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Memory's sensuality

Claire et Suzanne Paquet, *Comme les jours précédents, deuxième lieu*, Galerie Skol : Sept. 8th to the 30th 1990, Maison de la culture Frontenac : Septembre 16th to 14th 1990

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MEMORY'S SENSUALITY

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CLAIRE AND SUZANNE PAQUET'S INSTALLATION, *Comme les jours précédents : deuxième lieu* investigates the relationship of memory, language and photography. The present work is a continuation of their former installation *Comme les jours précédents : premier lieu* which showed approximately one year ago. In both installations, photographs and text encourage a personal construction of meaning. This exploration is restrained by the physical structure of the works. Throughout the two pieces, formalist concerns contend with sensuous elements introduced through the photographs and text.

Both installations contain untitled photographs of various scenes such as industrial sites and water scapes. Some photographs are two sided, each side depicting a different scene. Larger photographs also run along sections of the wall. The first installation consisted of four rectangular metal cages which had photographs clipped at eye level. Lights shone up from their bases. In the second work, overhead lighting is used while the photographs and text are displayed in aluminum frames hung from the ceiling.

Although the installations are titled in chronological sequence, the ideas presented in the second are not a *development* of those in the first. With a year separating the two works, memories of the former show mix with the viewing of the second. Both installations explore the contradictory nature of photography. The relationship between photography and memory can be understood equally in terms of loss and acquisition. Photographs fix an image of places which have personal significance, but in doing so, they isolate only a fragment of the original scene. Through the passage of time the thoughts and feelings associated with the scene will have changed, or be partially lost to memory. There is skepticism with respect to photography's ability to safeguard feelings and thoughts.

Conversely, the photographs act as a ground on which occurs a mixing of present and remembered emotions, each *reinforcing* the partial ; there is always more that can be articulated, other photographs to refer

to, each one with its own emotions and account. Stories become intertwined, and the emotional complex surrounding them increases. Countering this enrichment is a sense of loss which occurs when the photographs are presented as a group. They cannot be strung together, overlapped, glued or collaged to represent the original scene from which they were taken.

In both installations the photographs depict a sense of movement and searching. Roads pass through industrial sites, or wind through strip mines. The horizon, when evident, is smudged in mist. Rituals of passage or transformation associated with paths and channels are suspended or even arrested by the indistinct horizon. Roads, which are means of arriving at destinations, disappear in fog. Waterways, bridges and train tracks appear and disappear. The interpretations are consequent : as the hope of finding gratification beyond present circumstances is denied, gratification is experienced through a languishing in the present.

In the first installation, blurred images of a human figure appeared several times. The sex was indeterminate, giving the viewer little chance to confine the image in terms of social or sexual categories. The photographs presented the back of the head : the person appeared as if looking out to something. The scene or object of this person's gaze was enveloped in light, and therefore impossible for the viewer to make out.

The human figure is absent from the second installation. Several full frame pictures of water substitute metaphorically for the body : the action of wind falling on the water produces patterns reminiscent of aging skin. Water undulates into long crests to resemble puckers or healed scars. A mud bank, cut through by rills, has an erotic suggestiveness as the exposed mud scintillates in daylight.

The text pieces by Claire Paquet, which accompany both shows, are also photographed. Their reproduction and manipulation (either reduced or enlarged) exaggerates the process whereby the author's private expression of ideas moves into the anonymous public sphere. Yet the author ensures a certain privacy for both



Claire et Suzanne Paquet, *Comme les jours précédents : deuxième lieu*, 1990. Galerie Skoll.

herself and her audience. The text is spoken in the first person, allowing the viewer to participate in the work through a shared, but private, *I*. The works recount perceptions, feelings and ideas which mingle with one another without leading the reader in any particular narrative direction. Words and phrases are repeated rhythmically. Descriptions of the luminosity and sensuousness of objects lit by sunlight occur throughout. A sensual understanding of objects and events within the world is produced through a flux of metaphors. These feelings of sensuality continue when one looks back at the installation.

In the second installation, the photographs are manipulated in such a way as to make the text indiscernible. This disintegration of language represents not only skepticism about language's capacity to communicate, but a sense of uncertainty as to identity and origin. The exposure of personal perceptions is veiled in secretiveness by the deliberate blurring of the photographs. There is a reluctance to allow the viewer to participate in the social activity of communication which language represents. It is therefore difficult to place their message within any cultural context. The blurring appears to emphasize an emotional expressiveness that outweighs any practical use of language. The

desire to *understand* the photographs in terms of both their literal message and their imagistic content is denied. The photographs waver between being pictures of words and total abstractions.

The blurred images of words are countered by the clarity of the rest of the photographs and the physicality of the installation. The message behind even these latter images remains ambiguous, and in the first installation the lighting undermined the structural assuredness of the metal supports. Dark shadows of the supports were thrown against the walls by the bright lights. These reticulate shadows of the structures with their clipped-on photographs resembled distended black and white Mondrians. The shadowy Mondrians obliterated the photographs' figurative representations; instead they offered an abstract interaction of geometric shapes. The shadow of abstraction worked as a double to the expansive and subjective qualities of the text and photographs. There was little that could be read in their dark shapes. The viewer's ability to imbue them with a personal content was obstructed.

In both installations, the photographs are deliberately overwhelmed by the very metal structures on which they hang. Their elaborate supports emphasize, in an exaggerated way, formal constraints found within



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any practice. The presentation of ideas occurs within certain grammars, which are in turn contested by the discursive nature of ideas. The viewer engages the metal structures with their own discursive pleasure by means of the photographs and text.

The metal frames are complemented by photographs of industrial sites and bridge supports. These images, alternately, contend with the sensuous nature of the water photographs. Water, which is often implicated in manmade structures, is never presented as threatening. The industrial structures, the cranes, smoke, slag heaps and oil containers, are softened in light diffused from its proximity to water. In one case, the reflected understructure of a bridge is blurred in its watery shadow, an idea evocative of the distended shadows of the metal cages in the first installation. The photographs of the sites, however, do not carry any overt environmental message. The industrial images are themselves presented sensually, appearing as if

through a screen of memory. They are invested with personal significance and represent an exploration of the past.

Throughout the show, sensuality creates a dialectic wherein sympathetic or contrary ideas can exist side-by-side outside the restriction of judgement. This dialectic is noncontentious. Sensuousness removes the trappings of cognition ; it promiscuously mixes disparate ideas. It is by nature apolitical and disruptive ; it offers nothing but its own delights and is expressed through a languishing exoticism. What is particularly significant in the Paquet installation is the disruption of these sensualities by the presence of harsh, angular structures. These structures are not imposing, but serve as restraints to the unrestricted nature of the text and photographs.

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