

Imagining the Real

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The story begins right at the bottom of the picture, where the shallow foreground of dirt, weeds and scattered debris is cut off by the top of a retaining wall, the raw edge of new development. From there the ground falls away precipitously and the eye lands in a cul-de-sac. A suburban street ends here in a concrete loop with new plantings and an old-fashioned lamppost in the centre. Beyond and slightly lower down the slope, all but filling the near view, sits the huge, white, steeply perched *Monster House, Coquitlam, B.C.* — a turreted folly with a basketball hoop attached to its three-car garage — that is the ostensible subject of Roy Arden's 1996 colour photograph.

Beyond the house, its neighbour and the fir trees behind, a panoramic vista unfolds in deep focus like one of those 17th-century Dutch landscape paintings that appear to map the world. The middle distance of the photograph opens over the vast Fraser Valley. Tall, white apartment towers rise up on the right, like a phantasmagoria at the edge of a lake. The suburban forest stretches as far as the eye can see into a pollution-tinged band of atmospheric haze. Towering above it all on the left, from across the border with the United States, is Mt. Baker's distantly visible, mirage-like, snowcapped peak.

The eye finally settles here, but it's the trip back that is important. Retracing the zigzagging diagonals of this complex composition re-establishes the link between the mountain pinnacle and the debris-strewn dirt of the foreground. It's in this direction that the descriptive narrative of Arden's photograph moves: from top to bottom or back to front, towards the picture plane and the viewer. The space travelled has social meaning and allegorical meaning, as well. To go from the highest to the lowest point in the picture is to conceptually move from an iconic image of the sublime in nature to an abject remnant of the natural. It is to move from an indistinct pictorialist ideal to a focused, realistic image of everyday life.

The passage across the image reads like the allegory of a fall presented with the matter-of-factness of Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*. But in fact the work's internal movement takes us in both directions, rising and falling, endlessly circulating on a vertical axis: between the elevated and the base, the high and the low.

Positioned between these dialectical poles, the "monster house" represents a historical moment, one in which the driving forces of society and history are busily shaping what the 44-year-old Vancouver photographer terms "the landscape of the economy." The balloon-frame monster house, an architectural type purpose-built to move foreign capital out of Hong Kong into Canada, is a recent Vancouver phenomenon. It is also a symbol of globalization, as well as of class. The landscape it inhabits is, likewise, at once actual and theoretical: the city of Greater Vancouver and, to borrow art historian T. J. Clark's phrase, the city as "a sign of capital."

Arden maps one city onto the other in a body of work that encompasses Vancouver's violent past and its forgetful present: the old, decaying, working-class neighbourhoods and the burgeoning suburban developments; the discount stores stocked with obsolescent goods and the growing landfills; the pockets of repressed wildness returning to the city and the receding natural world, uprooted and consumed by urban expansion. He takes his photographs on the derelict periphery of the downtown area, at the city's edges, in the industrialized margins that separate city and countryside, along the railway tracks and in the gutters.

It is in places like these, wherein all modern cities look the same, that the dynamics of change in late capitalism and the attendant entropy manifest themselves. Constantly in action, in and upon the landscape, these socioeconomic forces leave their marks on the everyday in the overlooked, the unsightly and the formless. Arden's photographs render these forces visible, intelligible. Driving the city in his car, he scouts locations in which to construct photographs that reveal the abstract operations of the economy.

One could say that taken as a whole Arden's work is about modernity as a continuing process, mapped on capitalism, its engine, whose history begins at roughly the same time as that of photography. Moreover, his photographs are framed conceptually by the traditions of painting, and by the nature, history and genres of camera work, including film. Over two decades, his practice has encompassed what could appear to be disparate bodies of work. However, Arden's concerns, though presented in diverse forms, have been remarkably consistent. They are also deeply seated, influenced not only by his teachers and their interest in the city as a subject (something that is shared among the Vancouver photo-conceptualists, of whom he is a younger member), but also by his upbringing.

Arden is the son of Finnish socialists who emigrated to Canada from a country exhausted by the Second World War, into which his father had been conscripted as a boy soldier. Because of his parents' experience, he says, "I realized I lived in history and if you don't pay attention, it will grab you from behind." Arden arrived in Canada in utero in 1957 and was born in Vancouver that October. He grew up on a noisy street in a blue-collar neighbourhood in East Vancouver, just across from industrial sites that lined the banks of the Fraser River. He went to high school with the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation carver Beau Dick: "Observing him at work, I learned what culture is," Arden says. Later on, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after studying religion and art history at Langara College, he studied at the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design) with Iain Baxter and Ian Wallace. He completed a Master's degree in 1990 at the University of British Columbia, under Jeff Wall.

Arden describes the "landscape of the economy" project as "an attempt to register the transformative effects of modernity." This might also be posed as the question —why are things the way they are?—that has driven his career. A considerable, if hardly exhaustive, overview comes together in three recent exhibitions: "Fragments, Photographs, 1981 – 85" and "Selected Works, 1985–2000," organized respectively by Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver and the Oakville Galleries in Oakville, where both shows were seen early this year, and "Terminal City," a travelling exhibition organized in 1999 by Centro de Fotografia at the Universidad de Salamanca in Spain. Several leitmotifs emerge from the work and, perhaps more importantly for an understanding of Arden's process, it becomes clear that each series of work has sprung from ideas about realism and montage that form the base of his practice.

In the digital, post-photography era, Arden remains committed to so-called straight photography, made with an evident awareness of film, television, advertising and the history of painting. His images are not staged, either on a set or in a computer extension of the darkroom. The fact that they stem directly from his experience is a philosophical matter: the model for his practice is reportage. By choosing this model, he acknowledges the influence of Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács, the Marxist literary critic, Atget and his German contemporary Heinrich Zille, Walker Evans and, of course, Wall, whom Arden credits with restoring credibility to realist photography after the critiques of the 1970s and 1980s. Wall has theorized Arden's work as photojournalism as art, while Arden's "reportage" underlines his active investigative stance, the sociopolitical content of his work and the relationship of the photograph as text to language.

"The lens is given the task of making discoveries," asserts Benjamin, who cites as the initial "discovery" Nadar's photographs of the Paris sewers, the first ever taken underground with artificial light. "With Atget," Benjamin writes, "photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance." Like Evans, for whom Atget was also an early model, Arden works within this tradition. Moreover, in the ways that he constructs a picture that he "finds," one can see an equivalent of "the conceptual disclosure and presentation of causes and inter-connections" that, Lukács wrote, were for reportage the only sources of concreteness.

As it applies to Arden, then, reportage is a term that specifies that the photograph and its realism are constructions. Reportage first discovers and then exposes, both technically and figuratively, not only the telling incident but also its interconnectedness with broader meanings. "Finding" a picture is not so easy as it might seem, nor are Arden's photographs transparent. Their allusions peel back in layers: in a colour, a time of day, a quality of light, a compositional reference, an image that recalls a photographer, a painter or a writer. Their interconnections are achieved by variations on the concept of montage, which, as the photographer Alfred Kemény wrote in the 1930s, presents "opportunities — with regard to content, not just form — for uncovering *relationships, oppositions, transitions, and intersections of social reality.*"

One of Arden's compositional strategies parallels camera movement in film. At the same time that *Monster House* is inescapably related to 17th-century Dutch landscape painting, its structure can also be read in relation to a film sequence that moves from a foreground close-up to a medium shot to a long shot in deep focus, the last a hallmark of Neo-realist film. Indeed, Arden, who earned his living as a projectionist in repertory film houses while studying art in the 1970s, acknowledges the Neo-realist film director Pier Paolo Pasolini as an inspiration.

A similar suggestion of filmic movement is also used in *Basement* (1996), a single work comprising 20 photographs, 10 in black-and-white and 10 in colour, shot in long, medium and close-up views. This work is also a serial montage, a sequential form that uses juxtaposition and contradiction to call forth the interconnections among images, as well as the disjunctions or breaks between them. Echoing Nadar in the sewers, Arden "discovers" in *Basement*, which is flash-lit like an exposé, an image of the city's unconscious in the waste of overproduction and entropy.

With regard to "uncovering," however, it is Surrealism, filtered through the writing of Georges Bataille, the dark philosopher of the *informe* (the formless), and the startling, grotesque photographs of the German-born Parisian artist Wols, that paradoxically has had the profoundest effect on Arden's realism. For Bataille, photography functioned as the "base evidence" of his theory of base materialism, in which the abject or ignoble disrupts the vertical social hierarchy with its power to erupt from below: photography bears witness to "the lowest of the low."

In Arden's work, this idea performs a double function. On the one hand, it brings to the archival photographs in his appropriation works of the mid-'80s the sign of the Freudian repressed, as in vertical montages like *Rupture*. On the other hand, in the everyday "landscape of the economy," it calls upon photography's indexical trace to testify to the presence of the abject, the *informe*, the uncanny and the need to expel the other at the unstable base of the capitalist superstructure. The base evidence, in each case, whether historical or contemporary, uncovers the city of the unconscious and its repression of what it cannot acknowledge.

Arden's reading of Bataille is visible from the start, however, in "Fragments," presented at Oakville as a group of 37 square, colour photographs, winnowed from hundreds he considers his first mature body of work. These lush, colour-saturated pictures were made when Arden was in his 20s. As shown now, they present as serial montage a lyrical, Joycean portrait of the artist as a young man. The portrait touches upon his milieu of poet and artist friends, his travels to Geneva, Berlin and Paris, and also his formation as a photographer. In the first photograph of the group, a self-portrait, Arden bends over his Rolleiflex on its tripod, with his sport jacket pulled over his head in the manner of a 19th-century photographer's black cloth.

This allusion to the black cloth; the pictures of shop windows, discarded chairs, antique clocks and architectural subjects; and the overall sense given by these Symbolist photographs of a flâneur's pleasure in the city streets point to Baudelaire's concept of the "painter of modern life," to Atget as practitioner and to Benjamin as modernity's philosopher. The European city of the flâneur is conflated with Vancouver. In the punning *Life Magazines* (#1), Vancouver lies a reference to photojournalism; in *Pruned Trees* (#1), Vancouver to violent Wolsian light and the arboreal subjects of Wols' tachiste paintings. The latter foreshadows the livid, uprooted *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C.* (1991). The "Fragments" of stained floors, peeling façades, derelict public men's toilets and water-filled gutters, the beginnings of an exploration of the *informe* that culminates in the mordant series "Terminal City," take Arden deeper into Bataille's neighbourhood.

The photographs of blue sky that comprise the top half of the nine vertical diptychs of *Rupture* might refer at once to the “bright blueness” in Bataille’s novel *Blue of Noon*, symbolic of the continuity of Being, and to Benjamin’s “time of the now.” Below this realm, exerting pressure on the dividing line, are images of struggle and suffering. These are archival newspaper photographs taken in Vancouver on Bloody Sunday in June 1938. On that day, police quelled a protest by single, unemployed, homeless men, who, to qualify for relief, had to live outside the city in Unemployment Relief Camps, and were seeking their right to return and work. Tear-gassed and beaten, the men literally are put down, into the gutter and the street.

In the editing, cropping and sequencing of *Rupture*, Arden, with allusions to Masaccio’s *Expulsion From the Garden of Eden* and George Grosz’s bandaged soldiers, portrays class warfare, returning the repressed memory to the city that has forgotten it. Overhead, the blue sky is marked by the lens, the camera’s witnessing eye. The idea of the photographic archive as a vast compilation from which repressed history can be retrieved is expressed even more emphatically in *Abjection (second version)* (1992). In this set of 10 vertical panels, the archival newspaper photographs are from 1942, of Japanese men at a muddy fairground, where they have been forced to turn in their vehicles before being banished from the coast to internment camps. Along the edge of each archival image, set within a black field of exposed photo paper, is an accession number that allows for its storage and retrieval.

The notion of the archive, then, contains the possibility of recovering the evidence of many such events. *Rupture* and *Abjection* are a kind of “history painting” that inverts the elevation of a cleansed cultural memory. In 1990, when he started work on the “landscape of the economy,” Arden completed 10 serial montages based on otherness, banishment and abjection. Nine years later, he revisits these ideas in the context of the “landscape” work in “Terminal City,” for on the other side of the coin, fresh evidence can and must be added to the archive.

This discrete series of 16 black-and-white photographs leads cinematically down a rock-strewn path, across the tracks, past 19th-century working-class houses surrounded by vegetation, to heaps of trash, lean-tos, mattresses and nests of rags and refuse in the woods. The camera, which begins with a long establishing shot, moves in steadily, tracking along a horizontal axis. The last three photographs are extreme close-ups, one of a battered death’s-head of a typewriter (an homage to Bataille?) and two that fuse the abject and the informe in muddy, oil-soaked earth pocked with water-filled footprints and littered with used condoms. Although without people, this view is not only of the city’s margins but of the marginalized, akin to Atget’s album of the “Zoniers,” to Marx’s lumpenproletariat, to Bataille’s “lowest of the low.”

Arden has not often photographed people. There are the portraits in “Fragments”; the solitary man walking on *Cordova Street, Vancouver, B.C.* (1995), an anomic inversion of the flâneur who looks like a character from a Jeff Wall; and the men at the strike hut in *‘Locked-Out’ Workers, Vancouver, B.C.* (1994). However, the focus of Arden’s most recent video (a new medium for him) is a young man, sitting marooned with his belongings, like a figure out of Caravaggio or Goya, on a concrete island in the encircling traffic. Arden shot *Citizen* (2000) from a car, moving around the man and holding him in the viewfinder until, aware of the camcorder, the man turns his head to make eye contact before continuing the arc of his own gaze.

At this eureka moment, the citizen, caught by the camera halfway between an upright posture and the horizontality of sleep and death, is transformed by his own action from an object into a subject who is capable of enacting change. When this happens, it seems the actualization of what Arden always looks for with his camera: the metaphor, the allegory, the validation of art that is present in the real.