

Paragraphs

Shep Steiner

Things turn in the photography of Roy Arden; as a function of general economy in his landscapes and urban studies and, in a handful of powerful works, as a range of symptoms that afflict the viewer.

Alongside eyes-sores that strike or hook the eye and make it swell, beside a picture like *Pulp Mill Dump (#2), Nanaimo, B.C., (1992)* that smells like rancid meat on the bloat, Arden's unique aesthetic would have us single out the hunchback glance of *Hastings Street Sidewalk, Vancouver, B. C., (1995)*. This physiognomic curiosity reaches down within one to stir something like a forgotten stomach. Reading more like a paragraph written by the city than a photograph of the city, the work narrates an analytics of place that is felt far more than mapped. What reads in the wider corpus as a general prohibition against the figure is here spelled out as a poetic base and literary reference. Thus Malcolm Lowry:

*Beneath the Malebolge lies Hastings Street,
The province of the pimp upon his beat,
Where each in his little world of drugs or crime
Moves helplessly or, hopeful, begs a dime
Wherewith to purchase half a pint of piss—
Although he will be cheated, even in this.*

In *Hastings Street Sidewalk*, one takes the literary as a privative form of pleasure in place of the medium's controlling metaphors.

With scale the first hindrance — and a low ceiling, poor depth of field, lack of focus, and a plunging perspective that dumps one like a gutter ball in the street running close seconds — movement runs crosswise. Save the gloomy recess at left with its brick red facade, one has simply nowhere else to go, but out, right across grey concrete. Wary of an overhang jutting close overhead, one feels the photograph in one's face, as if pressing up against a cheek. Angry, begging and plain bored, boot rubber, butts, dirt and a flyer catch the eye; graffiti written over top a strangely forgettable (easily missed) genre scene with tree, sign post and receptacle, repel it.

Veritably loaded up with what the great Leonardo described as "every false relation and disagreement of proportion that can be imagined in a wretched work," the surface of this diminutive photograph embodies the pressure of something like watery eyes in a convulsive fit. Focussed in the joints of the concrete, a trail of hankies, a smeared and flattened bag crowns this miserable history of the street.