

Donigan Cumming: *Ex Votos*

MSVU Art Gallery, info@msvuart.ca, June 21 to August 10, 2008

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HALIFAX, NS

DONIGAN CUMMING *EX VOTOS*

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June 21 to August 10, 2008

Montreal artist Donigan Cumming's exhibition *Ex Votos* at Mount Saint Vincent Art gallery opens with a photo installation *The Stage* composed of 250 black and white gelatine photographs mounted in a grid. Cumming photographs and documents people – people you'd hear described as nobodies, welfare cases, weirdoes, local characters or ever less flatteringly as bums, crazies, and drunks. Like Diane Arbus, it seems Cumming shoots from waist or hip level. The angle makes the interiors smaller and the people larger, crammed in with all their stuff, knick-knacks and icons – religious and other (Blondie paraphernalia for example). I move from the top left, taking in an image with each step. Unlike Arbus, Cumming works with the same subjects over and over again. Ingrid Jenkner, the director of the gallery, describes them as Donigan's troupe. That implies a connection and intimacy between the artist and subjects I hadn't anticipated. I fixate on a tall lanky man with shaggy hair and lose my spot, scanning instead for the same character. During this



quest my eyes land repeatedly on images of old gents in the nude. I can't help but chuckle. There is playfulness here. This is a seminal work of Cumming's dating back to 1990. It inspires and informs the encaustic collage works *Prologue* and *Epilogue* (2005 both). Source material for these massive photo-collages it taken from *The Stage* for the most part.

Religious references abound in Cumming's work, thick like the encaustic that creates the relief and the glue to hold the cuttings down. An "Ex Votos" is an offering made to a saint in gratitude for a prayer answered; little silver hands and legs are often used I recall. This imagery abounds in *Prologue*. Teaming rivers of limbs, hell and lost souls – or at a pragmatic level, bad feet and teeth that are the bane of a poverty ridden existence.

Prologue's composition is inspired by James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (1889). *Epilogue* is Cumming's irreverent rendition of Bruegel the Elder's

painting *The Suicide of Saul* (c. 1532). Bruegel is a great documentarian of life in the Middle Ages where poverty, fundamental belief, illness, ugliness and madness were the lot of the masses.

The artist describes these dense collages in which he has chosen to ignore all rules of perspective as a "collective portrait of the community that I've been working with for twenty years."

I move over to the video works. Three screens. Watching *Cut the Parrot* (1996), I'm introduced to Susan Thompson. I recognise her from *Epilogue* where she dons a halo, a beatified expression, and pants that give her camel toe. She looks half-dead in the collage. Not so in the video where she crackles with nervous energy: panic and sexuality. Her hair is wild. Her eyes dart back and forth searchingly, following Cumming or the camera. We are locked in. Cumming's gift is to present us with the moment where she is seeking to define the nature of their intimacy



while struggling with issues around sex and abandonment. I sense she is worried because this kind of intimacy doesn't fit into her vision of male-female relationships. She repeatedly asks about his wife and then concludes "You love her for true". "You wont leave her". This is where the mental unbalance appears as her boundaries dissolve. The word "leave" triggers fear: will the wife prevent them from seeing each other because Thompson feels something for the artist. "Is she jealous?" She inquires over and over.

Cumming is in her face with the camera most of the time. It fills the whole screen. I'm about to disengage because the intensity and awkwardness is becoming unbearable. That's the moment Cumming asks her to sing *Que Sera Sera*. Susan Thompson's voice is beautiful. I can see her throat quivering, vulnerable, trusting and so very tender. I could cry.

These relationships are the platform or context from which Cumming brings us in direct contact with the human predicaments of mortality, deterioration, addiction, illness and sexuality in the midst of all of these. Just the type of stuff we tend to turn away from. It's harsh and poignant, rich and meaningful and really funny at times. The troupe is working and playing and sharing who they are with the larger world – in some cases that involves full frontal lewdness. □

Epilogue
Photo Collage
21.6 x 4.4 m