
Gary Michael Dault

Numéro 74, décembre 2006

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/16268ac

Citer ce compte rendu
L oneliness, existential or otherwise, has been the informing condition of twentieth-century society, and it looks as if it will continue to be so in the twenty-first century. Penny Cousineau-Levine’s recent two-gallery exhibition, Alone, was a vivid, surprising, and ultimately troubling presentation of carefully selected modalities of aloneness.

Of course, Cousineau-Levine meant considerably more by “Alone” than aloneness. The exhibition(s) not only presented essentially incarnations of the struggles enacted by the eight emerging photographers featured (d. Bradley Muir, Lori Newdick, Mackenzie Stroh, and Chih-Chien Wang at Gallery TPW; Jennifer Campbell, Kate Greenslade, Dawit Petros, and Marisa Portolese at Gallery 44) against what she termed the “culturally dictated restraints” that confront any entry into the agon of self-definition, but were also photo-manifestations of that asymptotic approach to the hard-won stability of self-presentation offered as “solitary performances and pursuits, bereft of social context or support.” As she points out in the catalogue essay (“Alone: Fitting In”) that accompanied the exhibition(s), these photographers offer the viewer access to their “private observances” played out along their particular roads to a constantly adjusted sense of individuation.

Some of the work, such as d. Bradley Muir’s “autobiographical yet not biographical” (as he characterized it during a panel discussion at Gallery 44) Artist as Worker photo series, involved multiple layers of rather tensely accessed experimentation with the self-as-surface (what Cousineau-Levine calls the “tropes of masquerade”). In his version of desperate dressing-up, Muir not only donned and doffed the uniforms of various identifiable occupations (“Artist as Corporate Courier,” fire-fighter, doctor, cook, executive, etc.), he photographed himself in this multivariate drag while folding into the poses, gestures that referenced images found in works by Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Donigan Cumming, Wolfgang Tillmans, and the other usual suspects. What I liked most, though, about Muir’s photographs — whether it was deliberate or not I don’t know — is that in all of his “incredibly temporary” self-portraits, he kept his sneakers on — as if they were some sartorial given, some low common denominator of being (feet of clay), the saving index to his own focus-less selfhood.

Considerably more effective as an exploration of forced self-erasure recollected in tranquillity were the wrapped portraits and, juxtaposed against them, the icy photographs of landscapes and glass vitrines by Boston-based artist Dawit L. Petros. To call Petros’s bleakness — indeed, whitened-out — portraits “wrapped” is a bit misleading, of course, in that his subjects are not wrapped the way mummies are wrapped (to preserve) or the way cocoons are wrapped (to engender) or the way the airy dishments (Fervour and Longing) possess a quietly moving aura in the contrast between the enforced otherworldliness of her little boys — these Little Princes, marooned on the tiny planets of their handheld programs, dreamily dreaming somebody else’s dreams — and the often pastoral or domestic settings (forest, bedroom) of which they seem disturbingly unaware, quietly builds to an unappeasable sense of loneliness, fuelled by what Cousineau-Levine cunningly calls the resulting “temenosness of their acculturation.” The work of Portolese, who sometimes shares Greenslade’s predilections for pastoralism, seems to me — unlike Greenslade’s work — to attempt (and accomplish) too little. Portolese’s Hush, for example, in which a supine, meagrely dressed woman with a cloth over her face begins to rise from the ground, is rendered bathetic by Cousineau-Levine’s analysis of it: “As she lifts herself off the floor of the forest, the woman in Portolese’s Hush is in danger of dislodging the covering that has been placed on her face. Perhaps she rises up from a state of entrapment induced by attempts to mask and control the transgressive female body.” Yeah, maybe. But, for me, the photograph simply cannot hold this much thesis. And that is the time-honoured route to anti-climax.

The work of the afore-mentioned Jennifer Campbell, however much it may strive, in some measure, to index the procedural ploys of the Dada and Surrealist artists of the past, is bathetic to a degree far more disturbing than Portolese’s occasional forays into that discomfitting realm. I agree with Cousineau-Levine that Campbell’s images are “disturbing,” but I find her photographs of women with kitchen appliances tied to their faces (echoes as much of the commedia dell’arte grotesques of a Jacques Callot as of a “misogynist Surrealist photographer” such as Hans Bellmer) to be more goofy than any contrivance that, as Cousineau-Levine suggests, could contribute to our understanding that “the woman who dares to seek her expressive voice will inevitably suffer for it.” Campbell’s photograph Roadkill is so awkwardly made and so gratuitously gamey that it becomes, in the end, irrepresibly funny. It reminds me of Oscar Wilde’s response to the expiring of Little Nell in Dickens’s The Old Curiosity Shop: “A man would have to have a heart of stone, not to die laughing.”

Gary Michael Dault