Archival Dialogues: *Reading the Black Star Collection*, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, 29 September to 16 December 2012

Andrea Carson Barker

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Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Collection
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Curator Peggy Gale and Ryerson Image Centre director Doina Popescu smartly chose to inaugurate Ryerson University’s new building and gallery with an exhibition specifically about “The Archive.” In this case, the focus was the world-renowned Black Star Collection, comprising over 290,000 photojournalistic prints, which had been donated anonymously to Ryerson University in 2005. This was a smart choice because it engages the practice of looking back that has become popular with artists and curators. In his essay “The Way of the Shovel,” published in a 2009 edition of e-flux journal, Dieter Roelstraete argues that our culture’s obsession with “the New” has led to the rise of curatorial hand led viewers to examine and appreciate the archive not only as a historical document, but also as a reflection of their own relationship with history. Three artworks serve to acclimate the viewer to the idea of looking. Mark Rokeye, whose digital piece Shrouded graces the impressive New Media wall at the building entrance, created a near-perfect start to the show, replacing the usual didactic texts with the viewer’s own revelation as each clouded image was gradually revealed, hands first, then backgrounds, then faces. Finally, the image flipped around to show the back of the photograph, filled with notes and explanations. It was a delight to recognize a young Mick Jagger and quite sobering to see revealed clearly terrified Vietnamese civilians in their war-torn country. Marie-Hélène Cousineau, a Montreal-based producer and director who is intimately familiar with Arctic life, contributed a straightforward installation, Perdre et retrouver le Nord (Losing touch and coming home) that brought a distancing, museum-like quality to the show. Cousineau selected Peter Thomas’s 1960’s images from Baker Lake and rephotographed them, with the original subject now holding the earlier print. She coupled these images with three lovingly handmade dollhouse-sized replicas of Inuit residential interiors designed to illustrate the Westernization of Northern domestic life over time. Stephen Andrews’s installation juxtaposed a series of wall-mounted photographs of Lee Harvey Oswald just before he was shot – you could feel the moment’s intensity – with a film that blended fragments such as the famous image of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who burned himself alive in Saigon in 1963, with some of Andrews’s own to create a dark, moody narrative. Similarly, Christina Battle trod the line between truth and fiction, pairing “real” Black Star images with her own, and drew an otherworldly story from one that itself blurred the real and imagined – the mysterious “Mothood” sightings in West Virginia in 1966. Each of these works negotiated individual memories and interests, but together they demonstrated that history is a useful and important medium that, when brought into the present moment, has much to teach us about ourselves. This particular archive is a valuable tool indeed.

Michael Snow, from the series TAUT, 2012, courtesy of the Artist

Marie-Hélène Cousineau, Woman with infant daughter. Because of the inclusion of imagined sound “memories” by other passengers – a nurse, a midwife, a German soldier – viewers became witness to a kind of history. One imagined the memories as one’s own, filtered through the experience of the artist and of the photojournalist Werner Wolff, whose image initiated the artwork. Another standout piece was by Stan Douglas, whose gorgeously staged large-scale photographic installation Midcentury Studio Project, inspired by his study of post-war photojournalists – including those in the Black Star Collection – snatched to life when arranged by Popescu and Gale to form a loose narrative, weaving between truth and fiction, coupled with the collection’s images upon which they were based. Marie-Hélène Cousineau, a Montreal-based producer and director who is intimately familiar with Arctic life, contributed a straightforward installation, Perdre et retrouver le Nord (Losing touch and coming home) that brought a distancing, museum-like quality to the show. Cousineau selected Peter Thomas’s 1960’s images from Baker Lake and rephotographed them, with the original subject now holding the earlier print. She coupled these images with three lovingly handmade dollhouse-sized replicas of Inuit residential interiors designed to illustrate the Westernization of Northern domestic life over time. Stephen Andrews’s installation juxtaposed a series of wall-mounted photographs of Lee Harvey Oswald just before he was shot – you could feel the moment’s intensity – with a film that blended fragments such as the famous image of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who burned himself alive in Saigon in 1963, with some of Andrews’s own to create a dark, moody narrative. Similarly, Christina Battle trod the line between truth and fiction, pairing “real” Black Star images with her own, and drew an otherworldly story from one that itself blurred the real and imagined – the mysterious “Mothood” sightings in West Virginia in 1966. Each of these works negotiated individual memories and interests, but together they demonstrated that history is a useful and important medium that, when brought into the present moment, has much to teach us about ourselves. This particular archive is a valuable tool indeed.

An expert on contemporary art, architecture, and design and the founder and publisher of one of Canada’s most widely read culture blogs (viewoncanadianart.com), Andrea Carson Barker is a writer and critic who works with various culture organizations on strategic profile building, PR, and social media planning. She is founding curator of the daily art auction artbombdaily.com and sits on the City of Toronto Public Art Commission.


Christelle Proulx est étudiante à la maîtrise en histoire de l’art à l’Université de Montréal. Ses recherches portent sur la photographie, le Web et les nouvelles technologies.

Curator Peggy Gale and Isabelle Rondeau of the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

Michael Snow, TAUT

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