Alvin Luong
Bijan Ramezani
Catherine Plaisance
Esmond Lee
Leila Syed-Fatemi
Rachel Granofsky
Sarah Sands Phillips
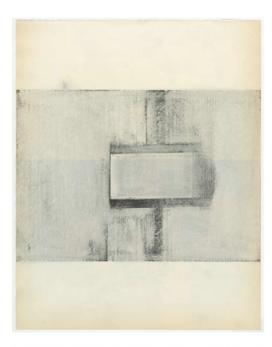Proof 22

G44 Centre for Contemporary Photography

JUNE 5 TO JULY 4 2015

Sarah Sands Phillips, *Untitled* and *Untitled*, from the series "Photographs of Canada", manipulated found media, 2015

The Cure by Image

by Ricky Varghese

In Marguerite Duras's and Alain Resnais's now-classic and poignant tale about memory, loss, and love at the site of an unimaginable catastrophe, *Hiroshima mon amour*, the character of the French woman, known only by that anonymous common name—the French woman—upon her arrival at that originary site of atomic devastation, utters a statement staging the obstinate relationship between remembrance and the trauma of forgetting: "Forgetting will begin with your eyes."[1] In her rigorous essay-length study of the film, Kaja Silverman renders the prescient need for a "cure by love" in the face of such possibly incommensurable and irreducible forgetting; she argues that this cure by love, "represents the triumph of relationality, it is a cure through and for displacement…[it] suggests that creatures and things are in need of this care because without it they cannot help but suffer from the most serious of maladies: invisibility."[2]

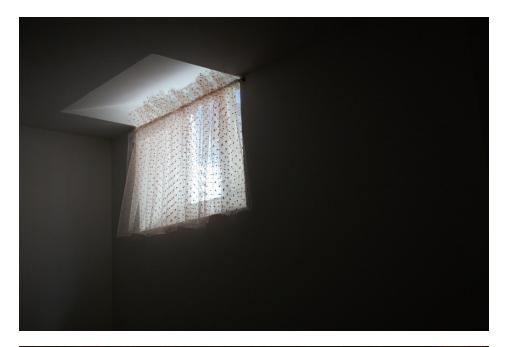Catherine Plaisance, still images from *Désordre (Horaire)*, HD video, 2014

Presently, then, the provocation might be to ask after how each of these artists, arriving at the photographic medium from diverse points of conceptual origin, respond to this demand and desire for relationality with the viewer vis-à-vis a commitment to play with and expand both the visual field and the scopic fidelity promised by the photograph as a structure of witnessing both simultaneous presence and absence.

Negotiating the fine line between the accrued sedimentary process of layering and the vivification of the photographic surface via its erosion through the process of sanding down, Sarah Sands Phillips's images appear to make the invisible visible. Working with photographs originally sourced from texts documenting the Canadian landscape, selected on the basis of their pre-existing compositional struc-ture and form, Sands Phillips brings the image behind the image to life by eroding it, bordering on a sort of imagistic erasure and simultaneous renewal. As such, she urges the viewer to consider the shifting nature of the photographic surface as one that is always in the process of revealing. This becomes both the excessive byproduct and the essential aftermath of the photograph's surface that acts as the meeting ground for both the efforts of the viewer's gaze and the physical manipulation endured by the image under the artist's hands.

In a similar vein, the revelatory is given privileged place, it would seem, amidst the looming darkness that overwhelmingly shrouds Catherine Plaisance's miniature world in her *Désordre (horaire)*. The viewer might crane to perceive what light touches in this miniaturized world handcrafted and filmed by the artist. Space feels limited, construed on a dramatically miniscule scale; its scale is further exposed to a reduction in how the scene she films is veiled by that accompanying darkness it is made to bear. The world re-created at this scale might desire the bounded nostalgia for a childhood rendered unaffected as of yet by the vagaries of adulthood. What is bounded precisely about this nostalgic return to childhood is the veil of darkness that overpowers the idyllic setting, while also making visible the very real possibility of the future to come, a disastrous future mired by the disorder of adult life.

Esmond Lee's photographs speak to a destitution within the desire for relationality. Intended to be an intimate study of the dissolution of and the disenchantment with the immigrant experience, the plentiful emptiness of the artist's home photographed here itself suggests a lonely absent subject signaling an attempt at both self- and other portraiture. The shared home space and its objects metonymically stand in for the artist and his parents, the "real" subjects of the work that remain strikingly present in their absence. Simultaneously standing in as a symbol of immigrant self-achieve-ment while also outlining the discordance between the artist and his parents' respective dreams, the home is revealed, in the Taoist tradition that inspired these images originally, to signify that "whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form."[3] The invisible becomes envisioned precisely in the melancholic quietude of these photographs.

What objects and their surfaces signify and render to the gaze of the viewer appear to be vital to Rachel Granofsky's practice. By mobilizing techniques of *tromp l'oeil* painting, Granofsky appears not to seek out uniformity upon her surfaces, but rather wants to reveal the breaks in any sense of perceived and presumed uniformity, thereby revealing the breaks in how perception itself operates in relation to the surfaces she
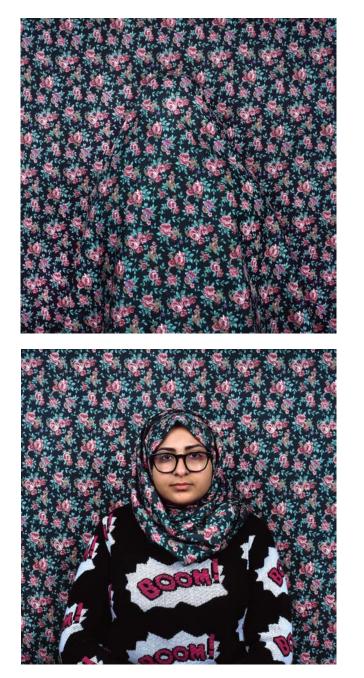
Esmond Lee, *Untitled* and *Untitled*, from the series "Between Us", digital c-print, 2014

Rachel Granofsky, *Pyramid*, digital c-print, 2014

Leila Syed-Fatemi, *Anna I and Anna II*, from the series "Clothbound", digital c-print mounted on plexi, 2014

Alvin Luong, *36 Cyprigene Sum (After Carl Andre)*, thirty-six digital c-prints, 2014

paints over and photographs. The creases, edges, corners, and borders between objects become both enlivened and high-lighted in this gesture. The photographs appear as paintings. Appearances, however, can be deceptively capacious in veiling what remains both simultaneously visible and surreptitious in these images. Figure and ground become, at once, both enmeshed to and entangled with one another, and as well offer up an opportunity to revive one another, have one make the other—each other—visible to the viewer.

Leila Fatemi's diptychs endeavor to revise the subject's relationship to the selective western gaze—a gaze that renders the other's body both devastatingly hyper visible at times and, at other times, profoundly invisible. Facing forward, the

subject of her photographs, the veiled Muslim woman, looks straight on, peering effortlessly, at the viewer demanding recognition, an encounter, and a relation. This demand for relationality is furthered by the very nature of the veil as both guise that allows the subject to blend into the background, while also highlighting her presence through the inscription of difference. Facing backward, Fatemi effectively forges and fashions a relationship between her subject and her background by destabilizing the veil—the very object that otherwise makes her stand out—as that which endeavors to camouflage her and subsequently make her absent; in this instance, she is made to avert her look from the viewer, perhaps enacting a different relationship to both orientalist

Bijan Ramezani, *Redaction no. 1*, archival inkjet print, 2014

Bijan Ramezani, *Persona Non Grata* (installation shot), 2014

historicity and its demanding gaze.

Reworking the gaze upon the aesthetic object by reimagining the object itself becomes central to how Alvin Luong positions his work within the long history of art. Simulating minimalism as a gesture that attends to the limitations of a medium, Luong's critically rhetorical inquiry of Carl Andre signifies an urgent way by which parody becomes an essential means to experience art in relation to its canonization. By calling his piece *After Carl Andre,* Luong poses a question more so than posit a statement with any certitude. He asks what exists after and in the aftermath of the canonized aesthetic object; he also inquires after the very afterlife of this object—can it be expanded, redone, re-imagined outside of its classical interpretation? The parodic becomes fertile ground to undo the time of the history of art by applying a necessary gash into its presumed linearity. Via the simulacra, the history of art becomes opened up to new ways of seeing aesthetic practice.

Perhaps a significant triumph with regards to the ethics of relationality might be in recognizing how the other becomes distilled in cultural memory. Bijan Ramezani's *Persona Non-Grata* does exactly this. By searching for his own identity, the dual identity of being Iranian and Canadian, through the eyes of others, within the gaze of the spectacularized Western media, Ramezani attempts to undercut the uncanny[4] ontology of systems that other the figure of the foreigner or the stranger. By appropriating various media representations, while exposing them to techniques that take advantage of the image's capacity to be malleable, Ramezani expands the visual field by repopulating it with other images, images in which the other becomes otherwise outside of and beyond the significations offered to it by western episteme.

It is not that photography might offer a cure for the human condition; it might not have the power to save humanity per se. Rather, the gestures showcased here allow us to think the photographic medium as one that is always already in dialogue with its absent signifiers, with what is invisible or made to be so. As Roland Barthes astutely observed, a photograph is "in no way a presence,"[5] but perhaps (and yet still) it could bring us one step closer to that fantasy of and desire for a resolute presence in the face of forgetting.

1   *Hiroshima mon amour*. Dir. Alain Resnais. Perf. Emmanuelle Riva and Eiji Okada (Pathe Films, 1959).
2   Kaja Silverman, "The Cure by Love," in *Public*, 32 (Toronto, 2005), 42.
3   From *The Heart Sutra* as quoted by the artist.
4   Sigmund Freud referred to the uncanny, Das Unheimliche, as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud, 1919). The German term itself indicates an affect of "unhomeli-ness," in the sense of the uncanny and I wanted to get at this in my reading of Ramezani's work, specifically in his exploration of how his own dual identity becomes bifurcated within and by the space of western and Canadian media.
5   Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image - Music - Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Staruss, and Giroux, 1977), 44.

This exhibition is supported by

Canada Council Conseil des arts
for the Arts du Canada

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

TORONTO ARTS COUNCIL | FUNDED BY THE CITY OF TORONTO
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

The McLean Foundation

RBC Emerging Artists Project