

Summary

Upon entering the exhibition *Of Individuals and Places: Photographs from the Lazare Collection* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, it becomes immediately apparent that the exhibition room has been organized around human life in relation to space; how spaces effect individuals and how individuals create and interact with space. The square room is divided into an inner and an outer room, where the inner space is enclosed by four freestanding walls, with openings at each of its four corners, and is painted a dark shade of grey. The outer room then becomes the space between these walls and that of the exterior, a lighter space which acts as more of a hallway to be experienced in a linear manner. It feels most natural to follow the path of the outer room before entering the inner. Before proceeding however, diagonally facing the entrance on the outside of the inner freestanding wall, is what seems to be the star of the exhibition; a collection of 14 portraits by the nineteenth century British photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, immediately filling the room with faces that feel extremely familiar to the viewer who exists in nostalgic, 21st century society. Cameron's aesthetic is the epitome of the nineteenth century portrait, widely consumed and reproduced as it holds connotation of history and time,¹ therefore the exhibition's outer space immediately feels both public and known.

Directly across from the wall of Camerons, Edward Burtynsky's *Three Gorges Dam Project, Wushan #3* (2002), from the Yangtze River in China, hangs first on the outer left wall, initiating the collection with an image of human-induced destruction. As the viewer moves along the wall, one is located in distinctly urban space from Ballester's *Nocturno* (2005), to Baier's

¹ Barthes, Roland. "The Rhetoric of the Image." 1964. In *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, 128-39. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018.

January (2003), to Sondergaard's *Interiors* (2008-2010), all of which centralizing on the physicality of the urban landscape, without the presence of humans themselves. Humans are introduced to the cityscape as one continues down the wall, affirming the suspicions of the previous, unpopulated settings – there is life here, and as one continues toward the back wall, humans take priority in the successive, large frames, a reflection of Cameron's portraits. The figure in the Baier comes to signify the exhibition's introduction – the small, yet present human confronted with the sublimity of landscape, recalling Freidrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808-1810).

Class begins to play a major role in the selections on the next wall, reminding the viewer that they are in fact publicly admiring the private collection of an elite collector. Goldin's *Kristy and Myles at Juicy, NYC* (1996) is set atop Sanchez's *Rescue Effort* (2006) in contrasting moments of the polished and the gritty, which could very well be occurring simultaneous to one another. Many realities organized in a single space, all of which occurring before the public eye, in public space. Banality contrasts with drama – the epitome of human life. The viewer approaches the third wall of the exhibition's outer space, and a zooming-in on individuals occurs, their faces; timeless, precise, beautifully composed. These individuals are all dead, and yet I am not aware of this while admiring their beauty. They are public, framed figures rather than human subjects. Aesthetics are priority here. We do not know them, but we have seen them many times before.

From this striking compilation of lifeless subjects however, one is confronted with a rather chunky transition at the room's next corner. On the final outer wall, the viewer is immediately hit with broad, vast landscapes vacant of all the life and humanity offered by the previous journey. Watson's *15 North, Exit 25, Las Vegas* (2001) feels particularly chunky in its bold colour and distance, as it contrasts the somber intimacy of the portraits. In standing looking

at the Watson, which depicts a wide landscape of open land and sky, interrupted only by distant, illuminated billboards lining a freeway, one has Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) in view, peering out from the entrance to the exhibition's inner room. Her view of this landscape from inside the walls, as though looking out a window, creates a stark contrast between the two spaces, where this portal between the outer room and the inner acts as a divide between the public and the private space of the exhibition.

Inside the inner room are much smaller, intimate, black and white frames. While the photos on the outer walls feel grand and consumable, the ones in this enclosed space are personal, evocative of a family photo album. The walls are a darker grey than the exterior, and the lighting is comfortable, feeling like an extension of the soft, black and white photography. The space feels safe. Standing in front of Chuck Close's *Untitled (Kate 14)* (2005) in the center of a wall of close portraits, one has never seen Kate Moss look so human. There is a warmth in this inner space, the private interior to the public outside, and each selection works in conversation with the next in creation of a single narrative; life. These are real people. Two images in the far right corner, however, interrupt the ease of movement within this space. Katy Grannan's *Anonymous, Oakland, CA* (2011) and Catherine Opie's *Charlotte* (2004) seem to belong in the public domain amongst the outer walls, rather than in this dusty family photo album. Their stark colours and crisp focus seem punishing against the softness of the rest of the room, and one's eye cannot help but be drawn to them, in a much less pleasant way than the eye is drawn to any of the other frames here. They annoy me, so I ignore them. I spend the most time in this interior room, drawn particularly to the succession of transportation images hung across the left wall, more specifically to Danny Lyon's *Leslie, Downtown Knoxville* (1967). This

photograph becomes my favorite of the collection, there is something so intimate here. I sit on the bench across from Leslie and begin my analysis.

Analysis

In visiting *Of Individuals and Places: Photographs from the Lazare Collection*, the notion of the public versus the private both in terms of space as well as human subject, becomes central to one's experience as they navigate the strategic lay-out of the divided exhibition room. Thoughtful portraiture confronts urban life and expansive landscape throughout the outer room in a grand manner, and within this continuous interaction between human and environment exists the intimacy of raw, candid realism as presented in the exhibit's inner space. While this inner space feels closer to life than the photographs lining the outer walls, there does remain a common thread throughout the entirety of the Lazare collection as it is organized in the MMFA; appreciation for truth and realism. Truths and realities are organized in a strategic succession as they create spaces that generate feelings ranging from discomfort and isolation, to familiarity and nostalgia, where each wall of the exhibition tells a different story within the larger context of its location as part of either the inner or outer room; the public or the private. For myself, each wall possesses both *studium* and *punctum*, representative of that wall's role in the space it occupies. The *punctums* work together to orchestrate a cohesive movement from the public domain, into that of the private, and back out again, where humans interact with their environments, and in response, an environment is created around them. The museum visitor moves through the photographs in the way one watches a film, observing many truths coexisting alongside one another both in harmony and stark contrast – the precise way human life carries on – pricked

every now and then by something with subjective, heightened meaning. Realism, of individuals and places, at it's finest.

In his famous 1980 book titled *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes defines the two elements of photography that for him, establish particular interest in photographs. The first is the studium; a Latin term referring to “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment... but without enthusiastic acuity.”² Most any photograph will possess studium, so long as the viewer possesses a general interest, stirring an average reaction based on a broad knowledge of culture.³ For Barthes then, the entirety of the Lazare collection could hold studium, as there remains a strong likelihood for general engagement with each of the photographs on display, by each of the exhibit's visitors. The studium becomes the general theme I have taken from each of the exhibit's walls, beginning with the aforementioned first wall, which begins with Burtynsky's *Three Gorges Dam Project, Wushan #3* (2002) and continues on to present public, urban spaces where evidence of human life is seen, but human figures play very insignificant roles in the frames themselves. The way the buildings cast shadows on the navigators of the streets and hallways, and the grandeur of human creation that comes to dictate human life, this becomes the studium taken from this first wall. A general interest or understanding of what is represented, but merely of average effect.

The second element of the photograph for Barthes then, is the element which either breaks or punctuates the studium, and this is the punctum. “This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”⁴ The punctum is personal, and in this way while each photograph may hold studium, not all will possess punctum for their

² Barthes, Roland. "Extracts from Camera Lucida." 1980. In *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, 19-30. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018. *Camera Lucida*, 1980. 25

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

viewer.⁵ On this first wall of the exhibit, the punctum image for me is Nicolas Baier's *January* (2003), as stated above, this is the photograph which pricks me as the meaning of this wall; the human in relation to the sublimity of the urban landscape, on the outside looking in. However, it must be recognized that since the punctum is subjective and personal, the experience of visiting *Of Individuals and Places* will be unique to each of its viewers.

As the visitor moves through the collection, whether they follow the same route as I or choose a different path, it is impossible to escape the format of the gallery walls, which each hold a strategic arrangement amounting to studium for the viewer. "Decorously isolated on the wall of exhibition, the objects can now be read according to a certain logic, a logic that insists on their representational character within the discursive space."⁶ The continuous, yet fragmented curation of this exhibit forces the visitor's experience to be conducted by the wall arrangement, where each wall acts both alone as well as a part of a whole – it's studium doing the same. The visitor moves through the exhibition as though watching a film, where each wall acts as a single scene, and the distinct punctum moments collected in the viewer's memory throughout the film's plot, become the encounter one will remember. Further, as the exhibition is divided by public and private space,⁷ where the photographs are arranged in relation to one another as belonging either 'inside' or 'outside' the two distinct spheres, the punctums drawn from each fragmented space in the gallery will be divided to symbolize the private versus the public. "Given its function as the physical vehicle of exhibition, the gallery wall became the signifier of inclusion and, thus, can be seen as constituting in itself a representation."⁸ It is interesting then, to consider

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Krauss, Rosalind. "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View." 1982. In *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, 223-41. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018. *Art Journal*. 227.

⁷ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger. 1962.

⁸ Krauss, Rosalind. "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View." 1982. 227.

punctum in relation to public space, as a punctum is in itself a private matter. There is a privacy in publics, as each individual will experience public matter uniquely, inclusive to this exhibit itself, based on their own life's experience.

The curation of these photographs amongst the walls of the public outer, and inner private spheres (where these terms are used in reference to Habermas's respective definitions of them⁹), causes the micro-collections displayed in each space to form narratives in the viewers mind, due to the realism threaded through the exhibit. While I have defined the images outside the gallery's inner space as public, I must clarify that realism remains here. I use this term as defining photos that feel commercial from the photos which feel personal. This inner space is dark both in colour as well as lighting, arousing the atmosphere of an interior room in a home, perhaps an attic, which the sunlight from the windows does not reach. These photos then, in their small scale and soft black and white compositions, cause the visitor not to feel alone in viewing, but rather surrounded by memoirs. Though I am aware that Kate Moss is not dead while she stares at me through the lens of Chuck Close (2005), my feelings remain as though I am reading the diary of a late relative, learning family secrets and keeping them to myself. Forgetting for a moment then, the esteem of a photo such as *The Migrant Mother* (1936) and taking these photographs solely at face value, it seems "their appeal...can only be to some- one personally involved with their subjects, someone for whom they reveal the 'that- has-been' (*ça a été*) that is, for Barthes, the essence or *noème* of photography."¹⁰ This is the effect of the private space, where the punctums that arise from these walls will most likely prick a memory of the viewer's

⁹ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. 1962.

¹⁰ Perloff, Marjorie. "WHAT HAS OCCURRED ONLY ONCE: Barthes's Winter Garden/Boltanski's Archives of the Dead." In *The Photography Reader*, 31-41. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018.

own family albums. The punctum for myself here being Lyon's *Leslie, Downtown Knoxville* (1967). There is an extreme intimacy about the interior of a vehicle.

While each of the gallery's walls carried for me, both studium as well as punctum, which come together to form a single experience of *Of Individuals and Places*, the two punctive images mentioned in this analysis, that of Nicolas Baier's *January* (2003) and Danny Lyon's *Leslie, Downtown Knoxville* (1967) symbolize the division of private and public space which is presented by the curation of this photography collection. The Baier acts as a symbol of the public sphere, where the figure stands with his back to the viewer, staring out across the grandeur of the urban landscape with a distance which removes him from its existence, regardless of his standing within it. The landscape before Baier's figure will continue to exist with or without their presence in the frame – there is no personal relationship between the scene and the figure – they are on the outside looking in. By contrast, in the Lyons photograph, both the operator and the spectator,¹¹ are fixed within the scene as well as the frame, connected to both with an intimacy that is crucial to the photograph's existence. Here, the photo is situated directly within a private moment, contained by the enclosure of the vehicle, where the outside, public sphere is only visible through the windows as one looks out from inside the car. This phenomenon of being on the inside looking out directly references the feeling of standing within the inner room of the Lazare exhibit, looking out through the openings in the room's corners to the outer room, in the way of Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936). These photos work together, as Robert Frank conceives of image as text,¹² to summarize the MMFA exhibition of the Lazare collection; an experience of

¹¹ Barthes, Roland. "Extracts from Camera Lucida." 1980. 21.

¹² Soutter, Lucy. "Why Art Photography?" 2007. In *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, 275-84. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018. *Source*.

realism, founded in punctum, divided by the private and the public, to be consumed by the public in a private manner. From the outside looking in, from the inside looking out.

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