

Between the Tides - Photographs of Roy Arden

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Since 1991, Canadian artist Roy Arden has been making large color photographs that depict the city of Vancouver and its environs. Arden is not alone in turning a critical, realist eye on Vancouver's particular manifestations of modernity. Another native son, Jeff Wall, a friend and colleague of Arden's, gave what T. J. Clark called "the painting of modern life" new force through photographic means, and served as a catalyst for a narrative photographic practice whose practitioners include such local notables as Stan Douglas and Rodney Graham.

Arden's approach hovers somewhere between the pictorialism of early Modernists like Alfred Stieglitz and the more positivistic practices of documentary photographers like Walker Evans, who worked under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration. In the spirit of Evans (who appropriated the photojournalistic model to propose it as a new kind of art photography) and of photo-Conceptualists such as Edward Ruscha, Dan Graham, and the Bechers, Arden gazes directly at his subjects. In his work optical conventions such as perspective are viewed not as a restrictive "norm" to be subverted with gimmickry and darkroom manipulations, but as a device for the construction of a rationalized vision. At the same time, these deadpan images with their naturalistic color and attention to composition evoke the prephotographic or protophotographic tradition of "realist" painted representations. Presented in the gallery as singular, large tableaux, they demand to be regarded in the same manner as paintings. Arden thus attempts to reclaim painting as a vehicle for serious historical, philosophical, and political expression, while giving it the documentary weight particular to the photographic.

During the '80s, Arden produced a body of work in which he used archival images to examine photography's role in the construction of personal and historical memory. The incarceration of Japanese Canadians during World War II, the civil disturbances of the Depression, the oppression of the aboriginal population, and other historic events rise to the surface of these images like the return of the repressed. While his new pictures place Arden in the role of the photographer as recorder of everyday reality, they continue to focus on historical and socioeconomic conditions. Clearly aware of photography's pivotal role not only in the emergence of pictorial modernism but in the construction of historical consciousness, Arden has turned, in his recent series, to documenting the shift from one kind of economic structure to another.

Fascinated with the instant of change and highly skeptical of the idea of progress, Arden often begins with the ruins of modernity - the detritus of contemporary urban life. One of the most poignant images in his recent New York solo show, a large color photograph entitled *House in Strathcona Alley, Vancouver, B.C., 1995*, depicts a decrepit worker's "cottage" in the center of "Terminal City" (a name Vancouver earned as 'the end of the line' on the transcontinental railway). The small wood-frame bungalow, now boarded up and in the latter stages of decay, invokes the entire history of the resource economy that developed in that region of Canada - an economy dependent on a once bountiful forest. Constructed almost a hundred years ago, this shack is one of the many "company cottages" provided, free-of-charge, by lumber companies to their employees early in this century. Arden captures this hope-filled symbol of a previous era just before its scheduled demolition, marking the shift from a resource-based economy to a postindustrial one, it serves as an allegory of the origins of the present.

Conjuring the very moment of change even more vividly, *Construction Site and Suntower, Vancouver, B.C., 1992*, shows a row of eight-story brick warehouses culminating in a grand building - the Suntower of the title, an exemplar of early-twentieth-century architecture that contrasts sharply with traces of contemporary constructions, no more than a decade old, easily discerned at the margins of the photograph. In the foreground, occupying half the picture plane, gapes an enormous construction pit at least four stories deep from whose center rises a heap of dirt as high as the warehouses in the background. A harbinger of the new as it cuts into the surface of past and present, the pit delineates the basement of an immense complex, several city blocks square.

Our economic future takes another form in five color photographs of brand-name household goods on display at a local WalMart. Unlike the Pop recommodification tactics of, say, Andy Warhol, Arden never takes his stuff out of the store, but it's been repackaged all the same. One cannot help but be struck by the stacks of bright red boxes of Tide, Ritz crackers, green Apple Jacks, and plastic chairs from some third-world factory, all vying for the consumer's attention. Neatly and decoratively stacked in four-foot cubes resting on plastic pallets, some of the items have been covered in Halloween decorations. In *WalMart Store, Burnaby, B.C., 1996 (Royale), 1996*, for instance, a cube made of Royale toilet-paper four-packs has been hollowed out in the center to accommodate a life-size cardboard outhouse, painted an autumnal ocher, its door adorned with a crescent moon. The juxtaposition of Halloween paraphernalia - with all its connotations of the harvest, not to mention its roots in superstition - and this ruthlessly rationalized retailing produces an illuminative flash of production so disproportionate to actual need that it has spun completely out of control.

Arden's 1996 "Basement" series continues his dystopian critique of progress. Recalling Nadar's photographs of the sewers and catacombs of Paris, "Basement," an ensemble of ten black and white and ten color photographs, scans the rejected objects that fill the bowels of the turn-of-the-century apartment building in which Arden lives. There is enough repetition and overlay among the images to suggest a cinematic sweep. It is as if the camera had panned around the room, like a detective surveying the scene of a crime. What has been left in this basement includes not only objects related to the maintenance of the building, but a plethora of consumer items discarded by tenants over the years. An ancient bottle of poison is juxtaposed with cans and a fuse box from the '30s and '40s. In another photograph, a '50s-style box for a non-stick frying pan epitomizes the cheery utopianism of that era. Yet another image depicts a record album from David Bowie's glam-rock period with its rehearsal of decadent fin-de-siecle aesthetics. Most of the older items pictured tend to be too small to identify accurately: there is a bottle of Banana Oil amid unknown substances and fixtures. One of the most striking images depicts a small round table on which rests an empty blue can of Crisco. Inside this can is a plastic yogurt container covered in grease, inside of which sits an equally greasy Vaseline jar. Here we have not one but three kinds of what is surely one of the lowest material substances. This marker of the base does more than simply symbolize the rejected and valueless objects in this basement; it also recalls the massive gravelike construction pits and condemned workers' cottages in Arden's other photographs. It is as if Arden's sensibility, with its redemptive approach to seemingly insignificant objects and the detritus of social life, represents not only a model of artistic praxis, but, even more urgently, the posture that photography must reflect if it is to continue to be relevant.