

# Exhibition follows photography's rise in '80s

## Works not seen in 30 years showcased in *C. 1983, Part II* at Presentation House Gallery

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun April 7, 2012



*St. Sebastien by Vikky Alexander*

The current exhibition at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver focuses on a critical period in Vancouver's art history between 1982 and 1987, when a group of artists became interested in experimenting with photo-based art.

The movement would leave a defining mark on the city's art scene, with many of the artists involved, such as Rodney Graham and Ian Wallace, going on to build careers of international significance.

*C. 1983, Part II* is the second instalment of the exhibition, the first of which ran from Jan. 28 to March 11. Part II continues to May 6.

The exhibition's curator Helga Pakasaar describes the period as a key one in the development of the city's artists and artistic community. It was a time when several new artist-run galleries opened, such as Or Gallery and Artspeak. They became venues for

many of the artists in the exhibition to show their works for the first time.

Pakasaar said she approached the period as a time when there was a “knot of narratives” going on. Some artists were making conceptual art with photography, while others were looking at perception, making collages or experimenting with light striking a photosensitive surface. “Locally there was a very interesting sense of vitality here that came out of the ’70s,” Pakasaar said. “In the early ’80s things seemed to open up more in terms of mediums and situations that were possible.

“There were lots of new galleries that opened and artists’ collectives and critical writing.

“There was a lot of talk about photography that permeated the international art scene as well.”

All the works in the exhibition are analogue and haven’t been converted into digital versions. As a curator, it required a lot of sleuthing by Pakasaar to find some of the artists who were no longer practising. It also meant looking for works in archives and storage lockers. Many of them haven’t been seen since they were first shown in the 1980s.

One work that operates as a kind of conceptual base for the others is Rodney Graham’s Millennial Project for an Urban Plaza. It’s essentially plans for a camera obscura theatre to show a tree as it grows. At three storeys in height, it would likely be the biggest image-making apparatus ever built.

The camera obscura, or pinhole camera, is significant because it’s a precursor to photography. A rudimentary projector, it can be as small as a shoebox or as large as a room. A small hole on one side lets in external light, projecting an image of the source subject onto an interior surface.

Graham’s camera obscura has never been built. It exists only as text and a model in a vitrine. Even greatly reduced in size, the Millennial Project foregrounds the apparatus required for making images of the world. It’s the opposite of the smartphone camera, which is so small, sleek and easy to use, the machinery of image-making virtually disappears. And unlike a photographic image that captures a moment in time, the Millennial Project would show the continual process of growth and change of the tree in front of it.

One of the most haunting images in the exhibition is Kati Campbell’s trio of glowing blue translucent film images in a lightboxes called Production. All the people and text from magazine photographs have been eliminated. What’s left are enigmatic images: an open car door, a living room scene with two comfy chairs on a carpet in front of a window with a car outside, and a bathroom sink. They’re also placed high on the wall, altering the perspective from which art is usually viewed in a gallery. The trinity of images is reminiscent of the kind that might be found in a place of honour high up on a church wall.

Directly across from Campbell’s work is Ian Wallace’s The Imperial City. It’s composed of four columns of images that dominate the wall. The two on the outside abutting the corner are photographs of classical-style statues with the figures each holding an arm outstretched. In the middle are scenes from his Poverty series showing a man and a woman in the street by a brick building. The images look journalistic but are part of staged scenes. They’re both overlaid with orange Plexiglas.

Shaped like columns, the two outside images of statues frame the wall like architectural features. The presentation gives equal weight to the way different eras make art and calls into question the social and political role that art plays across time.

Share Corsaut's works recall the simplicity of Russian Constructivism in their geometric shapes that are both figurative and abstract. Called photograms, they're made without a camera by putting objects onto photosensitive paper and exposing them to light.

One of the unintended visual themes in the exhibition is the repeated appearance of BC Place Stadium. Pakasaar said only after the works went up did she notice that the dome appears in several works — four in total. She said that may not be surprising given that it was such a big change to the city's skyline when it opened in 1983.

Mostly it appears in the background in several city images, but it is prominent in Henri Robideau's. His panoramic photographic captures one of the massive protests against the restraint program of the Social Credit government when 50,000 people marched over the Georgia Viaduct and down into the undeveloped north shore of False Creek in July 1983. Robideau's extended cutline calls BC Place a "giant marshmallow in bondage."

On opening night of C. 1983 Part 2, Presentation House played Rodney Graham's rarely seen *Two Generators*. The four-minute film foregrounds the mechanic apparatus of filmmaking and turns its presentation into a performance.

As part of C. 1983, a special screening of experimental films from the 1980s will take place at Pacific Cinematheque on Friday, May 4 at 7:30 p.m.; a 90-minute screening of *Two Generators* follows at 9 p.m.

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