

## REPORT

### Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival

TORONTO

MAY 1–31, 2014

In its eighteenth year, Toronto's annual CONTACT festival has grown to become one of the world's largest photography shows. As much as the festival offered something for everyone, CONTACT's current burnished incarnation served up few surprises or thrills of discovery. This year's festival theme of (the construction of) "identity" also did little to frame or unify the widely disparate artworks on display.

Spread across almost two hundred venues throughout the city, exhibitions ranged from a public installation of expanded full-length, full-color portraits hanging on bustling King Street, to photographic prints opaquely paying homage to Josef Albers and Sol LeWitt installed in an out-of-the-way gallery. As expected, CONTACT also featured portfolio reviews with gallerists, a "how to" on curating and collecting photographs for the private collector, and dozens of events ranging from opening parties and after-parties to public talks by curators and artists. High-profile corporate prizes, such as the Scotiabank Photography Award (valued at CAD\$50,000) and the much less lucrative BMW Exhibition Prize (worth CAD\$5,000) rounded out the festival's offerings.

The featured solo exhibition for the year, at the Ryerson Image Centre, was of Stan Douglas's work—one of the perks of his 2013 designation as the Scotiabank Photography Award winner. Famous for his use of compositing and digital technologies as well as his use of staging devices to portray impossible yet seemingly truthful portraits, the exhibition displayed Douglas's most iconic works. *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001), a mammoth sixteen-foot photographic panorama, captures the run-down, seedy businesses and flop hotels on one of Vancouver's most infamous blocks in skid row. The markers of both contested urban space and extreme poverty are evident on both the number of "FOR SALE/LEASE" signs on the Edwardian-era buildings and in the harsh neon fluorescent lights illuminating clinical powder-blue, low-income

living spaces. Also on display in the exhibition were the iconic series *Der Sandmann* (1995) and *Detroit Photos* (1999), in which Douglas grapples with the unreal physicality of staged sets (in the former) and the weirdly hyperreal set-like realities of dramatically repurposed, formerly abandoned spaces (in the latter).

The exhibition turned its attention to human-based possibilities for staging and construction with its series *Disco Angola* (2012), including the seemingly documentary *Kung-fu Fighting, 1975*. In this photograph, a bespectacled African American man in shiny brown polyester slacks vigorously punches the air in the foreground, to the mild bemusement of a white man clad in V-neck T-shirt and black velvet pants seated in the background. All of the markers in this photograph—from the fashion choices of its actors, to the décor and furniture of the surroundings, to the race of the individuals and their respective coded roles—suggest that this photograph was taken, as the title suggests, in 1975. It is a playful intervention that unearths the past and disrupts the present, particularly today, with 1970s hipster fashion resurfacing with a vengeance. Guest curator Robert Bean took pains to step the participant through Douglas's depictions of the unreality of things, then places, then persons. This curating of Douglas's often dislocating, unsettling works made for a curiously informative, user-friendly experience.

Meanwhile, the attempts by Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) to engage wholeheartedly with the theme of identity felt stilted at times, as did the presentation of the University of Toronto Art Centre's *Through the Body: Lens-Based Works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists*. While the MOCCA's exhibition of a number of international photographers working on different aspects of representation was scattered in focus, *Through the Body* was uneven and superficial. Neither offered a satisfying engagement with the nuance or the multiplicity of identities inherent in identity construction. Perhaps most clumsy was MOCCA's presentation

of Tomoko Sawada's series *OMIAI* (2001). The series was displayed as thirty studio portraits laid out under glass in a cabinet case. Each image featured the photographer clad in various costumes as part of a Japanese cultural tradition of marital matchmaking, in which the expressed interest of a husband-to-be in a particular series of studio portraits of his intended fiancée precipitates the arrangement of a meeting to discuss marriage. The effect of the cabinet display of studio portraits was of flat amusement at the quaint cultural tradition that most viewers likely did not share.

Photographer Chun Hua Catherine Dong's portraits in her *Husbands and I* (2010) series similarly drew on existing stereotypes of Chineseness. Her unsmiling portraits draw from the easily recognizable trope of a Chinese mail-order bride, out of place in her festive red jacquard cheongsam and unhappy in an unbalanced power relationship with her new, white husband in a new, white land. This ham-fisted presentation was unfortunately made more problematic during Dong's bed-in performance at the University of Toronto Art Centre with curator Matthew Brower, during which the clearly non-Chinese Brower painfully reinforced multiple levels of power imbalance between curator and artist, male and female, white and nonwhite, as he asked Dong about her practice, and she, bra-clad and flirting with the audience, patiently and dutifully answered his questions. The awkward performance, staged in a bed in the gallery space, neither troubled existing power structures nor enriched the viewing experience of the works.

The standout work in *Through the Body* was Ma Qiusha's *Us* (2010), a three-channel video of men and women dressed only in connected white sheaths, tearing away from each other to exit a white-walled gallery space, with the tearing resulting in the departing party's various states of dress and (in some instances) naked undress. The work was all the more intriguing for its non-actor participants' reactions, with some attempting to cover others or themselves as the fabric tore away from their bodies, expressing clear discomfort at the process. Others of the group looked

on with some curiosity, and yet others, dispassionately. In the act of tearing away from the group, mini-groups formed and reformed to create different communities.

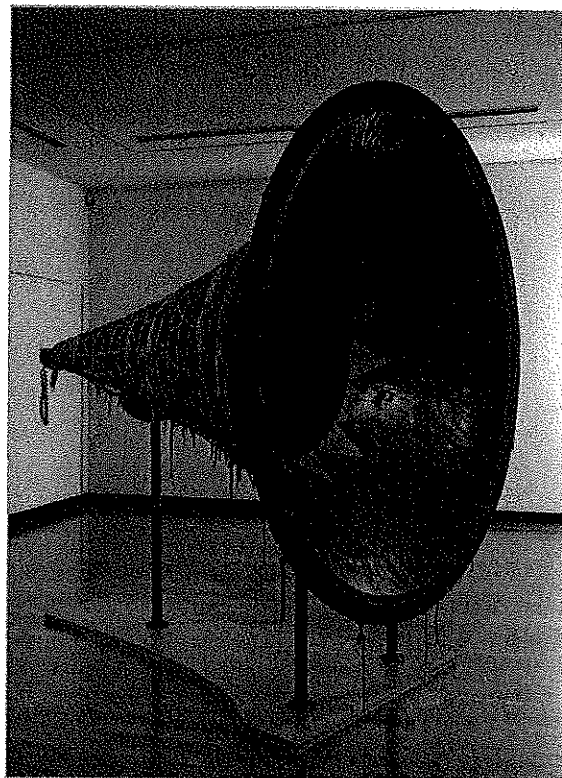
Gordon Parks's iconic photographs of the lived experiences of African Americans in the era of segregation, selected from various series and dates, offered documentary weight to the festival's central question of constructed identity, while the inclusion of his photographs portraying a very white Canadian existence served to reinforce the stark differences between the lived everyday experiences of each of these groups. Similarly, Rebecca Belmore's performances and video work at the Justina M. Barnicke gallery helped ground the question of "identity" in lived, historical context. An older work, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), still resonates, even through the mute presence of the enormous birchbark sculpture in the gallery. The work was created to function as a mouthpiece and broadcast for aboriginal self-determination, an issue which continues to be highly charged, particularly during land use and access negotiations for resource extraction.

Other works did not engage with the central question of identity construction at all. Jessica Eaton's series *Cfaal (Cubes for Albers and LeWitt)* (2011–13), on display at the Jessica Bradley gallery, eschewed any specific references to "identity" in favor of a formalist approach, with her images appearing more closely aligned to painting than photography. Her works, depicting multi-colored, overlapped cubes, are created painstakingly by using filters and multiple exposures of white cubes, with overlays and color creating the illusion of depth and a painterly hand in the final printed, magnified photographs. The visual effect of these vibrant color-block cubes is reminiscent of the high modernist work of Josef Albers or Sol LeWitt, with the nod to both made obvious by the title of her series itself. Eaton's approach playfully recalls photography's historical argument for the lack of distinction between photography and painting.

Scott McFarland's works at the Art Gallery of Ontario also engage in the

possibilities and contradictions of photography itself. His meticulous and highly constructed *Sugar Shack, Caledon, Ontario (study 3)* (2013) and his *Wortley's Wiggle, Caledon Ski Club, Mississauga Rd., Caledon, Ontario* (2012) served as exercises in visual narration, with more obvious ties to the "Vancouver School" of photoconceptualism, such as those underlying Douglas's own obsessions. In *Wortley's Wiggle*, McFarland seamlessly stitches together a winter scene on the left with a spring one on the right, to create an apparently single-frame, impossible panorama. The effect is oddly cinematic, as movement is created by the suggestion of a visual narrative trajectory from left to right—from winter, to spring—and recalls the moving panorama, largely forgotten in the history of photography.

The exhaustive nature of looking was also evident in Aleesa Cohene and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's video installation *The Same Problem 5* (2014). In this work, constructions-within-constructions were presented, as scenes from well-known period piece movies were edited and stitched together to bear witness to a repeated, consistent angst. In one sequence, actor Hugh Grant stares glumly out a window, obviously consumed by some weighty thought; the snippet then cuts to actor Ralph Fiennes's silhouette against a different window, his motionless back suggesting the same brooding deliberation. The amusing sixteen-minute video pieced together clips from a variety of movies set in similar socioeconomic classes and historical time periods that asked remarkably similar questions of belonging and purpose while offering no explanatory ground other than the internal logic of the film itself.



*Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991) by Rebecca Belmore; collection of the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid

A cross between a shrewd art fair and an educational public offering promoting greater photographic appreciation, CONTACT walked the fine line between crass commercialization and a wide-scale promotion of the photographic medium in all of its forms and engagements. The experimental, rough quality of some of the photography featured in past festivals is long gone, replaced by polished, high-gloss work and a carousel of bloodless networking opportunities and events and talks. The effect is that CONTACT functions increasingly as an economic powerhouse for gallerists and as a tourism boost for the City of Toronto, rather than as a vehicle for photographic experimentation and discovery.

CYNTHIA FOO lives and works in Toronto.

follow us!  
@afterimage\_mag

Copyright of Afterimage is the property of Visual Studies Workshop and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.