

Emmanuelle Léonard, *Un livre de photographies*, Montréal, Occurrence, 2005

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Emmanuelle Léonard

Un livre de photographies

Montréal, Occurrence

2005

Emmanuelle Léonard has exhibited a growing body of work since 1996, steadily evolving into a contemporary photographer whose next project is eagerly anticipated. Her complex images not only explore the theoretical terrain between photographer, subject, and viewer, but also serve to disentangle pervasively entrenched myths about photography's ability to passively frame and record the world and its inhabitants. Informed by aspects of contemporary photojournalism and by conceptualism, Léonard takes as her starting point the aesthetic language of documentary photography, but she stretches its vernacular to address her own unique preoccupations about the self and its relationship to public and private spaces, as well as necessary interactions with others.

In her photo essay *Les marcheurs* (2004), Léonard employs a seemingly documentary posture to record the early-morning arrivals of workers at a Montreal textile factory. Starting at the same time each day, Léonard catches her subjects' downcast gaze and lack of social interaction. Her subjects appear to have been caught completely unaware, hunched over in the cold and lost in their respective daily routines. By capturing their presence as individuals who become knowable to the viewer through a shared activity and not through their own specificity, Léonard's photographs render homage to their labour while simultaneously maintaining their cloak of silent anonymity. Thus, viewers are afforded the guilty pleasure of staring at Léonard's subjects at their leisure, without fear of discovery or reprisal.

Les travailleurs de l'église Sainte-Rita, Nice (2003) similarly links individuals by way of common experience and renders them as neutralized subjects of a visual case study. For this project, Léonard photographed six workers from the church, each one posed against an identical background within the confines of the building. Unlike *Les marcheurs*, with its surreptitious gazes, in this series of photographs each subject looks directly into the lens and smiles passively. Each sitter is identified by name, and yet because the framing is repeated for each view, the field of vision is levelled so as to almost completely disappear; strangely, the six images seem more like identification photographs than portraits. The viewer is denied the sensation of being able to glean something about the subjects except for what is explicitly offered by Léonard in the title – namely, that all six people work in the same place. The underlying message is that it is difficult to know much about anyone from an image, unless the viewer is prepared to step into the trap of generalities and stereotypes.

For her project *Les travailleurs* (2002), Léonard shakes off the mantle of the author by putting the camera into the hands of her subjects. Gleaning information from statistical data produced in Quebec on labour – facts that might compose a picture of working people but clearly cannot tell a comprehensive story – Léonard enlisted the aid of workers in a range of occupations to document their professional surroundings as empty spaces. Because she gives her collaborators the freedom to choose the vantage point from which to see a space with which they are intimately acquainted, the viewer is permitted to explore the locales from a privileged point of view, through the eyes of an insider. Simultaneously, as the spaces are documented in a state that is rarely experienced by anyone, devoid of occupants, they are transformed into sites of critical investigation dependent upon the guidelines that Léonard gave to the amateur cultural anthropologists. From the large body of images that she collected while working on *Les travailleurs*, Léonard produced a complementary project in the form of a publication containing selected photographs. Volunteers circulated seven thousand copies of a free newspaper, *Dans l'œil du travailleur*, during Mois de la photo in 2001.



On the heels of her successful photographic collaboration, Léonard produced *Statistical Landscape* (2004), in which she asked twenty employees to stand as visual witnesses for specific labour sectors in Toronto. The size of the final image produced for installation was linked to the number of workers represented by their agent, in a manner akin to government representation based on population. As in Léonard's earlier work, multiple points of view are privileged over a single vision; nonetheless, they are firmly guided by the photographer.

Léonard's photographic series *Kill the Drunk Woman* (2004) reveals a shift from earlier imagery that fit, albeit uneasily, into a post-documentary vein toward work centred upon questioning the need for an actual physical body in order to explore the issues related to the self/other dichotomy. In these new photographs, Léonard transforms herself into a computer-generated doppelgänger that is the protagonist of a video game. Playing out a sequence of predetermined actions in a fabricated universe that is not fantastical but drearily mundane, Léonard is shown in multiple versions within a single frame; an anti-heroine who drinks alone in a dingy bar, plays video poker, and retches unglamorously in the corner. The title of this series should elicit some emotional reaction from the viewer, because the woman in question is meant to be – or, at the very least, to signify – the photographer. Moreover, through the implied associations with computer games, in which players possess complete freedom to manipulate the characters as they see fit, the viewer expects to see the action played out to its logical conclusion. The experience is thus anticipatory and unfulfilling all at once, much like overexposure to simulated violence.

The catalogue is richly illustrated and provides a solid context within which to assess a strong body of work by a photographer who is still at an early phase in her career. While a short synopsis of Léonard's exhibition history is included, a more comprehensive résumé, including a bibliography, would have been extremely welcome. Nathalie de Blois's thoughtful title essay unravels some of the key ideological strands evidenced in the past eight years of Emmanuelle Léonard's photographic practice, situating her work within a larger body of contemporary images that subvert their own iconography in order to critique its limits and expand its inherent possibilities.

Johanna Mizgala

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