

ABOVE, BELOW, BEFORE AND AFTER

by Jon Knowles

Gestalt psychology imagines that the patterns of people's experiences are something going on in their heads. It imagines that people have images of the tree in their minds, but why stop there? Get rid of the subject as a container of images and thoughts. It's all just as much out there as it is in you! You can only make this partition between object, subject, and medium through logical analysis, whereas spontaneous life is without clear divisions. The gestalt ontology is in the world. – Arne Naess

Inside Sporobole, there is a generous amount of wear and tear on the floors and ceilings. Probably much of this occurred in advance of this becoming a gallery space, no doubt a reason for the “white washing” of the ceiling beams and cross supports. If you look up, notice the hooks, screws and bits of fishing line still evident on the ceiling. On the floor there are equal numbers of clues as to previous activity: paint marks, plaster leftovers, scratches, gouges in the wood planks etc. Taken together, these hundreds of display decisions and final executions towards the mounting of an exhibition – the indexical – amount to a distressed patina that exists in parallel to these works here by Lorna Bauer. This architectural fact offers an intriguing complement to the aesthetic of the pictures and video which make up the exhibition, something like a neil young aesthetic. This is my own idiosyncratic short hand for the following: distressed, worn, rugged, worked-up, melancholic, tattered, rusty, dishevelled, tired, possessing the shapes of time . . . the entropic.

These blemishes of architectural situations also speak of the legacy of a less examined issue around an artist-run centre, that is, their nature as incubators for risk taking, trial and error, tests, accidents, failures, all subsumed by an experimental dimension. Over the last few decades, too many of these types of spaces have fallen prey to a more polished and deliverable artistic practice and positioning, something a lot less like a wilful who-gives-a-shit ethos of a neil young aesthetic and more like a cynical professionalism that gives up and glad hands its way to more comfy and dominant

interiors, making the pictures that go along with that life. This exhibition seems to offer an emphatic corrective to such a tendency.

It is not necessarily about what's in the frame but what thoughts and reflections emerge when you consider both what is inside presently and what ultimately lies outside the frame. The idea of going beyond also comes to a limit, and many frames are collapsed in this process of discovery. It is not just the vastness of space caught in the frame, but the space between artworks – the proximity, or distance, the manner of presentation on a particular wall, its bareness, the type of wall used, whether it is a wall left from a previous exhibit, whether permanent or temporary, modified, cut open, the spaces deemed empty – completely relevant as part of the experience here at Sporobole. So it becomes an issue of installation. It's all there: above, below, before and after. There is a deeply felt orientation to things, not only the space, but the ordering of things in the pictures and all the trials that have gone on beforehand, before arriving at this resolute manifestation of photography. A space for thought is activated.

What is the subject of these pictures though? I would say they are depictions of the residue left over from an action, the activity around taking a photograph. A new series of images entitled *What Could Appear In The Morning Mist* (which doubles as the show's added second sentence title) consists of a photographic diptych comprised of two deep black fields of empty space. Upon closer inspection of the images, a faint reflection of a photographer surfaces and presents itself. These two images speak to the artist's interest in discovering the documentary photographer embedded in the reproduction of an artwork, be it in a magazine, on the internet, etc. This diptych is an attempt within the legacy of photography to slow down the viewer to a near freeze, with the added intent of making visible the artwork's disseminated/mediated life through reproduction. Sometimes there is an extension to this, where photography finds its corollary – shooting a gun – and this activity seems to be the built-in metaphor for a reflexive tendency, where both camera and gun possess a trigger.

possess a trigger. The objects or situations that are presented to us in Lorna Bauer's pictures rest with an agreeable amount of equilibrium typical of a frontal depiction of an event. This emphasis marks a strong centrality in many of her works. Usually these events take place around a real or imagined landscape of some kind (a tabletop can also be a landscape). In this game of point and click, or point and shoot, there is an arduous amount of decision-making going on. There is waiting, and deliberating, and editing out. These pictures fluctuate between an infinite space where the subject matter doesn't so much float on a black ground but rather is pulled down by gravity, and then projects its representational contours beyond the frame into an imagined, hypothetical, propositional and ideational space. The politics of looking are not far away from this schematic rendering of a need for an orientation. Sometimes this is simply a representation of the mind's visualization of a remote geography (virtual). Other times it is the literal and straightforward depiction of a thing. A case in point is *All The Material*, a meticulously corralled pile of broken glass lit atop a jet-black ground. If morphological antecedents were central, this could be the architectural model for Robert Smithson's proposal for a monumental glass island located off the Georgia Straight in British Columbia, as viewed with night vision goggles. Its more definitive story though is made manifest after examining the title of the work – *All The Material* – and its companion work on the television screen just a kitty corner away. This all seems to be everything. The image *All The Material* has a companion entitled *Four Glasses* which is a still life of drinking glasses and in one absolute instant, a minute or so in, all the glasses suddenly break. This is the element in photography that Lorna Bauer seems to be toying with, this perfected moment. It's not a visual trick per se, as in Hollywood saloon gun fights, but close to it. *All The Material* is the evidence photographed on the floor of this perfectly executed achievement of breaking glass, presumably after many hours of failed attempts. These pictures are never what they seem at first, there is always an above, below, before and after. The instantaneous of the act has a sequencing and causality. The context of studio toil is everything, and the pictures are acting like a relay signal between each other.

Let's return again to this question of the event in the picture, the thing that is asking us to think about what has happened *inside the frame*, and invariably the *outside* as well. Brian O'Doherty speaks instructively about the internal logic of early modern art, diverging from the typical assumptions of 20th century art. I think this passage from *Inside the White Cube* is very helpful:

Cubist paintings are centripetal, gathered toward the center, fading out toward the edge. (Is this why Cubist paintings tend to be small?) Seurat understood much better how to define the limits of a classic formulation at a time when edges had become equivocal. Frequently, painted borders made up of a glomeration of colored dots are deployed inward to separate out and describe the subject. The border absorbs the slow movements of the structure within. To muffle the abruptness of the edge, he sometimes papered all over the frame so that the eye could move out of the picture – and back into it – without a bump.

Contained by the frame but never compromising verisimilitude, the picture *What Is Not But Could Be If* undergoes a fantastic shift in depicting the material of an edge between wall and floor. Simultaneously, what one wants to see in the image is a foggy picturesque landscape, putting the viewer in a boat or some far off vantage point overlooking an unknown destination. In reality, though, this photo represents the bottom edge between the wall and floor of a cyclo, the backdrop used in commercial photography studios to provide a curved wall to isolate and contain the large subject matter of a commercial photography shoot. In this case, the floor is dirtied from all the footsteps of previous assistants' past activity, creating a detectable ground, hinting at the verifiable process involved in the production of other photos shown in the exhibit. If you accept this discursive element in the show, then this tight framing has been collapsed, and something emerges for a brief moment formulating a politics of seeing that allows a title like "What Is Not But Could Be If" to be understood more as a question. *What is not but could be if?*

The work has only just started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Knowles was born in Oshawa, Ontario and has been living in Montreal since 2005. He studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (Halifax), The Cooper Union (New York City), and Concordia University (Montreal). Knowles frequently collaborates with Michael Eddy and Robert Knowles under the name Knowles Eddy Knowles. Jon Knowles' projects are characterized by an interdisciplinary approach. In his work, there is often a synthesis of formats - photo, text, video, audio, found object, painting, performance, sculpture - which ultimately results in installation. Knowles adopts and reconfigures strategies with reference to Conceptual Art and Appropriation Art, which suggests that the meaning of a work comes out of the context, multiple connections and by the potential interpretations arising from the work itself, its references, or the materials used. With information gleaned from pop culture, fine art and other fields he weaves together bundles of narrative where perception, fact, and remembered things arrive at a material form.

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