On (Un)Truths of Photography

A Discussion with Photographer and Visual Artist Richard-Max Tremblay

Richard-Max Tremblay with Nancy Pedri

Abstract

This contribution is an interview with Canadian award-winning photographer and painter, Richard-Max Tremblay. Through a series of questions and answers that draw from both Tremblay's personal philosophy and visual art practices, it approaches photographic untruth through the hands-on experience of a visual artist who has devoted a great part of his career to exploring the relationship between truth/untruth, seen/unseen, expression/suggestion. Readers unfamiliar with Tremblay's work will greatly benefit from the inclusion of several of his art works.

Résumé

Cette contribution est un entretien avec le peintre et photographe canadien Richard-Max Tremblay, souvent primé. Dans ces échanges au sujet de la philosophie personnelle de Tremblay tout autant que de ses pratiques d'art visuel, il s'agit d'appréhender la notion de non-vérité photographique à travers l'expérience directe d'un artiste visuel qui a consacré une grande part de sa carrière à explorer la relation entre le vrai et le non vrai, le vu et le non vu, l'expression et la suggestion. Cet entretien permettra à ceux qui ne le connaissent pas de découvrir le travail de Tremblay et de se plonger dans plusieurs de ses œuvres.

Keywords

photographic practice; photographer; photography and painting; intention; fiction.

Nancy: *Let's jump right in, shall we? May I ask you to address what you understand to be the untruths of photography*?

Richard-Max: Photography has many faces… and masks… and truth is as evasive as perception itself.

There is depiction. A photograph of John A. Schweitzer, let's say (an example you know well), speaks "truly" that the person seated in front of the camera is that person indeed. This said…

Scientists may very well use a microfilm of a cell to study its structure or other real aspects of its existence, and that type of photographic work is about truth. This is the documentary aspect of photography.

But the documentary has many faces other than the clinical one, like, for instance, the type of documentary practiced by war photographers. They record the "truth" of events, but the photographic images they produce are subjective statements. They are critical and aim to produce particular emotions in viewers.

They also invite numerous questions about what the photographer wants to transmit or what his or her intentions are. The photographer can only trust what the camera sees, and it sees what the eye cannot see. Therefore, decisions have to be taken before and after the release of the shutter, and those decisions will be taken according to the photographer's intentions. And, the photographic process does not end here. The spectator can receive the emotions intended, but can also question those intentions ... including the kind of emotion the photographer aims to convey.

In this sense, photographs are fictions. The act of taking a photograph implies decision making and a distance from the subject photographed; it is an appropriation of sorts.

However, fiction is a vision of the real: it produces a specific reading of something (Well, in this context, this is my definition anyway!!).

Can truth be fiction and, inversely, can fiction be truth?

When I contemplate this question, I remember reading about the debate between Plato and Aristotle on the subject of fiction (poetry). For Plato, fiction is a lie. Aristotle's reply sounded roughly like this: yes, perhaps fiction may not be the truth, but it relates what may happen.[1] This sentiment is also attributed to Picasso, and repeated and quoted by so many people: "Art is a lie that tells the truth." Such is the case with a photograph, even when it is not "art" per se.

Philosopher Henri Bergson also said something that I consider when I look at art, including a photograph or, for that matter, anything, in fact. He says that when we look at an object, we don't really see the object, but the conventions interposed between the object and us.

In the end, I am left asking, what is truth? We know about some truths, like the world's Climate Crisis. But, this truth, like all truths, has hundreds of windows from which we can view it, so to speak. All are bound to provide only a part of the whole, making it virtually impossible to grasp the truth in its entirety.

When looking at travel photographs, my photo souvenirs, or family archives, I often realize that a material photograph replaces the true moment. Our memory is vague, and somehow the photograph becomes a replacement, a substitute for our actual memory. The photograph becomes the memory, and this shift of

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[1] In French: « La fiction porte atteinte à la vérité, au bénéfice de l'hypothèse » (quoted by Hubert Damisch in an interview with Alain Veinstein, *Du jour au lendemain*, France Culture, 3rd July 2012).

memory gives rise to fiction.

Let's return to the photograph of John A. Schweitzer. My only souvenir of that moment is the photograph itself. I remember almost nothing else from that day, apart from the fact that I asked John to choose a chair from his collection of chairs before photographing him. The only truth of this photograph, in my sense, is that the person you see depicted is really John; the rest is my "fiction." (The photograph doesn't say whose chair it is and where the photo had been taken.) My intention was only to suggest or provoke some sort of response in relation to the pose and the decision to place John precisely in this situation (also the decision to use black and white). I did not know what would be the response of any spectator. All these choices that influence the individual aspects of the portrait are potential questions a spectator may ask: why this and why that?

In my practice as an artist, I know that truth is always hidden, because I have to invent it. I always like to say that **photography is a blind art**, because the eye cannot stop time at, let's say, 1/125th of a second or whatever shutter speed is being used. In this sense, the camera captures something the eye cannot possibly see. This is particularly so when it is done in black and white: our eyes don't see in black and white. And, so once again, the photographic image is fiction.

Every fraction of a second is different from the fraction before and from the fraction after.

We only see in the continuity of time. As a result, the photographer is always a "gambler," clicking away at a subject hoping that the camera will capture something that will make sense in the end. How often do we press the button only to discover that our subject's eyes are closed, a state that happened while the mirror inside the camera was lifted up at the same time as the shutter speed was released?

Despite this uncertainty, a photographer has to trust the camera, which serves as his or her accomplice, and make decisions according to what that camera in his or her hands can do. It is only after the camera has captured what the eye cannot that the photographer's critical eye starts to select and choose.

This means a photographer has to make critical decisions **before the photographic act**: choosing a subject, deciding the conditions in which to take the photograph and dealing with those conditions and determining light and shadow, camera pre-settings, speed, aperture, and so forth. There are also decisions to make **after the photographic act**: selecting the image; judging the quality of contrast, values, luminosity, and composition; and making adjustments or other corrections or alterations required to give the image its impact. These decisions are necessary because when the camera acts, when the shutter is released, when that photographic moment occurs, **the photographer is blind.**

So, where does truth lie in this process?

Another aspect of what truth can be in photography is related to its use in the legal justice system. A photograph can only provide proof of something up to a certain point. More and more, in trials, photography is dismissed as proof of a concrete truth. Over the last 20 to 30 years, the use of photography in a legal context has acquired an aura of uncertainty. This is partly because everyone knows how software like Photoshop can manipulate photographic images, transforming what was captured into something else. Photographs are purposefully rendered fiction, thus rendering them false in terms of the legal system's requirements for truth.

Once again, we must ask what photographic truth is, and recognize it as a volatile notion at best.

Nancy: *Can you please address the interaction between photography and painting that characterizes much of your photographic practice? I am thinking of your* Soubresauts *series* (1994)*, where the interaction between photography and painting is tangible. Does the mixing of these two mediums speak to questions of photographic truth?*

Richard-Max: The interaction between photography and painting characterizes both my photographic and painting practices. I would like to talk about both aspects, and address what each practice does to the other.

True, in a way, as you mention, the series *Soubresauts* has to do with the question of truth; however, to grasp better how, we will need to step back and consider the premise informing that project.

I started to do portraits in the early '80s. At the time, I had just come back home to Montreal from London where I was pursuing my postgraduate studies in painting at Goldsmith's College. As a young student, I had to hide to do my paintings; my father was against my studying fine arts, and so I set up my studio in the basement of my grandmother's house. The complicity and support of my mother and grandmother allowed me to pursue, quite happily, my studies in painting.

Back in Montreal in 1981, at first, I took up photography with friends as a hobby. Very early after that and after seeing a major retrospective of the work of Irving Penn in New York (MOMA), a desire to do portraits overtook me. The way Penn apprehended portraiture very much moved me!

 When I resumed my painting practice a few months later and as I was getting more and more involved in portrait photography, I started to focus on figures. While photographic portraiture remained a hobby, so to speak, I started to understand how the two artistic practices were becoming intertwined in my own work.

A few years later, after reading the French version of Samuel Beckett's last publication, *Stirrings Still* (in French, *Soubresauts*, published in 1989, the year of his death), I had an intuition that I could visually address the book's simple idea, creating an intermittent dialogue between lightness and darkness, life and death, or exploring the uncertainties of one's consciousness and existence.[2] The French word *Soubresauts* relates to the jolts, the repetitious unintentional jolts or death throes experienced before passing.

To proceed with this series, I started to photograph close-ups of faces, anonymous faces, to which I added markings with pastel and paint. I talked earlier about the blindness of the photographer. Painting on a photograph meant giving back to the photograph what it was missing, namely, the photographer's (the artist's) sight and intention. In other words, it served to relieve the artist of his "blindness" and give him the power to act on the photographic image. In this sense, it enacted a process of stepping even further into fiction.

The full *Soubresauts* series spanned four years, from 1993 to 1997. It is comprised of 84 images, all small formats ranging from 8 x 10 in. (20 x 26 cm.) to 16 x 20 in. (40 x 50 cm.) (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). This was the first body of work where I thought I found a way to intertwine and create a dialogue between the two visual art practices.

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[2] It is worth mentioning that Beckett wrote both English and French versions.

Figure 1. *Soubresauts #54*, 1997, oil and pastel on photograph, 26 x 20 cm. (10 x 8 in.)

Figure 2. *Soubresauts #83*, 1997, oil and pastel on photograph, 26 x 20 cm. (10 x 8 in.)

The *Soubresauts* series introduced a kind of osmosis between photography and painting in my practice. From that moment on, and as the years went by, all of my work as a painter benefited from my photographic practice. When I think of a concept for a painting, I develop the initial idea through photography and then eventually reintroduce it into the realm of painting.

As a result, my paintings aim to push photographic "blindness" a step further: they address the impossibility of grasping the complexity of the world around us, from fake news to political lies that permeate social media, but also the news at large.

How do I proceed? By showing in a painting precisely what prevents us from seeing!
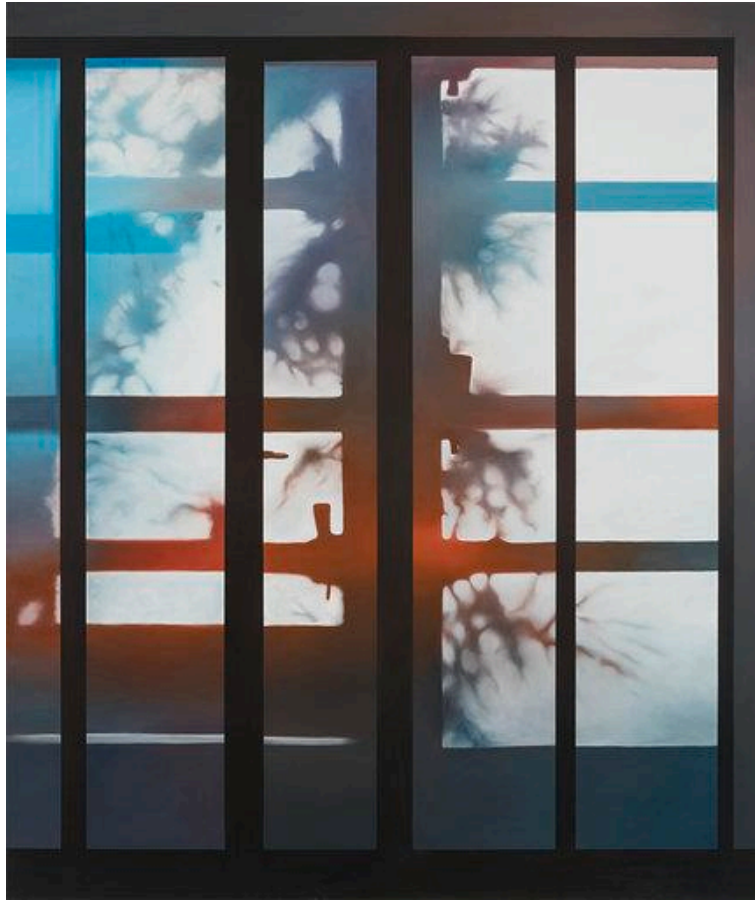
Figure 3. *Villa La Roche*, 2015, oil on canvas, 183 x 153 cm. (72 x 60 in.)

Villa La Roche, for example, shows a sort of landscape through a window, which itself is seen through another window or a glass door. The first glass door is a sharp black grid through which we can see another window lit by the outdoor bright daylight. That door/window is slightly out of focus so that the background that would supposedly show what is outside is so absolutely out of focus that it shows nothing but vague shapes that suggest a sky, clouds, and branches. Although the windows announce that there is something to see, we don't see what the windows should allow us to see. In other words, we see sharply, precisely, what prevents us from seeing further.

In my paintings, I have often used the notion of "depth of field," which essentially belongs to optics and photography, as an iconographic device. I do so to enhance the intention that underlines the concept of the work. The depth of field is what makes some parts of an image sharp and other parts blurred. What needs to be stressed in relation to the untruths of photography is that depth of field is foreign to the human eye; it is a lie.

This painting, like so many others, began to take shape with an intuitive photograph taken in the Villa La Roche in Paris, built by Le Corbusier in 1923-1925.

Figure 4. *On a Clear Day*, 2018, oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm. (72 x 48 in.)

A second painting, *On a Clear Day*, is about two curtains that are closed, but not entirely closed. They are closed just enough to allow the spectator to see a blue sky in the interstice, between the two curtain panels. These curtains are tools or pieces of the equipment I frequently use in my studio for all sorts of photographic purposes. One day, I decided -- again intuitively -- to play around with them, thinking they could be an interesting subject for a painting.

Again, these paintings reflect on the idea of "untruth," but approach it differently. In them, untruth is more about what prevents access to truth. My work has always been about various notions of truth.

Lastly, I wish to recall my first visit in a Museum, which is unforgettable. I was 17 years old. The day before, I had asked friends if someone would come with me to Montreal for the *Nuit de la poésie*, a major event where all of the best-known poets are invited to recite poems throughout the night. The event was coined a nationalistic protest using poetry and the literary elite to claim French speaking Quebec's political and cultural autonomy. That was not my concern; I just wanted to listen to poetry... I lived in Sherbrooke and was studying at the Sherbrooke CEGEP; hitchhiking was the only way for me to get to Montreal. My plan was to go to the poetry event and hitchhike back to Sherbrooke the next day. Nobody wanted to come with me, but I went all the same.

It was March 27, 1970. This was 50 years ago this year, and the event is subject to commemoration. The whole event was filmed and to this day can be seen on YouTube as a milestone in Quebec's literary and political history. The next day, before returning to Sherbrooke, I decided to visit the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal; I couldn't miss that opportunity.

The first painting I saw was a Pierre Soulages painting titled *5 février 1964*. It is a large-scale painting showing a huge black shape hiding what seemed to me to be elements of landscape. I was starting to paint, but didn't really know anything yet about painting. My "existential nature" saw something Pierre Soulages perhaps never intended, but something that was indeed very much a part of me...

Nancy: Okay, you have piqued my interest. What was that something that the Pierre Soulages painting triggered in you? What hidden truth did his work hold?

Richard-Max: Seeing Pierre Soulages' painting that day was like looking at my own life. At 17 years old, I could only apprehend painting with reference to myself and my own experience. I understood that art and painting could not be concerned only with style and aesthetics, which I knew nothing about. I thought they must also be about life; style and aesthetics are the "means" to talk about something else. I became obsessed with that idea, being naïve and idealistic as I suppose most young students are.

And, what was my life like? I would hide from my father who did not want me to be an artist. With the complicity of my mother, my aunts, and my grandmother, I was doing my paintings, as I said, in the basement of my grandmother's house. That said, this situation was not a source of trauma for me: I simply thought my father couldn't understand what painting meant for me. His prejudices were blinding, as they were for a majority of people back then living in locations as remote as the one where I'm from... Although it sounds very romantic, that period of hiding and painting was quite fun. When my father learned what I was up to and had to face the facts, he accepted my desire to pursue the practice of painting.

My aunt Gabrielle, who was also quite creative, was doing photography at that time. It was rare that a young woman living in the countryside would venture into developing her own negatives and print them. However, painting was my only focus at that time. Most of the photographs I engaged with as a teenager were scenes of family gatherings captured on color slides with a cheap Instamatic camera. In future family reunions, we were subjected to slide shows where we had to watch bad slides for an hour or even more. Not only were we engaging in fiction making, but pretty bad fiction at that. I saw nothing "true" about these bad photographs: everything was either painfully overexposed or underexposed, alerting me to the fact that these photographs did not communicate, capture, or narrate anything true about what I had experienced. It's no surprise that despite my aunt's reclusive devotion to doing black and white photography, there was nothing there to stimulate in me any sort of desire for the medium...

Basically, what *5 février 1964* said to me was that in the visual arts, something is always hiding something else. In this sense, truth constantly escapes us; it can't be grasped, like water in a sieve. Because each human being creates his own truth, truth can only be fiction. There are millions of truths... each held within the space between the image and each viewer.

Figure 5. *5 février 1964,* Pierre Soulages*,* oil on canvas, 236,5 x 300,5 cm. (93 x 118 in.).

In my final year (1975) as an undergraduate student, I did a painting in which Pierre Soulages is still very present:

Figure 6. *Untitled*, 1975, acrylic and collage on canvas, 214 x 122 cm. (84 x 48 in.).

When I saw the Pierre Soulages painting at 17, photography was not part of my world, so to speak. That painting, where 85% of the image is hidden behind what I saw as a black cloud, was telling me that there was something in it that I couldn't see. Only later did I understand that in both painting and photography there is always something that can't be seen. This observation led me to draw links between these two practices. This indecipherable hidden aspect was the mystery I was terribly attracted to, and my subsequent development as an artist pivoted around the quest of the indecipherable. From then on, the idea or concept of hidden truths became a sort of obsession for me.

Here, a memory persists. It's from Maurice Blanchot: "Devenir lisible pour chacun et pour soi-même indéchiffrable." How to translate this quote? I guess, "To become legible to everyone, and indecipherable to oneself," is close enough.

The experience of that painting also coincided with my first steps as a passionate reader of fiction. I started to read literature, poetry, and all I could find about art, including biographies and essays, for the many years to come, first as an undergraduate student, then during my post-graduate years at Goldsmith's. My voracious reading led me to develop numerous approaches in my practice, as with Beckett's *Soubresauts*.

I always tried to find something else than what I saw on the surface of paintings.

Nancy: Whereas several of your photographic portraits engage practices of erasure, such as the blurring or obscuring of figures and faces -- the addition of paint or the inclusion of masks, for example -- others present clear and sharply defined subjects. How do these differing practices speak to the evasiveness of photographic truth?

Richard-Max: It is always about the power of suggesting something that is not seen on the surface. A photograph is a "reality" that has to be worked upon. The fraction of a second on which the photograph depends is a very narrow opening into the vastness of what defines a human being. That's why a portrait cannot be about truth. Imagination and paths of recognition are needed to feed the perception. This is what the blurring, erasing, and obscuring of figures tend to reveal: the evasiveness (as one says) of photography.

Suggesting is what paint does in *Soubresauts # 54* (Figure 1). The circular paint work over the mouth of the face pictured suggests something that is open to different perceptions (or interpretations). One could see, for example, something about the circular movement of language, which happens in the mouth. A photograph alone could not communicate something of this nature.

Another portrait of John A. Schweitzer (*John A. Schweitzer in front of "Cercle Bleu" by Claude Tousignant*, 1988) is blurred and in being so gives the subject a kind of stationary movement. The subject is turning to and from the painting in front of him. We made many attempts to take this portrait because its point is that despite the movement, he can still be recognized. It's a crazy portrait where I wanted to work the circle by focusing on John's gaze going from the painting then back to the camera in a circular movement. This was ignited by the blue circle painted by Claude Tousignant. I think that the exposure of the negative was about 15 seconds. Again, something foreign to the human eye.

Figure 7. *John A. Schweitzer in front of "Cercle bleu" by Claude Tousignant*, Archival black and white ink jet print, 1988, 56 x 43 cm. (22 x 17 in.).

A guiding principle in my visual practice is to entice readers to think about the interplay between seeing and not seeing, showing and not showing. I often try to accentuate the impossibility to make an image -- a painting, a photograph, or a multimedia image -- that holds the type of truth associated with fixity, reality, or singularity.

Nancy: You mention that your photographic portraits can present subjects as engaged in a sort of stationary movement. Does this representational practice draw from sculpture, and thus benefit from an illusory truth effect produced through the manipulation of perspective?

Richard-Max: Reflecting on the notion of truth, I would like to add a few things that are to me essential, which I should have perhaps mentioned at the start of this interview. Truth is believed to be an essential part of life, like the air we breathe. Yet, no human being knows about the billions of living micro-organisms that constitute our own body, from the surface of our skin to the deepest crevices of our organs, all of which help us stay healthy because essential for repelling all kinds of predators that come from the outside. We know nothing of our own brain as we know nothing about the universe, except for a few obvious observations. The sheer immensity of it is simply out of our mental reach.

So, what is truth? I have come to think that truth is very self-centered, just as human beings are. Truth is about our pursuit of happiness. Happiness? I won't get into that but, for most of us, happiness is our ultimate goal, and whatever we think truth is ... should help. Truth is subjective and fictitious; each of us invents it. But, why do we invent it? Well, for our own wellbeing.

For me, truth has to do with the conveyance of emotions, which we need to share and communicate to

others. Through this sharing, we also need to feel that our place in the community is pertinent and useful. In some ways, art leads to a similar experience. Art is a mirror: we find ourselves in it, and need to relate to it.

I would say that doing art and portraits is strictly done on these terms. When you mention that my portraits "present subjects in a sort of stationary movement," I can't help but think that Leonardo Da Vinci did exactly that with the Mona Lisa. Da Vinci's portrait is the first portrait done after a photographic concept, which he invented. There is a stationary moment with a *before* and an *after*; Da Vinci himself wrote about this. And, yes, it's true that sculpture is not far away conceptually, especially in late 15th century.

However, for my part, I never think of sculpture when I do portraits, "autre temps, autres moeurs," as we say... But a sculpture exists in the context of the "space" that surrounds it. Portraits also deal with the space surrounding them.

I would like to discuss two portraits; both have to do with evocative, poetic, or emotional truth, but also with space.

When in a residency in Paris a few years ago, I did many portraits. One of them is of Josefina di Candia, an Argentinian painter who now lives in Buenos Aires and Paris (I can use the portrait in this context with her consent). For this portrait, we used many of her watercolors that we spread on the floor. She then lied down, with her hair arranged as if flying over the watercolor marks. The mask she removes reveals a face "scarred" with lipstick. Her features suggest surprise, as if she is being caught off guard in showing something that should not be seen.

Figure 8. *Josefina di Candia*, 2014, archival ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in).

In a sense, artists wear masks (sometimes over wounds). For one thing, I never succeeded in making a self-portrait that could convey something significant about myself. Lately, I was asked to produce a self-portrait. Here is my answer to this request: a small mirror onto which is written the word "quoique"

(literally, "although"). When I hold the mirror in front of me, it is no doubt a self-portrait, but as soon as someone else looks into it, my portrait disappears and one is forced to look at himself or herself. It becomes the spectator self-portrait. That's as far as I can go into self-portraiture: leaving the spectator with his own perception and his own image. For any artwork to be significant, the spectator needs to recognize his or her own emotions...

Here is another portrait done in Paris, of Spanish artist Lourdes Segade based in Barcelona. I asked her to stand in front of a large wall covered with vegetation, a labyrinth of roots and branches, all in harmony with her hair. I would not say that it is *about* perspective; it is more about creating an environment. The wall is out of focus not to distract viewers from her hair and face. That relationship between the wall and her hair is of a poetic nature. They had to be juxtaposed. As I said before, I often use depth-of-field as a device to direct the spectator's eyes to the parts of the image that are of some significance. It is a privileged tool. Poetry (visual or literary) is to me about bridging distances: in this portrait, the wall vegetation and Lourdes' hair become related. Portraiture is about bridging someone to someone or something else.

Figure 9. *Lourdes Segade*, 2014, archival B/W ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in.).

Nancy: *Several of your photographs are of objects, and not people. Do objects as photographic subjects also create bridges that give rise to a poetic truth? What does truth look like in relation to your photographs of windows or boxes?*

Richard-Max: Indeed, I would say that the two most important series of photographs I've done in the past ten years are the boxes series called *Déboitements* -- which in French, has many layers of meaning -- and the *Windows* series (*Les Fenêtres*). *Déboitements* was done in relation to a series of paintings. It consists of 14 black and white photographs taken in 2015, and 13 monochromatic paintings of different formats taken between 2013 and 2015.

The other series, *Les Fenêtres*, was produced in 2010 in Provence and is about the windows of abandoned tanneries, in the town of Barjols, in the Var. In the early 20th century, it was said that the leathers of Barjols

were the most beautiful leathers of France. That was before a good part of the French leather industry collapsed in the second half of the century. When in 2010 I was invited to do a residency in Barjols, I noticed the abandoned buildings with all of their broken windows. They were like artefacts: witnesses of a defeated world, speechless and scarred. Some windows had been broken with stones or other objects that had been thrown at them. Others had been perforated by gunshots, while some had been taken away, leaving rectangular holes in the buildings like blind eyes. Yet, despite their ruined states, I was attracted to these windows, as I was interested in their mysteries, in the sheer loss of their function: windows are meant to be looked through and to let light into homes while protecting internal spaces from the elements. These defeated windows could now be looked at as powerless victims.

I think it is important to show at least four of these, to get a good impression of the wide scope of emotions conveyed by the photographs.

Figure 10. *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0903_028*, 2010, archival ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in.).

Fenêtre (Barjols) 0903_028, was the only window I could photograph from the inside looking outward. Most of these buildings were condemned, and too dangerous to wander through, including this one where I had to climb a fence to get into it. This large window was irresistible to me; it conveyed emotions I had never thought of before.

When looking at these windows, even the notion of confinement inevitably takes on a poetic truth.

Windows are human inventions destined to frame the world from a particular point of view. But, they also act as a transition between the inside and the outside, as well as a protection. Maybe the first poetic window in human history is the entrance of Plato's cave... light came in, but it announced a suspicious frontier.

Figure 11. *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0827-033*, 2010, archival ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in.).

Witness to the outside destruction, *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0827-033* is located on the ground floor of a building and just across a narrow river, where it would have been easy for kids to throw rocks or any projectiles at it. It's always a mystery to try to figure out what is behind a certain event; only a rich and elaborate drawing from its destructive history is left behind for others to see.

Figure 12. *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0827-059*, 2010, archival ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in.).

Another window, *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0827-059*, shows a glassless opening in a stucco wall, which conveys a very different emotion. More serene... the aesthetic of a painting, surely... In this series of more than 50 photographs, it became obvious that I could bridge a large scope of human poetic emotions and truths. In this one, I couldn't help think of a Chinese ink wash, juxtaposed to a color field painting... as if the photograph happened to be done as a work of art.

Figure 13. *Fenêtre (Barjols) 0901-006*, 2010, archival ink jet print, 43 x 56 cm. (17 x 22 in.).

Fenêtre (Barjols) 0901-006 is very different from the previous ones. On this large wall, vegetation invades the window, penetrating inside the building from the outside, or is it the other way around? It feels like both of the opposite directions are possible... hard to say which one is more accurate, more truthful. The frontier that represents the window has disappeared. The inside and the outside are confused, as often happens when we are confronted with ruins.

Figure 14. *Boites # 12*, 2014, oil on canvas, 153 x 183 cm. (60 x 72 in.).

The boxes series were created in two separate steps. First came the paintings, called *Boites # 1* to *# 13*, oil on canvas in different sizes, all done between 2013 and 2015. Then, in 2015, I created *Déboitements*, fourteen black and white photographs. "*Déboitement*" can mean the action of breaking something into pieces, as in dismantled, or to disarticulate or dislocate. I used the word to mean dismantled boxes. I received a proposal to put together an art exhibition in an old nun's cloister in Montreal, today called *La Chapelle Historique du Bon-Pasteur (CHBP)*. Some twenty years ago, it had been transformed into an intimate concert hall with an adjoining small exhibition hall. I had thought of expanding the subject of the boxes into a new series of photographs and here was the opportunity to develop the idea. The intimacy of the room along with its history provided me with a perfect opportunity.

When I first engaged with the painting project, the idea of these boxes came to me as I was questioning the fragility of digital versus material archives. At the time, I was acutely aware that the technological tools with which we access digital data are constantly evolving: after a few decades of different software, digital files become obsolete, forcing everyone to acquire newer state-of-the-art software. In the process, huge amounts of data, including important archives, are bound to simply disappear. The loss of archives is a well-known tragedy. In the digital world, capitalism and profit dictate the process.

To capture my thinking through digital and material archiving practices, I thought of using archival boxes, like those used in museums, made with acid-free components and meant to last for something like a hundred years or more. I assembled these boxes in such a way that they appear as if they are about to fall apart or crumble, thus enacting a tension... a moment of uncertainty. The aim was to create a destabilizing effect or what I like to call a poetic truth.

A few of the images are quite large and required a significant amount of work, which enhances the tension resulting in the unstable moment suggested by the subject.

The *Déboitements* series is very different from the *Boites* series, even though the subject is very much the same. I was familiar with the exhibition room at the CHBP; it was actually the room where the cloistered nuns were seated when assisting at Mass. A glass door separated them from the room (a mirror room) where the priest was celebrating the ceremony. The boxes piled up upon each other acquired a new meaning in relation to the cloistered nuns who, in their state of confinement -- a state we can relate to now more than ever -- were separated from the world. Thinking about the fragility of the positions of the boxes and the secret of their content provides a poetic truth intrinsically tied to the tension of doubt and uncertainty.

Figure 15. Installation view, 2015, Chapelle Historique du Bon-Pasteur, Montreal.

The whole series was done with a very limited use of color: all of the images are monochromatic. Each image is of black boxes on a black background. I used deep blacks and intense contrasts to give the photographs a sense of gravity that the paintings didn't have. This emotional intensity was better aligned with the location itself and its secretive historical truth.

Figure 16. *Déboitements # 15B*, 2015, archival inkjet print, 60 x 90 cm. (24 x 35.5 in.).

Nancy: *Thank you for engaging in this rich discussion and for sharing your journey as a painter and photographer. I wondered if you would like to close with a bottom line, so to speak, about the untruths of photography. How should aspiring photographers approach the complex question of truth?*

Richard-Max: Nearly forty years ago, I started learning photography using the Ansel Adams method. My

two friends and I each bought the five books that, at the time, constituted his method. It was about learning how the negative responded to light, how to control aperture and shutter speed, and to expose the negative properly. Adams' lessons about photography were global; they aimed at understanding the mechanisms of light and optics, as well as the negative, paper, and chemistry to produce the perfect negative, the one that would produce the "perfect print." Fifteen years ago, I moved to digital photography. That was when I understood that the real archive was no longer the negative, but the print. The physical truth about photography had also moved in a material way, because archives have to be material. The truth of photography changed in line with its materiality.

Digital technologies not only advanced digital camera capters performing up to 80 to 100 million dpi. With the large amount of software that enables the transformation of an image to new levels of extravagant sophistication, the truth of photography has become more fictitious than ever before.

For many people now, being a good photographer means being an expert in Photoshop. Simultaneously, we are witnessing a revival in traditional negative and film cameras and silver prints, a phenomenon that resembles the revival of the 12 inch LP vinyl records that are made to "live" alongside digital sound. All of these technologies also can go hand in hand and contribute to each other's success. For instance, I can select a negative from my archives, shot some 30 years ago, scan it, and produce a digital print of a better quality and longevity than any vintage silver print that could have been produced, using the right papers and pigment inks.

In a sense, the aspiring photographer nowadays, very much like any photographer in the past, must find his or her own fiction, his or her own truth. Photography like painting is a "tool" used to convey the truth, reality, and emotion of a human being who addresses another human being.

I would encourage them to observe the world as much as our response to it, and invent the right way to convey what comes out of it. Because art, I believe, is not about the "why." Art is about the "how."

Richard-Max Tremblay is a professional painter and photographer who lives and works in Montreal since 1972. He studied at Goldsmith's College in London (England), and began exhibiting widely during the eighties and nineties (*Canadian Cultural Center in Paris* and the *Délégation Générale du Québec,* also in Paris). A substantial exhibition of his photographic portraits was held in 2011 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Over the last four decades, his work evolved towards the exploration of absence, loss, and the forgotten. In 2014, he was granted the *Paris Studio* by the Canada Council for the Arts that permitted him to work in Paris, but also in Berlin and Venice on a project that lead to the exhibition *Caché* at Division Gallery (Arsenal) in Montreal. This show presented as a synthesis of the artist's lifelong preoccupations.

Richard-Max Tremblay is the recipient of several awards, including the Prix Louis-Comtois (2003) and the Royal Canadian Academy (RCA) Trust Fund Jury Prize (2015). A retrospective of his work in both painting and photography is projected for the Fall of 2022, and will be accompanied by a publication. His website: https://richardmaxtremblay.com/.

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