

Memories, beyond the Kodak moment

Three photographers explore the theme of memory in vastly different and arresting ways.

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The stated theme of this year's Contact photography festival in Toronto is Still Revolution: Suspended in Time, but one of the great pleasures of drifting around this city looking at photographs this month (there are more than 200 shows to choose from) is finding your own thematic thread.

In my case, I kept thinking about memory, articulated in the medium of photography in myriad ways: in the elegiac work of Alison Rossiter at Stephen Bulger Gallery, which makes the subtle damage sustained by archival photographic printing paper an evocative subject for art (the medium literally holds the message here); in the epic narrative tableau by Vancouver artist Stan Douglas depicting the Gastown Riots, a new work that anchors the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art's (MoCCA) flagship Contact exhibition; and in the eccentric and poignant photography of Toronto's Rafael Goldchain, who is exhibiting his costumed self-portraits in the guise of his ancestors, real and imagined. If memory cannot serve us, these pictures suggest, we can use this medium to create our own.

Rossiter's project might strike some as perverse. For its first half century or more, photography took the rap for being machine-made art, but Rossiter seems to toy with that in these pictures.

The show is called Lament, and it casts a backward glance to a dying technology - the pre-digital, negative-based darkroom arts that have gone the way of rabbit ears and vinyl records. Developing these papers, though, she has made discoveries: evidence of subtle infiltrations of light, water stains and the ghostly fingerprints of anonymous photographers now long gone.

To these accidents of fate, though, Rossiter has added, in some cases, the ministrations of her own hand, dipping the sheets of paper in a further bath of developing fluid to suggest hillsides and horizons. Alternately, she has created bold abstractions by pouring the fluid down the paper surface, generating elegant columnar forms that emanate a sentinel stillness. The works in Lament, thus, recall both the submerged history of the materials (and the people who handled them in years gone by) and the fleeting moment of physical interaction with Rossiter in the studio, where action has left its trace.

In the work of Goldchain, on view at O'Born Contemporary, it is historical memory and identity the artist is after - or the absence of it. An émigré to Canada from South America, his family was part of the diaspora of Polish Jews who fled Europe on the eve of the Second World War. With the birth of his own son a few years ago, he felt an urgency to recover what had been lost, but found only a handful of family snapshots to work from. Collaborating with a makeup artist and a photography assistant, he began the painstaking work of recreating the family members he knew about, impersonating them in front of the camera. Soon, though, he embarked on a more fanciful tangent, imagining characters based on scraps of recollection or flimsy shreds of documentation.

Thus we discover here both his dapper maternal grandfather and the fictive Dona Reizl Goldszajn Rozenfeld, a tousle-haired depressive woman who was inspired by a wig he found at a second-hand store. (Cindy Sherman meets Yousuf Karsh.) The resulting body of work is as much a record of great performance (not to mention superb art direction and costuming) as it is great photography.

Douglas, at MoCCA, attempts another kind of historical re-enactment in his 2008 work titled *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August, 1971*. Here, too, we are called to remember what the passage of time might rinse away. The large-scale colour image documents an episode from Vancouver history: the Gastown Riots of 1971, which arose from the conflict between West Coast hippies (pushing to legalize marijuana) and the police, who inflamed resistance with their undercover tactics. Consistent with many of Douglas's other works - which have taken us back to Havana in the sixties, Nootka Sound in the early decades of European contact, or the Klondike during the Gold Rush (to name a few of the settings he has chosen) - this picture transports us back in time, in this instance dramatically animating a street corner in a part of Vancouver now known as the Downtown Eastside.

In this image of the early 1970s, the Woodward's department store anchors the neighbourhood, alongside another small business: a sporting-goods store selling ammunition and hunting supplies. (It's hard not to read this as a reference to the frontier past of the West Coast, and the correspondingly rough and ready politics of the society that has grown up there.) Protesters clash with police on horseback, as the streetlights cast dramatic pools of light onto the littered pavement.

Though it suggests the instantaneous, the work was long in the making. With the scrupulous eye of a historian, Douglas set about researching the incident - checking eye-witness reports, reviewing police and media records, recording details of costume and positioning of figures - and setting up to recreate them for the camera. Finally, he spliced the dozens of resulting images digitally into one highly controlled whole.

The upshot is an image that sits, conceptually, in a dialectical zone between news photography and history painting. Followers of Vancouver photography will find some kinships here to the work of other West Coast artists: to Jeff Wall's large-format, highly constructed dramatic images, and also to the reportage of Roy Arden, which in the past has also paid homage to historical incidents of civil unrest in British Columbia history.

Douglas initially created this image for use as a mural for the freshly re-purposed Woodward's site, which reopened last month as a gentrified mix of condos, low-cost housing and retail. This is a charged site, a fault line in the social geology of the city between the tectonic plates of rich and poor. Whether such urban upscaling projects represent a resolution to social problems or mere window dressing remains to be seen, but this work will bear witness to the history of this contested zone, which has resisted generations of attempts to reform it. Douglas directs us to remember, and to wonder why.

Alison Rossiter: Lament continues at Stephen Bulger until May 23. Still Revolution: Suspended in Time, continues at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art until May 31, and Rafael Goldchain's I Am My Family remains on view at O Born Contemporary until May 30. For more information: <http://www.contactphoto.com>.