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A Doubled Vision

Stan Douglas, Vancouver Art Gallery. February 27 - May 24 1999. The Edmonton Art Gallery (June 25 - August 24 1999), The Power Plant (September 24 - November 21 1999)

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ACTUALIZÉS/EXPOSITIONS

VANCOUVER A DOUBLED VISION

Stan Douglas, Vancouver Art Gallery. February 27 - May 24 1999. The Edmonton Art Gallery
(June 25 - August 24 1999), The Power Plant (September 24 - November 21 1999)¹



Stan Douglas, *Hors-champs*, 1992. Installation, photograph by Stan Douglas. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.

Stan Douglas's incisive ability to uncover the psychic compulsions within modernity's grand projects is revealed through Daina Augaitis's precise selection of four recent film and video installations and related photographs. Laid out along the Vancouver Art Gallery's cyclical floor plan, the exhibition structure coincides with the looped circularity of the installations. Each installation deploys a doubling or split latent within the media, to extract the enervated counterpoints of formative moments "when history could have gone one way or another", as Douglas has said². From local instances of crucial moments, he extrapolates endless returns in which utopian impulse convulsively produces its double, an abiding failure.

This exhibition cycle begins or ends with *Nu•tka•* (1996), a "Canadian Gothic" set at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in the late 18th century, the time of the first European contact with and claim to the (already inhabited) area. Two images, each scanning the majestic coastal landscape from the same point, are interlaced on

the even and odd raster lines of a single video projection. These coexistent video tracks are associated with two overlapped audio narratives – conflicting tales of dread, delusion and treachery – related by James Colnett, a ship captain who had claimed the area for England, and José Esteban Martinez, commander of the previous Spanish occupation and Colnett's prisoner. At six points in the seven-minute cycle both images and sound come into exact but not-quite-identical registration, the video images uncannily combining simultaneously calm and windy, high - and low-tide views of the same spectacular scenes, while the narrators' words come into uneasy synchronization on the four audio tracks, their separate tales related at these moments by the same words, drawn from Gothic and colonial literatures. The effect is entirely supernatural (a gothic term more recently adopted by British Columbia tourism's rhetoric of the sublime). The installation's 360-degree pans and enveloping sound produce a simultaneous expansiveness and oppressiveness that reveals the delirious underpinnings of this most

Romantically sublime moment in the imperialist narrative.

The uncanny had previously appeared in Douglas's densely literate *Der Sandmann* (1995). The black-and-white film is produced by two projections: the left and right halves of two 360-degree pans of a movie studio set featuring a fictional Potsdam allotment garden imagined twice, in the present and in the Communist past. Because the left and right projections are out of sync by exactly one rotation, the visual effect of the composite image is of a temporal wipe in which the central seam seems to write the past over the present and, in the subsequent pan, back again, continually. This temporally doubled view cycles repeatedly past two characters inhabiting opposite poles of the movie set, and thereby of the waking dream: Nathanael, one of the three narrators, poised on the "real" side; and the repressed object of his unease, an old man perpetually tinkering away in the "fictional" garden set. Through a series of letters from the E.T.A. Hoffman story that inspired Freud's theory of the uncanny, the three narrators draw out a story of repressed psychological misidentification, their three voices alternating regularly from one audio track to the other, in a repetitive aural displacement. Douglas's doubled vision presents the utopian social welfare system, represented by the German allotment program, and the concurrent development of Freudian theory (the coincidences abound, as outlined in Douglas's detailed historical notes) as coexistent sides to a perpetually unresolved dream of modern identity.

Hors-champs (1992), the earliest work in the exhibition, uses an irreconcilable split of vision as an emblem of the socio-political divides of the middle of this century. Projected on one side of a screen bisecting the room is a 1960s-style television presentation of a jazz quartet improvising upon a composition (Albert Ayler's 1965 *Spirits Rejoice*) that includes references to gospel and the heraldic Marseillaise. Since the program was shot with two cameras, there exists an exact excised double of the edited program, looser and more revealing, which is projected simultaneously on the other side of the screen. The American musicians were all connected to the Free Jazz movement in France, which was in turn associated with the socialist student movement and, in the United States, with Black nationalism. In the installation, Douglas establishes a structural duality in which one's physical inability to view both



Stan Douglas, *Marble Quarry at Hisnit Inlet*, extrait des séries *Nootka Sound*, 1996.
Colour photograph. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.



Stan Douglas, *Historic Set for Der Sandmann at DOKFILM Studios*, 1995.
Colour photograph. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.



Stan Douglas, *Set for Win, Place or Show (East View)*, 1998.
Colour photograph. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.



Stan Douglas, *Pat Through "Berg Auf", Am Pfingsberg, Pfingsberg, 1994*. Colour photograph. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.



Stan Douglas, *Nu.ka*, 1996. Video still. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.

sides of the picture is metaphorically consistent with the era's call for choosing a stance and a place.

Douglas's most recent video installation, *Win, Place or Show* (1998) employs a quasi-binocular double projection not as a means of focusing, but to mark failures of vision. In a one-bedroom apartment in a never-realized urban housing project near Vancouver's docks, two workers muse on city life, consider betting on a horse race, argue, scuffle, tentatively reconcile, and begin the cycle anew. The approximately six-minute act, in the style of the short-lived Canadian Broadcasting Corporation drama *The Clients*, was filmed simultaneously on twelve cameras, with further variations of dialogue and performance filmed for certain scenes. In the installation a computer recompiles the various shots into more than 200,000 possible versions of the program. In the overviews the two projections combine to create a wide though inexact registered image in which characters occasionally disappear through the virtual seam between screens, while the close-up sequences pair two views of the individual character, unsettlingly shot from opposing angles, with the effect of producing a bifurcated estrangement rather than the subjective identification usually associated with this visual structure. Through the conventions of television

Douglas suggests a pervasive identification of psyche and place, both perpetually enervated in the context of the nowhere of urban redevelopment schemes.

Thus Douglas suggests that the very means of recording the overarching projects of modernism have their own counter-narratives written compulsively into their formal structures. Yet, less we begin to think of the installations as fantastic visions, his series of contemporary locations and set photographs remind us of these projects' roots in the local, if now inflected with a sense of unreality. The solid topography of the photographs free the installations to their subtle task of unwinding the vernacular of specific, localized historical moments to reveal the particular hubris of their impulses.

GERMAINE KOH

NOTES

¹ De Pont, Tilburg, the Netherlands (February 5 – May 28, 2000), and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (December 10, 2000 – April 1, 2001).

² Stan Douglas in "Interview: Diana Thater in conversation with Stan Douglas", *Stan Douglas* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 29.