Messages Beyond the Medium [an exhibition of photographic installations by Manuel Piña (Havana, Cuba), Jorma Puranen (Helsinki, Finland), and Canadians Edward Poitras (Regina) and Jin-me Yoon (Vancouver)]
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Duchamp once said that works of art have a shelf-life of about a decade. Masterpieces might retain their validity for 50 years. I think he was serious. I think he was right, exempting, of course, his own work. It is the fate of successful art movements that, as the world catches up to their innovations, the individual objects lose their original power: the capacity to shock, to confuse in a meaningful way, to incite, to embarrass, to make you see – and even want to live – differently. Such works become museum pieces, exemplary, canonical, nostalgic.

Much of the Vancouver school of lightbox photography has become successful in this way. Works that once surprised – now that we have read the post-modernist playbook – have become visual essays, illustrations. The clever picture puzzles documenting their deconstruction, or posters about human encroachment on nature, now read as texts designed for comprehension. Though we have not altered our behaviour, our visual literacy and ecological awareness have caught up with the semiotics of these pictures – they are exhausted by their success as expository images.

There are, of course, works of art that survive Duchamp's expiration date: art that has been tasted but not consumed; images and objects that are uncanny, strange, difficult to assimilate; art that either puts conventional codes in play, as in much Dada and Surrealism, or art with content that a social order feels the need to repress. *Lost Homelands* is an exhibition of photographic installations by Manuel Piña (Havana, Cuba), Jorma Puranen (Helsinki, Finland), and Canadians Edward Poitras (Regina) and Jin-me Yoon (Vancouver) – artists who work from what curator Annette Hurtig describes as 'a cultural margin in search of a lost or illusive homeland.' While the content of these pieces should be a guarantee of exciting viewing, the installations vary in affectiveness. Some are overcome by convention while others challenge the viewer's repertoire of visual and conceptual strategies.

For two decades, Jorma Puranen has collaborated with nomadic Lapp tribes who have been displaced from their homelands by clear-cut logging and urban expansion. Puranen appropriates archival images from an 1884 French expedition of the Sami people housed in the Musée de L'Homme in Paris and repatriates them to their original sites. *Imaginary Homecoming* includes a large photo-documentation of this ritual. The strong, weathered faces are individually mounted on plexiglass and arranged in the landscape in an approximation of their original placement. Another photo shows a montage of faces over a strip mine that, presumably, used to be their land.

Puranen's work is clear, direct and sincere. However, the project seems distanced, even generic. The same strategy could be applied to aboriginal peoples of Canada or Australia, or anywhere. Missing is a specificity, a sense of these people as a people rather than as images. Puranen's return of the oppressed only faintly disorients the ethnographic gaze. I am not sure that viewers of this work understand any more about the Sami people than they would from a National Geographic piece on the same subject – perhaps less. It may be that the artist assumes the viewer's empathy will fill in the blanks – the experience the artist has lived but is not quite able to evoke. Or perhaps the distance, and even sentimentalism, is due to the fact that Puranen is not describing his people or his homeland. Will this sort of work eventually be read as a version of late (liberal) colonialism?

Manuel Piña's *Manipulations, Truths and Other Illusions* consists of four, tiny lightboxes illuminating faded photographic transparencies of palm trees, feet, a hand reaching for a flower, and a woman. There are large inkjet banners that look like ads for unspecified products with vague slogans: 'Hold Onto Life'. There are several other photographs; some of billboards with images echoing the small transparencies. Piña's installation is like entering another country through the eyes of a translator. The sights unfold with simultaneous narratives: some for the visitor, some for the resident. The stories overlap as the translator attempts to explain aspects of his country. For the most part, the structure – rhythmic and repetitive – is poetic. You can also sense an earnest but unclear narrative.

It is only by reading the sketch artist's statement that you find that the work is an illustration for a story about a young artist who rediscovers the work of a 19th-century Cuban photographer. The young artist then creates a series of photographs as a social commentary in homage to his predecessor. However, he (inexplicably) sells the images to an advertising company, which in turn uses them to sell Cuba as a tourist destination. While the text helps us through the archaeology of the installation, I think viewers can take from the work a more satisfying meaning than the sophomoric, 'O'Henry Meets Marx' artist's tale. (For example, it could be read backwards: an old artist rediscovers photography and his homeland through the example of billboards by a younger artist.) Piña seems suspicious of his own visual poetry, perhaps fearful that the ambiguous images might lead to narratives other than those that have been ideologically sanctioned. Separate from the text, the images remain evocative, mysterious, wonderful.

Edward Poitras continues to question the dominant culture's relationship to the land and the sacred. Disruption includes a photograph of a hill with a road through it. In front of the image is a large rock with a faint pictograph. A chain attached to the rock leads to the photograph. Poitras explains that the hill is a site near Regina, sacred to First Nations people. But, because planners are ruled by the grid, a road was ploughed through the hill rather than going around it, and the painted ritual rocks were dispersed. Some were rescued by local farmers, one of whom gave the rock to Poitras. In this case, knowing the story is indispensable to understanding the work's specific meaning. And yet, on its own, the piece is an eloquent image of the human disruption of nature and an expression of materialism's disregard for the sacred.

Less rich is Poitras's *Some Were Heroes* – a long, rectangular lightbox with a dark, nearly obscured image of Louis Riel on both sides. One corner of the horizontal box is partially raised from the floor by a long black noose. It has all the subtlety of a sledgehammer next to an egg.

I have spent many hours with Jin-me Yoon's *Touring Home From Away*, and continue to discover new ideas and ambiguities. There are nine, modestly sized, double-sided lightboxes suspended from the ceiling in a row. The 18 photographs are primarily of a family and some of the residents of Prince Edward Island. Many look like typical tourist snaps; a family in a field, in front of a fake castle. Others are familiar but a bit off: a family standing with their backs to the camera in a potato field. Some are images of everyday life – people in a Wal-Mart parking lot, coming from a grocery store, in a Tim Horton's – but not the sort of scenes we value enough to make permanent records of. Most have related narratives on either side of the box: Jin-me, with her back to the camera, looking at a War Memorial (including the Korean War); on the reverse side, her young son looks up to the bronze fighting men from the other side of the memorial. There are so many rich visual ideas in *Touring Home From Away*. P.E.I. is the birthplace of the Canadian Confederation, it is 'home' for Canadians but visitors are also 'from away'; even if they are from other parts of Canada / 'home'. But can a Korean-born Canadian, or a Canadian of Korean ancestry – or is she pictured / read as generically 'Asian' – ever be seen as at 'home' in Canada ('where are you from?')?

The recurring characters in this installation are members of Jin-me's family. There is a tension in reading these people: are they a real family; actors portraying a real family; a mixed-race family of actors 'sending-up' or playing or challenging, or embracing the conventional expectations of 'family'? The complexity in these constructions (the distance of irony and the ease of participation) is strongest in an image of Jin-me's son dressed as Anne of Green Gables. It really is too much: cross-dressing; masculinity; make-believe; parental desire and power; the weird Japanese fascination with Anne; the tourist industry; being Canadian / playing at being Canadian; etc.

Altogether, this is an extraordinary achievement that challenges both the medium and our perceptions of identity and home by entertaining an ambiguity rather than reducing life to the resolved advertising images that lightbox art photographs were designed to critique. As art from the cultural margins becomes more sophisticated and as commercial photography increasingly appropriates innovations from art, artists must find not only novel combinations, but forbidden content, overlooked and unpictured experience originating from our unique and problematic selves.