

Exhibition Reviews

Plain Truth. MENDEL ART GALLERY, Saskatoon, March – April 1998; GLENBOW MUSEUM, Calgary, 30 May – 13 August 1998; MACKENZIE ART GALLERY, Regina, 11 September – 22 November 1998.

Plain Truth is a new exhibition surveying the work of studio photographers and filmmakers who pictured Western Canada between 1858 (the year of the first prairie photograph) and 1950. Curated by Dan Ring of the Mendel Art Gallery and Keith Bell, professor of Art History at the University of Saskatchewan, it examines various themes from the first century of white settlement in Western Canada – exploration, surveying, colonization, investment, tourism, and promotion. By doing so, it illustrates the roles of the major players in the process (railways, governments, and corporations) and shows how they used and directed the services of photographers and filmmakers. Although not intended, the exhibition becomes a powerful showcase for the collections of various archival and archive-like institutions.

Foregoing the usual “artistic” bias in art gallery holdings, the curators have instead drawn their material from institutions which, while rich in photographic and film holdings have, ironically, rarely considered their material to have artistic merit. As a result, many archives do not understand why anyone would want to display their documents, and tend to be reluctant to lend original documents such as photographs to art exhibitions. Under the guise of legitimate conservation concerns, archival managers (most of who come from a textual records background) refuse to admit their lack of knowledge of the uses and dissemination of visual documents, and the formalized institutional lending process safely followed by the art gallery community. Too often, any discussion of lending and exhibition outside the confines of their own institutions (which for the most part are ill-equipped for proper exhibition of material) is cut short.

For institutions crying to be noticed and appreciated by the public, this is an extremely short-sighted approach (especially when professional galleries like

the Mendel can respond to all lighting and security concerns). But this could be the topic of another article altogether.

Indeed the curators have drawn their material not from the self-conscious photographic “artists” (of which there were few in Western Canada – people who used cameras were too busy trying to make a living!), but from the everyday output of the working commercial and itinerant photographers who manned the small studios across the prairies, and who rode the rails from Winnipeg to Vancouver.

As with many other types of archival documents, it appears that photographs taken for the most practical and mundane reasons (such as exploration, surveying, advertising, journalism, police evidence, annual reports, and so on) have, with the passage of time, taken on new documentary and sometimes aesthetic values. As such they can be appreciated on various levels by later viewers of images who do not need to know or care about the original reason for their creation. Just because a photograph was never intended to be an artistic statement, does not mean that it cannot become a work of art.

Plain Truth is one of the most exciting photographic exhibitions to come out of Western Canada in years – partly because it concentrates just on the west (an area that still tends to have a low profile in Canadian art history), but also because it consists chiefly of vintage prints with only a few modern reproductions. While this may seem to be a minor point, it is crucial for those who truly appreciate photography.

Vintage prints are those produced by the photographers themselves, or at least under their supervision and in their studio, using the photographic processes contemporary to their times. There is something immensely satisfying about viewing vintage prints. It gives one a direct appreciation for the eye of the photographer, for the limitations and advantages of the photographic medium (because these materials are both better and worse than their ancestors), the aesthetics of subtle paper finishes, colours, tints, tonal gradations, and mounts, and most of all, for the feeling of “authenticity” that simply cannot be replicated by a modern process. It is also important to know how the original photographer meant his/her image to be presented to the public, and see how in the years since its creation it has been handled, or mishandled (since some are faded or have broken corners). While it may be taking comparison a bit too far, it brings to mind the difference between viewing an original Tom Thomson painting, or looking at a screened, slightly off-colour or off-register reproduction of the same canvas in a book. There really is no comparison, and one most emphatically is not a reasonable substitute for the other.

Mixed in with the 238 photographs are forty paintings, drawings, and prints; forty-six books, pamphlets, maps and albums, as well as fifteen pieces of antique photographic equipment. All are attractive, informative supplementary items, and help to relate the photographs to the contemporary currents in art, science, technology, and publishing. Yet, in my opinion, these pale in

comparison with the breathtaking impact of the powerful photographic images, and their number could have easily been halved, freeing up more wall space for additional photographs.

The range of photographers, eras, and subject matters represented is comprehensive, with the well-known alongside the obscure, the archetypal alongside the unexpected. Truly significant selections by Humphrey Lloyd Hime (such as his "The Prairie, Looking West"), by the still-unidentified 1871–1872 International Boundary Commission photographers ("Fort Garry"), and by Charles Horetzky (with his famous view of the Canadian Pacific Railway survey team at the Elbow of the North Saskatchewan River) abound.

Other notable artists include William McFarlane Notman (son of the more famous William Notman of Montreal), William Hanson Boorne of Boorne & May (responsible for "Sun Dance" and "Photographing The Passion Play at Mission, B.C."), Geraldine Moodie (with her own Sun Dance series near Battleford), Frederick Steele of Steele & Wing and later Steele & Co. (here with a well-known portrait of the Southern Alberta chief Makesto "Red Cloud"), William Oliver ("Hauling Grain to Vulcan, AB" and "Night Camp Near Maligne Lake"), Mary Schaffer (whose hand-coloured lantern slides of her travels in the Rocky Mountains are reproduced as enlarged Cibachromes), Lewis Foote (known far and wide for his photographic essay on the Royal North West Mounted Police charging the 1919 Winnipeg strikers), and William James, whose panoramic views of Prince Albert district gatherings and events (such as "The Funeral of Bernard Brewster") comprise a capsule history of pioneer life in Northern Saskatchewan.

One series of images that deserves of all the superlatives one can summon is the thirteen shots of the Regina and Qu'Appelle Valley areas by Oliver Buell. Buell made a name for himself with his photographic work carried out during the fateful summer of 1885 while many of the Rebellion trials were in progress. (He took the all too frequently uncredited two shots of Riel in the courtroom.) Buell is one of the very few photographers who have managed to capture the grandeur and clarity of the prairie landscape and sky with such skill.

Of the previously unknown gems, the five ca. 1925 landscapes by Medicine Hat's Gainsborough Studio stand out for their composition, delicate hand-colouring, and subtle tonal gradation. On the other hand, for sheer impact, the harshly lit photo of a dirt and straw-littered corpse with a ring of sober onlookers from the collection of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Museum has no equal in this exhibition.

However, like all reviewers, I enjoy the process of second guessing the final selection and presentation of the exhibition, and of course reserve the right to substitute what I think should have been included (with no disrespect to the curators).

In this particular instance, I am of the opinion that four seminal prairie photographers were significantly underrepresented considering their stature and achievements. The first is George Anderton, the father of all Canadian prairie photography and the first resident photographer of the old North West Territories (including Fort Walsh, Medicine Hat, and Macleod). His presence is noted by only two small and rather ordinary images of the CPR bridge at Medicine Hat. Considering his pioneering and voluminous work on Fort Walsh, the North West Mounted Police, and the First Nations between 1876 and 1910, a large body of images was unjustly overlooked.

The second photographer whose talent is not fully shown is Charles Mathers, Edmonton's first resident photographer from 1893 to 1905. He is represented by a self-portrait from his Ontario period, a few advertising cabinet cards, two gravure booklets, and two vintage images affixed to glass. Considering the breadth of his work (from portraiture to commercial/industrial), its exceptionally high quality, and the fact that a large number of vintage images and albums survive, he seems to have been shortchanged as well.

Thirdly, it is almost a crime to see the great Calgary photographer Harry Pollard, active from 1899 to 1950, represented by only two images of stereotypical "pointing Indians," for which no context is supplied. A little research would have unearthed the fact that these appeared in the RCMP quarterly *Scarlet & Gold*, where they were credited to *Police Gazette*; they were meant to be illustrations for stories of the victory of law enforcement over "blood-thirsty savages." Ironically, one of Pollard's great strengths was his friendly and knowledgeable relationships with the chiefs and headmen of the Blackfoot Confederacy. As a result he took arguably the finest portraits of prairie First Nations individuals during the 1910s and 1920s that still exist. Regretfully, examples of these much more impressive works were left out. I desperately hope that Pollard will not be remembered solely for these two weak images.

Finally, conspicuous by his near absence (save for one image) is the pre-eminent prairie panoramic photographer, John Gibson. Active from 1907 to 1945 in Winnipeg, Regina, and finally Saskatoon, Gibson's Cirkut views of harvesting and threshing operations and crews are, in my opinion, the finest in all of Western Canadian photographic history. (The catalogue identifies these as "Circuit" views; "Cir Kut" was his camera's brand name.) His high quality work on such a fundamentally important subject is sorely missed in the context of this show.

The film component of the exhibition was not, and perhaps could not be as strong as the still images, even though the cream of the West's pioneer cinematographers – Byron Harmon, Edgar Rossie, Dick Bird – are represented. There is a rich selection of twenty-four western archival films (both documentary and fiction – most of which have never seen the light of day before in whole or in part) and three stations to view them (including one corner curtained off to resemble an old storefront cinema). Not too surprisingly, most

visitors did not have the patience to sit and watch for more than a minute or two. The moving images thus reverted to their original role as amusing side-shows – from which little was learned. (I overheard several visitors who even missed the point that these films were shot in Western Canada!)

This is no comment on the Mendel's setup, but rather on the nature of the modern gallery visitor, who seems to be willing to only spend a certain amount of time and thought on exhibit displays, here dealing with one of the most underrated and unresearched media in Western Canadian history. Let it be said that there definitely is a long and interesting history of prairie and Rocky Mountain film production that deserves an in-depth examination on its own.

Although I cannot put forward any new ideas, perhaps a different approach to the showing of films within a multiple-media exhibition is needed, something that would help to tighten the connection with wall mounted works. As well, for practical reasons, only VHS dubs of the films could be shown in *Plain Truth*, and like other facsimilies, video can never match the unique and impressive qualities of cinefilm.

Minor criticisms aside, *Plain Truth* cannot help but demonstrate clearly that Western Canadian photographers and cinematographers were good – not adequate, but very good. There is no hint that they came out to the frontier because they could not make it in Toronto, Ottawa, or Montreal. Rather there is a sense that they operated at a high level of expertise, confidence, and openness to challenge, and were almost *compelled* to set forth to tackle the documenting of a new environment and era, instead of settling for safe but mundane studio work on Yonge Street.

To accompany the exhibition, the Mendel Art Gallery has published an eighty-eight-page catalogue containing three essays – one each by the two curators, and another by Sheila Petty, professor of Film Studies at the University of Regina. Each of the authors gives the reader good background information and new insights on the types of images selected for the exhibition, on the themes running through Western Canadian photographic and film history, and on the creation, marketing, distribution, purpose, and use of film and photographs. With twenty-one full colour, twenty-four black and white, and four film still reproductions, as well as ten pages of detailed descriptions of all the works in the exhibition, it deserves a permanent place on any history lover's bookshelf.

All in all, Ring and Bell have assembled an admirable and compelling exhibition which represents and explores many of the "truths" about Western Canada. Although it sounds banal, this exhibition is a "must-see." Not only will it expose a wider audience to the rich, authentic, and previously unknown photographic and film heritage of Western Canada (and by association the archives that store this material); but in so doing will also help to correct the east-west imbalance in our appreciation of Canadian media. Managers of archival institutions and media programs should take notice – perhaps they

may start to consider letting their more visually attractive documents (providing they are stable) leave the confines of the stacks. The general public may even start to take note of their existence.

Regrettably, *Plain Truth* is currently slated to travel only to the Mackenzie Gallery (Regina) and the Glenbow Museum (Calgary). Most Central Canadian galleries (including both the National Gallery and the Canadian Museum of Civilization) passed on it. Another opportunity for other parts of the country to become familiar with Western Canadian history and art falls on deaf ears.

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Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America. JEWISH MUSEUM, New York, until January 1998; MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Baltimore, February – May 1998.

Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America was a well-conceived and intellectually challenging travelling exhibition of portraits of Jews in America. Consisting of works from the Colonial and early Federal period, primarily drawn from the American Jewish Historical Society of Waltham, Massachusetts, a little-known, but rich collection of American Judaica, and from the Jewish Historical Society of New York City, one of the major North American collections of Judaica, *Facing the New World* was the first major exhibition to present the history of the leading Jewish families of Baltimore, Charleston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond from the 1700s to the 1830s. The rich display of beautiful portraits was accompanied by artifacts, archival documents, and a well-researched and written catalogue.

The main thesis of the exhibition was that Jews in early America were part of a diverse group of colonists all attempting to establish an “American” identity and, when they commissioned portraits of themselves, they chose to be depicted in the same way as others of their class. Although they maintained their strikingly different religious customs, this was not revealed in the portraits. One cannot look at a portrait of a Colonial Jew and say, “Ah, this person is Jewish.” As Ellen Smith, author of one of the essays in the catalogue, reminds us, the idea of “American” was only being developed at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, “as people of very diverse origins were slowly assimilated into a distinctive, yet open, society, which was constantly recruiting new members.”

The exhibition was a veritable who’s who of Jewish families and American artists. One of its most interesting components was the large number of portraits from some single families. In particular the Levy-Franks family has left