SACKVILLE, NB

TROUT RIVER GULCH: PHOTOGRAPHS
BY THADDEUS HOLOWNIA

March 15th - April 1st, 2002
Fog Forest Gallery,
14 Bridge St., Sackville, N.B.
Tel: 506-536-9000 / e-mail
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Thaddeus Holownia is mainly known for the photographs that he has taken around the Tantramar Marsh in New Brunswick. This is the place where he has lived and worked over the last twenty-five years. Holownia has, of course, taken photographs in Canada, the United States and Europe, but it has been those taken closest to home that come to mind when many people think of his work. The photographs in this exhibition are very different not only for where they were taken in Newfoundland, but also in their execution. These photographs were produced during a Gros Morne National Park Artist Residency, a program co-sponsored by Parks Canada and the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador. Holownia is the first photographer to have taken part in this residency. It has given him the opportunity to make several trips to Newfoundland to take photographs in the Gros Morne Park.

The twenty-four black and white photographs in this exhibition were taken along a sixteen kilometre stretch of road in the park between a place called Woody Point and Trout River, also known as Trout River Gulch. This is a desolate place, yet Holownia has been able to find great beauty there. Like many of his other photographs, these were taken with his custom built large format, 7 x 17 view camera and then printed as contact prints. Unlike most of Holownia's other large format pictures, many of these photographs have a narrow depth of field. The photographer is known for his images that have razor sharp focus from foreground to background. This results from using a very narrow, or small aperture such as f/6.4 or even f/2.8. The new narrow focus photos were taken with the lens wide open (f8) and using 305 and 450 mm lenses. This results in pictures where the depth of field can be measured in millimetres. A single section of a branch of a tree might be in sharp focus while the rest of the photograph will be in soft focus.

A majority of photographs in this exhibition are a sub-series that Holownia titles Tree Calligraphy. It is an apt title, as the trees in these photographs have been twisted into calligraphic-like forms by the harsh forces of nature in this lonely part of Newfoundland. There are photographs in this series that are taken in exactly the same place over a period of several months by this method. They reveal how different the same place can look in the summer and then winter.

All of the photographs in the exhibition are beautiful. This is not surprising, as beautiful is a quality common to all of Holownia's work. Indeed, some critics claim that Holownia's vision whitewashes the reality of nature and, in turn, of life itself. This is not a criticism that I would accept, as I believe beauty to be very important, if not central to art, but I also admit to being a romantic. Photography can be a difficult artform to criticize. A lot of people who own cameras think of themselves as photographers. In truth it takes a fair bit of vision, as well as a good grasp of technical knowledge to be a photographic artist. Holownia has both of these skills in spades.

The photographs in Trout River Gulch are flawless, but it is the artist's vision that makes them art. It is Holownia's ability to see beauty in places that others would pass by that makes the crucial difference. Even then there is more to taking a great picture than just finding the time and place and pushing a button. You need real skill to get it right. The exposure is one thing, and a real important thing it is, and the other is making a decent print. Holownia's prints are far more than decent. They are objects of beauty. Comparing the late American photographer Ansel Adams's photos of national parks with those Holownia made for this show in one of Canada's national parks - Gros Morne, Holownia does not fare badly. His prints are of a similar technical quality to Adams' and he also shares the American's love of photographing the natural landscape with a large format camera. Holownia is, however, different from Ansel Adams in that he will do a number of photographs on the same subject or place over a period of time. Three sets of series photographs: Headlighting, 1974-1977; Rockland Bridge, 1981-2000; and Jolicure Pond, 1996-2000, were recently included in a major German exhibition at Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg titled Monet's Legacy, Series-Order and Obsession. He was the only Canadian artist to be included in this important exhibition.

The Sackville exhibition is a prelude to a major exhibition that the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador are mounting in 2005 of the photographer's work. It will subsequently tour Canada after its Saint John's opening. Thaddeus Holownia is an artist whose work I have followed for a quarter of a century and during that time he has become a major artist whose work will endure. The works in Trout River Gulch are simply wonderful photographs.

Virgil Hammock
MONTRÉAL

Prisoners of Age: The Alcatraz Exhibition

Photos by Ron Levine
(Montreal: Synchronicity Productions, 2000)

Ron Levine’s photos of lifetime prisoners in North America’s prisons complete with accounts that form the basis of this book, are both revealing and upsetting, for they document a world of broken dreams, expectations, and sheer stupidity. As the Montreal-based photographer comments in the book’s preface: “In March 1996 I walked into a geriatric prison for the first time. I was expecting metal bars, tiny cells and hardened criminals ready to pounce from every dark crevice of the institution. What I found was not unlike a nursing home, but oddly juxtaposed with barbed wire and guard towers. There were men who required walkers, canes, wheeze chairs... men attached to IV drips, oxygen tanks and catheters. My first thought was: ‘What can these men possibly do to harm anyone on the outside while in this condition.’

The subject of an exhibition at the Alcatraz prison (now a museum), Ron Levine’s photos are incisive, with an objectivity that opens up a whole world — seldom seen — to the reader. Ron Levine’s prison project can likewise be seen on the web at www.prisonersofage.com.

John K. Grande

MICHAEL MERRILL: Painting on the Border of Disorder

McClellan Gallery of the Visual Arts Centre
350 Victoria, H3Z 1N4
Tel: 416-951-28
Feb. 7th – Mar. 2nd, 2002

For his latest exhibition at the McClellan Gallery, Michael Merrill uses the photograph as both reference and as a medium of expression. The show consists of three large flash-on-masonite panel paintings, one small circular work (London), and a selection of collages integrating photos in the work. Citing Bill Vazan’s photographic reflections from the early 1970s, Alan Paipement, and Escher as influences, Merrill’s paintings defy defy gravity as they recreate sites and spaces of human habitation using 360 degree panoramic perspectives. He achieves this by rearranging the photographs into a schematic layering on the picture plane.

The show’s title, Panmorphic means both pan (denoting all) and morph (denoting form). So in a way these works can be considered fundamentally formalist. That said, they also work as potentially subversive representations of how mass culture can impose itself on the artist’s vision and the creative process. This exhibition ushered in a new distinctive episode in Merrill’s work. (Previous to this he used his own body as source material for painting on canvas, extending his visual method of working by appropriating living environments as site.) This new work carries a cornucopia of traces that draw from his considerable legacy of artistic activity from the past. The resulting works arrive at an original voice.

In the painting Ottawa Snowfall, a view from the Wellington Bridge looking deep into the heart of the downtown district, Merrill achieves a technical mastery of the scenery, and there is a dynamic anarchy to the way he renders this scene with a panoramic 360 degree perspective. The poetic gravitational pull of the large descending snowflakes keep the painting from physically unsettling the viewer. These works are an extension of a series of similar works done while Merrill was in Paris for three months. Bringing exterior photographic documents back to his studio, Merrill set about using the reflective panorama to explore the potential of the photograph as a vehicle to discover new ways of representing space. Merrill considers his oeuvre, over time, to be an ‘implied self portrait’. This work is self referential, even though it also explores sites in their entirety.

The show titled Studio. St. Henri is another fine example of Merrill’s mastery of composition. Taken from rearranged photographs of a studio in St. Henri, this vignette spiral...
First, let's get over How Canadian is it? Sarah Milroy in the Globe and Mail referred to him as 'the one that got away', and the gist of much discussion of this work was on a great landscape painter that the present generation never would have been introduced to Canada. I'd say 'escaped' would be closer to the truth: having come from Toronto's Jarvis College, Doig surveyed the prospects for a new kind of landscape that he navigates tips into a fairly hollow comedy. In Carve Lake, the original video image of a canoe is stretched across the whole canvas, and the person in it is transformed into a green ghost trailing an arm in the water (the artist has helpfully included the artist in his source images in a showcase near the gallery entrance). In another, a man with a police car behind him shouts across a pond, as water swells mysteriously around his ankles.

When they're at their best, though, these paintings play a local, Canadian-Isb variant on a formal landscape model, no earth-shattering surprises, but pictures that are romantic, spatially convincing and a pleasure to look at in their expansive generosity of field.

Oliver Girling
Sky TV (1966) a rare Ono videowork that featured a live feed of sky and cloud movement onto a gallery screen. Water Piece (Painting to be Watered) (1962-66) with its natural sponge, eye dropper and water, reveal that basic sensitivity to nature's energy, movements and processes. Yoko Ono never abandoned this wisdom and continues to thrive on the exchange between materials, energy and idea.

Among the objects, installations, works on paper, photos, and films presented for the Yest tour are Ono's classic 22 Instructions for Paintings (1962). Originally exhibited at Sogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo in 1962 Ono displayed instructions as paintings in an attempt to push the visual art to some optical conceptual point. As Ono said: "It would open up a whole new horizon for the visual arts. I was totally excited by the idea and its visual possibilities. To make the point that the instructions were not themselves graphic images, I wanted the instructions to be typed.

(Yoko Ono's involvement with John Lennon opened up a whole exchange. She commissioned billboard stating WAR IS OVER! for Times Square, New York and DER KRIEG IST AUS! for Berlin in 1969. Accursus for Peace (1969) consisted of one box that opened up to help 1960s world leaders with a request they plant it for peace. John and Yoko's bed-ins for peace in the Amsterdam Hilton, and in the Bonaventure in Montreal, the Surrender to Peace add they took out in the New York Times (1983), helped fire up a generation who lived with idealism, loved their performances, and followed their ideas and work with a passion. These interventions and actions often involved reduction, unifying the materialist mind. Ono's comment "Make yourself dispensable, like paper" This ephemeral (Asian?) vista view surfaces continually, in her videos and films. Fly (1970) documented a fly moving across a woman's body - the commonplace event becomes epic. Her early films No. 1 and Eyelid stretch and elongate a moment into several minutes. These Ono filmic experiments presaged Andy Warhol's later continuous real time time films. For No. 4 (Fluxfilm #16) better known as Bottoms, Ono captured a body bottom from derriere. The shots are so close-up, it becomes an aesthetic statement."

What remains, after all the 1960s ideas, concepts, idealism and excess baggage have evaporated in thin air! The LIVE notion that these events, performances, art concepts were all about, documented in this exhibition - Yoko Ono Yest - are now heavily laden with self-importance. LIKE LEAD! None of this art was ever intended to become ART! Nor was it destined for the Museum of Modern (F)Art (an early Ono performance). Even George Maciunas, that Fluxus ringleader, deplored all the later merchandising and commodification of Fluxus art. I personally find the new turn (not a U-turn) Yoko Ono has made into installation art, with the Wish Tree (1996), Cleaning Piece (1997), and more significantly EX IT (1997) seems the most alive. Though these works are not in the AGO show they have the most growth potential for future Ono art. Her EX IT piece has now upon row of coffins. Trees grow out of holes in the coffin lids. New life emerges from these body containers. It's a powerful affirmation of the ephemeral side of life. YES YOKO reaches the divide between art, nature and society with compassion, above all, and wisdom ONO YES.

John K. Grande

OUT OF THIS WORLD: TEXTILES FROM THE SPIRIT REALM

The Textile Museum, 55 Centre Avenue, Toronto, Ont. M5G 2H5
Tel. (416) 599-5321 / Fax (416) 599-2911

With war in Afghanistan, who thinks of the rug-weavers plugging their trades amidst the bombs and tanks? Not National Geographic, who spent five years tracking down a green-eyed refugee with movie-star looks who'd graced their cover in the '80s. When they did find her and photograph her again, it came as a shock only to the editors and perhaps a few North Americans that she'd never been photographed in between times (or before the first time). Why on earth should she have been? The visual culture of Afghanistan, as well as Turkey, Iran, Uzbekistan, Chechnya and all around the Urals and Caucasus, is astonishingly rich beyond the camera's reach. Although traditional Islamic culture prescribes recognizable imagery, in practice the knotted silk and wool rugs, the silver jewelry, the embroidery and the paintings are rich with images of all kinds.

The exhibition OUT OF THIS WORLD: Textiles from the Spirit Realm, curated by Natalia Nekrassova and Max Allen, is an intriguing collection of cloths, batiks, yarn paintings and jewelry, that includes an informative section about materials and dyes. The seventeen Islamic prayer rugs on view are especially captivating, not only on account of their formal beauty, but also because they reveal a connection between the motifs of the artisan and experiences of her or his society.

The "war rugs", of which there is a 1901 example, were woven by Chitakos nomads, and incorporate such items as helicopters and tanks with traditional Garden of Eden imagery (often, though not in this show, these rugs are also partially bleached, to reveal the extent of the weaver's own family loss). Equally striking are the matted hands corresponding to the placement of the actual hands of the supplicant appear on either side of the arch that signifies the mosque in the top portion of the rug.

Lyrical, abstracted flowers represent Elysian fields on a delightful Caucasian rug of the 1870s. It might remind any western viewer of the mountain of knowledge we lack about Chechnya, which our media usually tags (following our post-September 11 rapprochement with Russia) with a prefix or follows with the words "terrorist" or "Al-Qaeda". It's a good bet that while some Chechens battle the Russians in the mountains, many others maintain the oral and hand-craft traditions such as these, and keep their stories going from generation to generation.

Oliver Girling

SASKATOON

THE EINSTEIN'S BRAIN PROJECT: PANDAEMONIUM BY ALAN DUNNING / PAUL WOODROW.

January 11 - March 10, 2002
Mende Art Gallery
950 Spadina Cres. E.,
Saskatoon S7K 3L6
Tel.: 306-975-7647
Fax: 306-975-7670

Pandaemonium is the latest edition of Alen Dunning and Paul Woodrow's The Einstein's Brain Project, a series of collaborative installations characterized by plays on simulation and reality and on the mind/body problem. As described in their artist statement: "The project examines the idea of the world as a construct sustained through the neurological processes contained within the brain. It suggests that the world is not some reality outside ourselves, but is the result of an interior process that makes us sustain our body image and its relationship to a world."

The success of Pandaemonium depends upon which side of the Matrix you inhabit.

The installation occupies a dimly lit by two video projections on either side of a blue figure that lies on a table in the center of the room. Suspended above the body is a homemade virtual reality headset - wires, exposed hardware and chassis. A wall text offers a cautious invitation: Though meant to be touched, the work is fragile. The device (the text claims) translates brainwaves into code that alters the abstract images we see projected on the right-hand wall.

The body is a plaster cast of a young man. He is of average height, bald and fit. Because the cast is coated with thermochromic paint, its tone fades slightly in response to the warmth of your hand. Touch is key to this work. As you glide your hands over the body, sensors activate the second screen and the VR headset - both show fuzzy video images taken from what look like old movies, including some Film Noirish scenes. (In my massage I found six sensors.)
The thesis seems to be that memory is distributed through the body and can be activated kinesthetically. The idea is terrific, but the images the artists chose are disappointing. Like the body, they are generic, Hollywood clips from half a century or more ago. It is difficult to develop a narrative or find anything specific about the mind/body that might have generated them. It may be that the mind to another. The blurry video-transmits mental images from one scientist dons a strange headset that to Earth). In a key scene, the hero to slipstream, there are sinuous, undulating patterns in black and white on the surface of both the three-dimensional pots and the flat tiling that unify the piece. These patterns recall the rhythms of nature and the illusionary nature of life itself — whether in a micro-cosmic or a macro-cosmic scale are left hanging in the air. They can inspire us with a sense of beauty. A trompe l'oeil effect is achieved by displacing the dimensionality of the three clay pots. Linear design patterns effectively camouflage the pots into the flat surrounds of a tile design. Representation of the chaos and rhythm of nature's design. Questions of appearance and reality, and the illusionary nature of life itself — whether in a micro-cosmic or a macro-cosmic scale are left hanging in the air.

The gritty resonance, Block achieves in her recent paintings likewise leaves us in a dilemma over surface and content. We can't read further into these works and the ambiguous surface textures merely reify the independence of the painting as an object from that which it represents... Block's journey triphic, for instance, recreates a scene one might see looking out of a cabin window....
into nature. The window effect establishes an immediate parameter or frame the viewer looks through or into. A tension is established between the landscape scene depicted and the painterly surface effect. For its very inexactitude, and latelier faire depiction of a landscape scene, the journey triptych recreates the visual/ optical effect of being there. It is more about the sensation of things, than the recording or depiction of "what reality represents". No Gold Frame builds the same textual surface effect, recreating a landscape scene from near the Rivière Rouge region of Quebec. Victoria Block's art has a spiritual dimension. This displacement of that sensation of the wilderness or landscape experience, transformed from memory, onto the surface of things—builds a new world of tactile effect and visual sensation. It has a life of its own.

John K. Grande

CONTOURS: EXTENDED
PAINTING IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

December 7, 2001 - March 3, 2002
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
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CONTOURS: an exhibition that extends the language of painting, examines the work of ten artists—five from Victoria, five from Seattle. Based on past curatorial moments at the AGGV, CONTOURS recalls solo Seattle artist exhibitions from the 1950's and 1960's initiated by then director, Colin Graham i.e. Mark Tobey: Recent Paintings (1957), and Morris Graves (1959); and Seattle Now, a group exhibition from 1984 curated by Greg Belcher. The most recent incarnation pairs the talents of Lisa Baldissera, Curator of Contemporary Art at the AGGV, and Matthew Kangas, guest curator from Seattle. As Lisa Baldissera notes, this exhibition is not intended to be a survey of Pacific Northwest work, but instead focuses exclusively on the production of ten artists' work.

Tom Burrows' polymer resin paintings (four diptychs), are beautiful objects - minimal and seductive. Millry Way (2001), pairs two panels—one a deep, smoky Aubergine and the other black. The latter has "Alphabits" that cluster in suspension, forming constellations reminiscent of the night sky. Like the paintings of Vija Celmins and Paterson Ewen, Tom Burrows' works are elegaic meditations on life and its passing. Victoria Arrangement (2001-2002), a painting installation by Seattle artist Susan Dorf, articulates the wall. Seventeen panels of various dimensions employ a complex technique of sprayed enamel and wax on birch. Stenciled patterns emerge and dissolve as though viewed through the lens of a microscope. The randomly organized abstract patterns resemble structures found in nature. Three works by Isabel Kahn, a Seattle printmaker, reference traditional textiles such as kimono and prayer shawls. Kahn combines intricate layers of handmade mulberry paper mounted on muslin. She works small sections of alternating prints, mounting them together into architectural pieces like Grass Ladder (2000). The structure of this scroll is composed of twelve sections that combine ink wash painting with printmaking techniques. The Space Between Us (2001), a wall-sized mural in two sections has a rhythmic surface, organic, and punctuated with Hebrew text. Isabel Kahn's art is heroic and formal, with an abstract language. In the spirit of Duchamp, Patrick Holderfield combines found objects - toys, car parts, and trophies, with painted poly-urethane foam. The protruding elements, like bloated organs, refer to the body and its hidden functions. Untitled (Dumper) extends the metaphor of roadkill into the realm of the absurd.

Seattle based Jesse Paul Miller's Unknown Collaboration (2001), paints the wall casually with an image borrowed from computer programs. The patterns are repeated on the floor in organized collections of debris scraps found on the streets of Victoria. Miller's other installation, 7 Light Drawings (2001), is a sound and laser light piece. The viewer "gets it" through the simple act of listening, Physical action—pouring, dripping, and tilting, dominate the art practice of Mark Takamichi Miller (Seattle). The multiple layering of colour and image are skillful. Two of the six acrylic panels are titled: The Beginning of the World (2001) and The Origin of the World (2000), titles that seem to show how curious about time and place Miller is. Takamichi Miller's paintings contain themselves within their contours. Like Takamichi Miller, Brian G. White (Victoria), immerses himself in the physical act of painting. The Beginning of the End (2001-2002), is a site-specific stripe painting that extends across the entire length of one wall. It is the wall. White's practice is rigorously conceptual and relies for its effect on the viewer's physical response (often described as vertiginous). Stephanie Atkinson's canvases are quiet places where nothing happens. Her imagery is private and poetical, obscure, and at times altered. Imagine a Jules Olitski canvas in which moths and butterflies or seed clusters and spheres of light are suspended. Imagine a lot of space in which the flags hover between opacity and transparency, between being and becoming, Paris (2001), and Triptap (2001), are tiny fields of colour, fragile, barely there. We are attracted to their beauty. For all their delicacy, Stephanie Atkinson's paintings are resilient, and possess a tenacity for life. They nurture, and like prayers, protect us.

Jeremy Borsos' Salon-style painting installation appropriates imagery from numerous sources. Susanna and the Elderberries (2001), is a spoof on the original and on its feminist revisions. Jenny, After Boucher (1999), and To Forgive is Human, to Err Divine (1999), further scramble our notions of painting and its traditions. Borsos' audacious irreverence does not hide the brilliance of a mind that is constantly pushing the limits, demanding (of himself), new forms of expression. Twentieth-Century Art has a life of its own.