

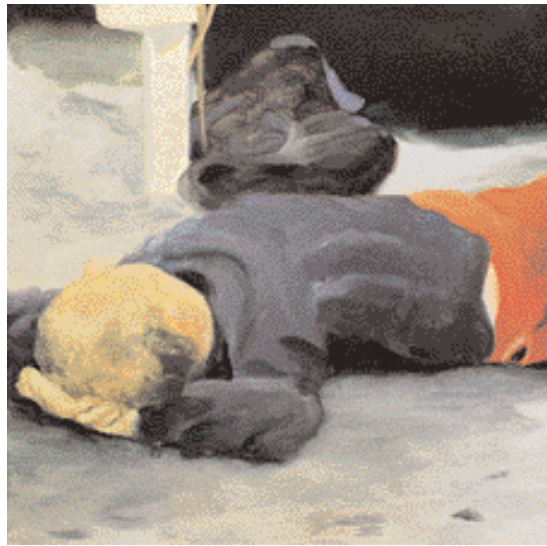


ABOVE: Scott McFarland *Trimming, Late Summer, Sarwin Thind* 1999 C-print 101.6 x 127 cm
RIGHT: Stephen Waddell *A Resting Worker III* 2000 Oil on canvas 50.5 x 50.5 cm



Vancouver photographer **Roy Arden** organized a groundbreaking exhibition last year on developing trends in contemporary photography. This is a newly revised version of his catalogue essay

after **p**hoto**g**raphy



IN 1981, PETER GALASSI, curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presented an exhibition entitled “Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography.” In the accompanying publication, Galassi articulated his theory for which the paintings and photographs in the exhibition were intended as supporting evidence and illustration. Rejecting the habitually recycled narrative that characterizes photography’s invention as a predominantly technical or scientific achievement, Galassi argued for an appreciation of photography as a legitimate product and continuation of European pictorial tradition.

Painted and sketched studies by Constable, Valenciennes, Købke and other artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were presented as examples of a proto-photographic vision. Chiefly landscapes, these works favour the everyday over the grand themes and subjects of history painting. With this new Realism and naturalism the model of vision evolved away from the synthetic toward the analytic. Galassi contrasts paintings by Uccello and Degas to illustrate the move from a predetermined Cartesian perspectival field in which the artist constructs a scene or drama to the notion of a pre-existent

material, real world from which the artist might select a particular view. This transition produces pictorial effects that have long since been characterized as “photographic.” This new “syntax of immediate and synoptic perceptions and discontinuous forms,” as Galassi termed it, has been popularly recognized as photography’s influence upon Impressionism. However, he also provides generous evidence that Impressionism’s abrupt cropping and other *photographic* effects appeared in handmade pictures well before Impressionism and the invention of photography.

As with the drawings and paintings, the photographs exhibited in “Before Photography” were likewise “pictures of bits; telling details and vivid, singular perceptions.” More like sketches than posed or constructed scenes, the photographs, by pioneers like Talbot, Le Gray and Fenton, record the specific appearance of fleeting realities. These mechanically produced images continued the dispassionate gaze of the proto-photographic painters.

Since those early days of the medium, photography has largely sought to define itself as distinct and separate from the traditions of painted pictures. The reasons for this are many but the view of photography as a purely technical invention has been central to this emphasis on discontinuity and difference. Photography was a modern miracle, a defining characteristic of the violent difference between old and new worlds.

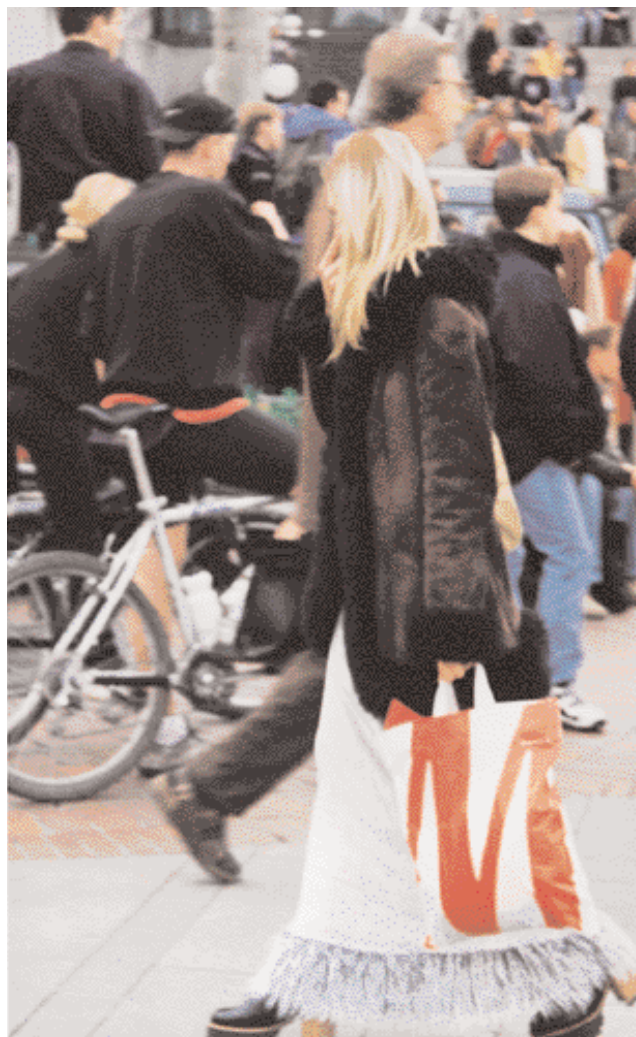
In the past few decades the relation of photography to the tradition of painting has been thoroughly explored, with results ranging from impressive to kitsch. This investigation started with conceptual art’s radical questioning of traditional and modernist conceptions of art. Recent art, informed by the various critiques of representation, has shown how photography is always ideologically encoded. The arrival of digital technology promises to obliterate the truth value of photography once and for all. Digital images are not photographs but mechanically produced pointillist paintings. They initially have the same indexical relation to their referents as photographs, but subsequently can be altered without any detectable trace of the alteration.

Today, despite the numerous refinements of its technology, there is something quaint about photography. Eclipsed by digital media, photography can now be seen as the obsolete, 19th-century technology that practitioners, occasionally frustrated by its limitations, have long suspected it to be. When something comes to an end it is typical to pause and reflect on its beginning. In recent works by some Vancouver artists, mostly working with photography, I noticed a similarity to the vision of the proto-photographic painters that so impressed Galassi. The Vancouver artists I examine here are Howard Ursuliak, Chris Gergley, Karin Bubaš, Scott McFarland and Stephen Waddell. The directness and fascination with the visual world demonstrated by these 21st-century artists, working in this new period “after photography,” appears to echo the naïvety of the studies

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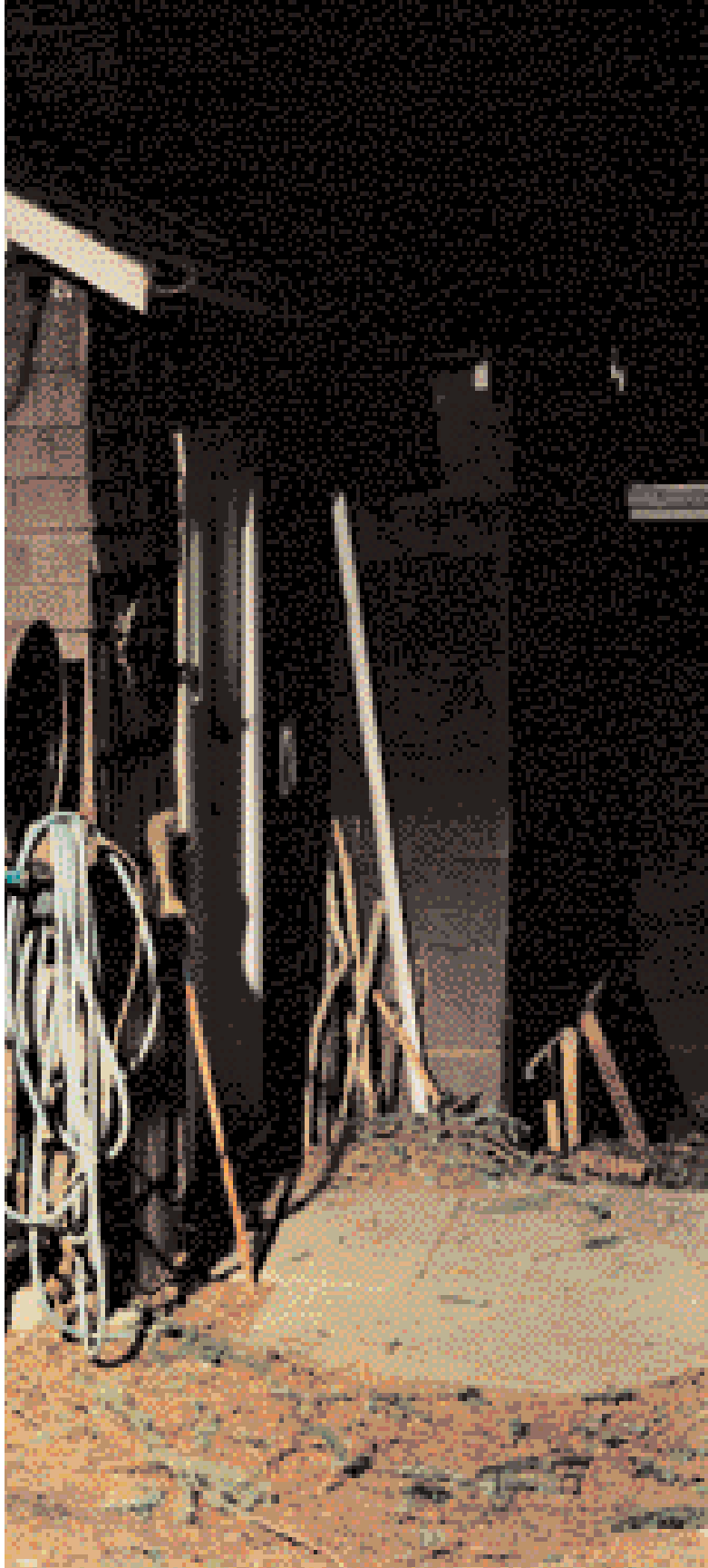


LEFT: Stephen Waddell *A Woman Walking in Stuttgart* 1998 Colour photograph (2 of 2) 100 x 150 cm

RIGHT: Karin Bubaš *Two T.V.'s* (from the series "Florence and George") C-print 40.6 x 40.6 cm



Scott McFarland *Cabin* (detail) 1999 C-print, video 76.2 x 101.6 cm



that Galassi had gathered together for “Before Photography.”

However, the Vancouver artists are not naïve with respect to photographic vision. Nor is their work an expression of nostalgia. These artists are aware of the mediated nature of all photography, that all photographs are fictions. Yet they have chosen to *pass* on the theory-driven constructions and deconstructions of recent photo art. All of their works are fragments of the everyday produced without substantial interference. While all images are constructions at one level, these works shun the didactics and rhetoric we have come to expect from post-conceptual photo art. Rather, they are closer to sketches made in the spirit of the kind of natural science that Constable proposed as a model for art. It would be inappropriate to call these works “documentary” for their power does not hinge on the indexical truth of the photograph but on a Realist style. In a time when much art has sought to uncover the truths hidden by appearances, it might be that these artists are negotiating a practice that is concerned with *appearance* itself as the singularly important aspect of visual art.

The majority of these artists employ available light, whether artificial or natural. Digital manipulation has been eschewed, although in the case of the videos, which were produced with digital cameras, or transferred to digital video from Super 8 film, the images are delivered more or less straight. The paintings of Stephen Waddell are not painted directly from life; they have been developed from photos in much the same way that painters in the past would complete oil paintings from sketches made in the field. The notions of the “stay-at-home artist” and the “close-at-hand” subject figure prominently here. Although some of the images were produced abroad, their ordinary subjects imply that they could just as easily have been made in Vancouver.

In her suite of colour photos *Florence and George* (1998), Karin Bubaš guides us around her grandparents’ empty home, where the signs of domesticity, of paternity and maternity, are inscribed in humble objects. Somewhat anthropological in the attention to detail, but with the dramatic mood of available light, these are glimpses into a private world. Both private life and public history can be read from the furniture and personal effects. We find ourselves in a small museum of everyday life. The work can also be seen as a portrait that tells us as much as, or more than, a picture of two faces could.

Bubaš’s suite of images *Exterior Studies at Night* (1998) also focuses on the domestic realm, but this time we are on the outside looking in. The photos that show the “Neighbourhood Watch” sticker and the “Beware of Dog” sign on the windows

of a suburban home reinforce an air of menace, as though we are seeing through the eyes of a stalker or burglar. Other images invite a less sinister narrative of a summer night spent drinking on the porch. Such narratives are finally speculative, as Bubaš has merely trained her eye on what was found to be there. The pictures that Bubaš made while visiting Japan continue her investigation of the spaces that we live in and the traces of life to be found in them. In a pair of photos, *Yoko's Room #1 and #2* (1999), a tawdry assortment of personal belongings and popular culture products lay scattered on the floor. On the wall, the ghostly negatives of removed objects, imprinted by the sun and air, are a kind of photography in themselves.

Scott McFarland's *Cabin* (1999) is an ongoing project made of colour photos and video that depict details of the interior and exterior of the structure and its surrounding vegetation, seen at night. There is no explicit dramatic story here, just action and vision. After viewing one of the videos for some minutes it becomes apparent that the light which draws McFarland's subjects out of the darkness emanates from a motion sensor security light activated by the artist's movements. A shifting composition, of the cabin's rustic exterior with an oil drum and garden hose, is turned off and on in irregular time—thus is dramatic effect derived from an otherwise banal situation. Encountered sympathetically, the work entrances; we are like the person who has become too stoned or “stupid” to stay inside with the party and is now experiencing being at a level more primal than social. Here, appearance itself is the subject. McFarland's videographic prose poem is a phenomenology of visibility framed within a reconsideration of the rustic. The photographs from the *Cabin* project pay homage to the delicate observations of nature of August Kotsch and the interiors photographs of Eugène Atget. That McFarland would experience an affinity to such quiet, 19th-century models is unusual for a young artist today. His subjects are decidedly non-spectacular, perhaps all the better to forefront the spectacle of vision.

In his recent and continuing project around the theme of gardening, McFarland has pictured the topiary culture of Vancouver's old money neighbourhoods. Beginning with carefully described views of topiary art, he has subsequently moved to picturing the workers that tend to these gardens and then the hidden maintenance and security systems that maintain them and protect their owners. His photographs of gardeners appear partially posed, as though he has interrupted the workers and won their brief cooperation—they seem more dramatic than documentary. In *Trimming, Late Summer, Sarwan Thind* (1999), a gardener in a bright red shirt with a cell phone attached to his belt kneels to prune a bush. The flattening of the figure against the background, the vivid and lush vegetation and the “Stone breaker” pose of Mr. Thind all recall Courbet. The most recent

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garden pictures focus on the automatic motion sensors and surveillance video cameras that lurk within the English gardens of Vancouver's elite. While his aesthetics are traditional, and radically so, McFarland's appreciation of class, economics and technology evidence a critical comprehension of the social realities of modernity.

At first glance, Stephen Waddell's video *Two Walks* (1998) is reminiscent of Vito Acconci's photo documents of performances in which he would follow complete strangers through the street. But Waddell isn't interested in the psychology of paranoia or expanding “art into life.” Instead, he focuses on the art of depiction. His technique of following is simply a way to generate a motif—the figure of the urban pedestrian. This is “The Painting of Modern Life” rendered with the technology of the home movie. Waddell prefers to use Super 8 film and then transfer it to video, the “just past” technology lending the flickering images a warm and painterly cast.

Waddell also produces photographs and paintings and sees himself primarily as a painter. When on the move, he carries a small camera and incessantly records the quotidian worlds he passes through. His ongoing photographic series *Conspirators* consists of hundreds of snapshots of pedestrians who have aroused his interest. As with the *Two Walks* video, *Conspirators* is produced by following strangers with a camera. The title suggests a commonality among people but the work avoids any humanistic sentiment and even hints that what people share might not always be good. Waddell also photographs the cityscape, focusing predominantly on overlooked corners, and has on occasion produced massive friezes of hundreds of these photographs.

Waddell employs his photographs as studies for paintings as well. Here, the motifs are distilled down to their essential aspects and given solemnity and weight. Often one photo source will yield several painted variations. One suite of paintings, *A Resting Worker*, depicts a man snoozing beside his truck. Waddell's



ABOVE: Chris Gergley *Shops, Halifax Street, Regina* 1999 C-print 47 x 59.7 cm
BELOW: Howard Ursuliak *Untitled (bound brown table)* 1998 C-print 136 x 169 cm



painted figures appear “lumpy,” his people don’t seem to wear clothes so much as be wrapped in them like parcels of fat, bone and muscle. His existential figure painting balances an Impressionistic optical rendering with the play of flatness and reduction of a painter such as Luc Tuymans.

The quasi-systematic, typological approach of Bernd and Hilla Becher or Ed Ruscha comes to mind when first viewing Chris Gergley’s *Apartment Lobbies* (1998). These modernist buildings are all within walking distance of the artist’s own residence. *Apartment Lobbies* is as much about the incidental effects of light and vision, about being there at a particular, nocturnal time, as it is about analyzing the architectural genre. Gergley isn’t making any grand statement about modernism, but applying a birdwatcher’s quality of attention to his own urban surroundings.

Queen City (1999–2000) is an exploration of Gergley’s hometown of Regina. These photographs depict the edges of the commercial centre, an area occupied by detached houses and small businesses. From his photographs alone, one might think that this was a small, “one horse” town rather than a neglected area of a modern city. Here, the “winds of progress” occasionally blow in, depositing a few new buildings and machines every decade or so. Otherwise, time is experienced as slower, and perhaps, more natural. In *Yard at Victoria & Arcola* (1999), an orange-red “muscle car” in a scrap yard is a familiar enough icon of “white trash” mythology. Gergley’s style owes much to ’70s American “New Color” photographers like Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. These artists were the first to make a solid case for colour photography, which had previously been largely disdained as too vulgar for serious art. Gergley is equally influenced by Neo-Realist cinematography; *Queen City*’s dispassionate views might easily pass as location shots for a film like Ulu Grosbard’s *Straight Time*. These clear and shadowless studies can be appreciated alternately as exercises in seeing, as anthropological evidence and as ciphers for undetermined narratives.

Howard Ursuliak has a fascination with those lonely commercial spaces that are at a distance from the busy agora. He has explored this phenomenon in two series of colour photographs; one that investigates singular shops and another that visits a dismal flea market. The flea market, set in what used to be a modernist supermarket, is depicted during quiet periods, when many of the tables of merchandise have been covered with assorted tarps, sheets and blankets. Previously positioned in a careful, if meagre, display, the bundled wares of *Untitled (bound brown table)* (1998) have now been transformed into doleful enigmas.

Recently Ursuliak has taken to producing black-and-white views of the backyards of city houses. These pictures are made just as the sun begins to rise, presumably before most of the residents are awake. If his earlier series located a geography peripheral to the market, the *Backyard Series* (1996–99) might be said to be performing the same operation with respect to time. These are pictures of the unproductive

dreamtime that escapes the rationalizations of the economy.

In his essay “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” Martin Jay identifies the three dominant visual modes operating in Western culture since the Renaissance. These are the Cartesian perspectivalism of the Renaissance, the Northern or Baconian “art of describing” and the baroque.

Photographic vision is clearly closest to, if not a product of, the second regime. Jay asserts that all of these visual modes are available to us as tools that can be exploited, even in ways that would seem contrary to the ideologies with which they were originally associated. It is already clear that digital technology lends itself superbly to the baroque. One etymology for the term *baroque* has it deriving from the Portuguese word for an irregularly shaped pearl. Jay characterizes baroque vision as anamorphosistic, erotic, multiple and bizarre. In contrast to the lucid, planimetric and fixed form of Cartesian perspectivalism, or the Northern “art of describing,” the baroque is a distorting, liquid mirror.

We have already grown accustomed to the liquid, magical effects of the digital baroque; Hollywood and MTV have wasted no time in exploiting them. Think of how clumsy photographic attempts to render Salvador Dalí’s “soft watches” were and how easy that job would be today for a nine-year-old child with an iMac. There is a certain irony in the reversal of technology and effect between the photographic and the digital. Photography is a “wet” technology for making “dry” pictures and digital imaging is a “dry” technology for making “wet” pictures. All of these Vancouver artists have opted for the “dry” planimetric products of an obsolete photography. A reportage of the quotidian is as viable and satisfying for them today as it was for the proto-photographic painters of the late 18th century.

This essay is not declaring a totally new tendency; the style it discusses has been evolving for centuries. The historic precedents for Realist art are legion—and obvious enough that they need not be catalogued here. Recent precedents are also many, but foremost among those having a direct bearing on the work of the Vancouver artists are the Becher school of German photographers, the painting of Gerhard Richter, Neo-Realist cinema, the American “New Color” and “New Topographics” photography of the ’70s, various important photographers from Walker Evans to Dan Graham and Robert Adams and some of the post-conceptual photographic art produced in Vancouver during the past several decades. The multiple returns to this Realist model can only be explained through specific analyses of the historical circumstances of each return. The full significance of this current return will reveal itself in time, but it seems appropriate to acknowledge it in view of the present obsolescence of photography and the inception of the digital. This eclipse may at least prompt new insights concerning the ontology of the photographic. ■

The exhibition “After Photography” appeared at Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver, 1999.