed by fire – *Void View* attempts to reclaim the unimaginable – the infinity of the universe – by way of a rhetorical non-image. Speaking



Desperate Island 1, 2010, sculpture with hydrostone plaster, fiberglass, studio photo background paper, 139,7 x 102,9 x 58,4 cm, photo : Richard-Max Tremblay

of his work, Grandmaison asks, “Doesn’t claiming to reveal the truth in fact upend it, subjecting it to opinion? [An image reveals only] one half of the truth – the other half lost in illustrating it – a little like infinity.”¹ *Void View*’s iconoclastic gesture seems to be asking, How can an image-maker in today’s hyper-mediated cultural milieu succeed in

isolating a subject worthy of critical attention and mobilize the out-of-frame in a way that harnesses (and liberates) its potential to disrupt our understanding of the very subject in question?

In this small sampling of work, Grandmaison demonstrates once again that, at its best, his work is both formally exquisite and theoretically rigorous. These three new works cohere in the subtext of their own limits of representation, thus suggesting the necessity of a sustained artistic engagement with the nourishing but frightening uncodifiable real.

¹ Grandmaison in conversation with Béatrice Josse, “Before Beginning and Beyond the End,” in *Pascal Grandmaison: Half of the Darkness*, exhibition catalogue, exhibition curated by Kevin Muhlen (Casino Luxembourg, 2011).

Anja Bock is a contemporary art historian and critic whose research focuses on the spatial turn in visual art since 1960, with an emphasis on immersion, subjectivity, sculpture, and curatorial intervention. Her published writings can be found in national and international periodicals.



Soleil différé, 2010, video HD, 18 min 51 sec, photo : Richard-Max Tremblay

Shadow Catchers Camera-less Photography

Victoria & Albert Museum,
London, England

October 13, 2010 to February 20, 2011

“Shadow Catchers” takes off from the tradition of camera-less photography initiated by William Henry Fox-Talbot, whose photogenic drawings, first displayed to the public in 1839, preceded photography with a camera – a “little bit of magic realized,” as he put it. And we sense his influence on photographers who followed, such as Christian Schad, Lucia Moholy, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Man Ray, whose photogenic drawings, schadographs, photograms,

and rayograms played with forms, springs, mechanical objects, garbage, tickets, rags, and other objects on photographic paper. In “Shadow Catchers,” an ingenious array of contemporary responses to this environmentally sensitive medium, we learn about photographers who are extending the range of possibilities and subjects available to camera-less photography.

Floris Neusüss is a romantic of sorts, who studied mural painting before turning

to camera-less photography in 1954. Best known for his *Korperfotogramms* (full-body photograms on silver-bromide and auto-reversal paper) of the 1960s and 1970s, which are on view in “Shadow Catchers,” Neusüss has extended his practice to include shadowy metaphorical images of couples on photographic paper. Ephemeral, evanescent bodies become a dialogue on life and death. In the image of a woman in fetal position in *Untitled* (*Korperfotogramm*,

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 photogram, 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
Article 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 Article 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 Article, 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