

# Exhibition Reviews

**Pop Photographica: Photograph's Objects in Everyday Life 1842–1969.**  
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, 26 April to 20 June 2003.

The most eye-catching piece in *Pop Photographica: Photograph's Objects in Everyday Life 1842–1969* is a photograph of a young couple on their wedding day, framed with snazzy gold paper and trimmed with bright paper decoupage. What makes this object stand out is that the photograph is not in a picture frame or in an album: it rests inside a glass bottle. The exhibit “Pop Photographica,” curated by Daile Kaplan, has brought this and other unusual photographic objects together at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

“Everyday” photographs, those taken by non-professionals often only for intimate purposes and destinations such as the family album, seem to be attracting renewed attention in the eyes of some academics, artists, and hobbyists.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, this type of photography is called “vernacular photography,” recognizing that it is a genre of photography likely never intended for public display or academic analysis – almost like a language or dialect shared among a smaller community of speakers. Kaplan, a former photographer, is also an author, auctioneer, curator, and Vice President and Director of Photographs at Swann Galleries auction house in New York. A self-described champion of vernacular photography, Kaplan has coined the term “pop photographica” as a catch-all phrase she uses to describe “the convergence of photography and popular culture.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Geoffrey Batchen states that “throughout the twentieth-century most histories have tenaciously focused on the artistic ambitions of the medium [of photography], excluding all other genres except as they complement a formalist art-historical narrative” and that attention to vernacular photography is long overdue. “Vernacular Photographies,” *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 262. Countless contemporary artists, including Canadian artist Carolyn Meili and others, use vernacular photography in their installations to explore aspects of identity, social relationships, and historic perspectives.

2 Daile Kaplan, *Pop Photographica: Photography's Objects in Everyday Lives 1842–1969* (Toronto, 2003), p. 19. (The catalogue title is the same as the title of the key essay.)

The emphasis in *Pop Photographica* is not on the photographic image, the likenesses created by the camera, rather, the focus is on the objects themselves, as functional, three-dimensional objects in which photographs have been embedded. In this exhibit, the physical and material nature of photographs is on display and the image plays a secondary role. From the first interpretive panel, Kaplan claims she will elucidate these unusual objects using material culture precepts in which the object speaks for the culture that created it.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the exhibit's greatest downfall is that it fails to situate the objects in any historic context, whether by taking the material culture route or by more traditional document-based historic research.

Many of the photographic objects in *Pop Photographica* date from the Victorian period, emerging with the birth of photography. One of the earliest objects in *Pop Photographica* is a sewing purse, containing scissors, a thimble and needles, and decorated on the exterior with calotype portraits of Queen Victoria. The French government gave this to the Queen as a wedding present in 1841 in honour of her marriage to Prince Albert. Unique objects, belonging to the elite created by artisans using the newest technologies, are grouped together in *Pop Photographica* with unique objects hand-crafted for ordinary people for everyday use. An example of this is the hand-sewn rag doll whose face is a photo transferred onto fabric. The photo is of a little African-American girl, most likely the doll's owner. Whether crafted by amateurs or by artisans, these photographic objects were tied intimately to their owners (to the point of bearing the owner's face). They commemorate and celebrate the intimacies of an individual's – often a *female* individual's – life.

While these personal and unique objects represent the majority of artefacts on view in *Pop Photographica*, Kaplan also includes mass produced objects. They bear images as well, but were not created using original photographs. Perhaps these items were included to fulfil the problematic requirements of her coined phrase “pop photographica.” As Kaplan notes herself in the catalogue, pop photographica is “a hybrid genre that defies simple categorization”<sup>4</sup> – yet this “genre” with which she wrestles is an artificial categorization of her own making! The viewer also wrestles with her categorization as the exhibit veers towards cookie tins emblazoned with the Royal Family. Kaplan's goal in using the term “pop” is to “acknowledge the medium's deep populist roots” as existing before the development of the Kodak camera.<sup>5</sup> The creation

3 Jules David Prowse defines material culture as understanding human culture by study of the objects created within that culture. “The underlying premise is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchase or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.” “The Truth of Material Culture: Fact or Fiction?” in Steven Lubar and W David Kingery, eds., *History from Things: Essays in Material Culture* (Washington, 1993), p. 1.

4 Kaplan, *Pop Photographica*, p. 19.

5 Daile Kaplan, “Pop Photographica in everyday life,” *Photo Review* 24, no. 4 (1999), p. 3.

of the Kodak snapshot camera, sold for the first time in 1888, is generally viewed by photography historians as the moment when vernacular photography was born, since at this point in time the power to create photos was transferred from specialized professionals to the rest of society.<sup>6</sup> However, the majority of the objects in *Pop Photographica* which were either created or used by people other than the very wealthy in society do in fact date to the post-1888 Kodak revolution. Hence Kaplan's attempt to depict photography as a pop phenomenon from its earliest days is not entirely successful. This failure to communicate her concept of "popularity" with respect to the pre-1888 material must be rooted in the superficiality of the research. Only this last segment of the exhibit – which features mass produced consumer products – feels truly "popular," and contrasts sharply with the other intensely personal items. Since we are given no definition of "popular," it is difficult for the viewer to make connections between the objects in the exhibit. There are other inconsistencies in the exhibit, for instance why stop at 1969? In the catalogue, Kaplan states that by the 1960s, photography was "subsumed by a dominant commercial culture of images."<sup>7</sup> Implying that the personal connection with photographic objects has disappeared, Kaplan ignores ongoing vernacular craft practices such as transferring family photographs onto calendars, t-shirts, mugs, and even birthday cakes.

Had the material been restricted to the hand- or artisan-crafted objects created by embedding original photographs into everyday objects, there would have been many fruitful areas for exploration and analysis. A more in-depth analysis of the dichotomies between owners of different genders, American and British Victorian societies, and between different socio-economic levels could have lead viewers to understand the purpose of these unique items and the societal contexts which lead them to be produced. Unfortunately, the exhibit panels are simply descriptive and do not attempt to answer any questions viewers may have beyond "what is it?"

One example where the interpretation is insufficient is the strange pipe in which a tiny erotic photo is hidden, seen only through a secret peephole in the bowl. Kaplan states only that the creator of the pipe "facilitated a private and sometimes titillating enjoyment of photographs, when the pictures were of a risqué nature"<sup>8</sup>; this description is completely bereft of any links to the society

6 That is, only those who could afford the equipment and processing fees: it must be remembered that only some non-professionals also developed their own film. Full comprehension of picture making was still largely retained by Kodak and not their clients as they only demanded that everyday folks "press a button – we do the rest!" (Kodak's company slogan, 1888 <[www.kodak.com](http://www.kodak.com)>).

7 Daile Kaplan, *Pop Photographica*, p. 19.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 27. The actual exhibit text for this item reads: "a quotidian and functional object, such as a gentleman's smoking pipe, would have a small peephole in its stem or base, which housed a photograph."

that created the object. Rather than answering the question as to why Victorian men would have placed a secret, miniature image in a pipe, Kaplan offers an explanation so generic it could have referred to any number of societies, cultures or practices.

Like Kaplan, Lynda Klich has also explored a genre of Victorian material culture while studying at the New York Institute of Fine Arts. Klich's analysis of photographic postcards provides concrete answers as to why certain objects would take different physical forms. Like much of the objects on display in *Pop Photographica*, photographic postcards were also owned and collected predominantly by women. A number of collectors of photo postcards were men, and like the peephole pipe, many "men's" postcards were erotic. Klich writes: "often, pornographic cards used exotic, mythological or allegorical themes to elide the tension between the indexical quality of the photograph and the strict, if not always enforceable, laws against pornography."<sup>9</sup> Klich provides insight into why an item like the pipe may exist. Pornography laws or social morés are not mentioned by Kaplan in her interpretation of the pipe's function, nor is this object linked to any others in Victorian society that may have been produced for a similar purpose.

The history of photography has no unity, writes photography historian John Tagg. "What alone unites the diversity of sites in which photography operates is the social formation itself: the specific historical spaces for representation and practice, which it constitutes... It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such."<sup>10</sup> Viewing *Pop Photographica*, Tagg's words provoke us to question why Kaplan is so determined to tie all these objects together. How can material from differing cultures, time periods, and social strata be brought together intellectually: how can meaning be given to the objects if they are not examined in their historical contexts? Items in which the use is more apparent, such as paperweights, are described more fully. But it is the strange and unusual – from marriage altars to wedding photographs captured in a glass bottle – that are left for us to puzzle over. What about that wedding photo in the bottle? Did a sailor make it as a wedding gift, placing the photo in the bottle rather than a model ship? Or is this part of a tradition of decoupage? Because *Pop Photographica* is silent on the creators and usage of these objects, we are left as Tagg describes, watching the "flickering." Admittedly the strange beauty of the objects is compelling, but not in and of itself informative.

Kaplan notes in the catalogue that "typologies associated with pop photographica – jewellery, clothing, kitchenware, souvenirs, personal accessories, household objects – may place an artifact within a larger context, but its his-

9 Lynda Klich, "Little Women: The Female Nude in the Golden Age of Picture Postcards," *Visual Resources* XVII, p. 443.

10 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 63.

torical importance and commercial or artistic value are less accessible.”<sup>11</sup> However photo objects or vernacular photography – whatever definitions one chooses to use to describe this material – is found throughout public institutions, including Canadian archives. They are home to countless handmade albums, daguerreotypes encased in locket, tintypes with homemade frames, snapshots, even homemade photo postcards. They are donated every day, most commonly as a sub-component of more “official” collections (for example, the countless family photographs that arrive alongside publicity photographs of well-known public figures). The historical importance and context is not less accessible, as Kaplan claims. Even when knowledge of the exact identity of the creator has vanished, clues to the importance of photographic objects lie everywhere around us, including the contextual documentation that accompanies them, or in the other documents they are associated with in the donation.

The power of personal photographs, such as portraits, is the way they entrance the viewer and allow them to create memories for the individuals depicted.<sup>12</sup> Often the viewer connects in a very personal way to photographic images and can easily self-project, create narratives, identifying with the subject of a photograph. However, without comprehending the societal context – in terms of economics, issues, events, philosophies – neither the images nor the objects in this exhibit can be fully understood. While still enjoyable for its aesthetic beauty and uniqueness of its contents, *Pop Photographica* is ultimately as carnivalesque as the typographic fonts on the exhibit walls. Its dimly lit atmosphere of invited intrusion presents a glimpse of beautiful, weird, and rare things, cloaked in the mystery of unknowing.

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**“Give Peace a Chance”: Selected Documents from the Antiwar and Disarmament Movement.** YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, MANUSCRIPTS AND ARCHIVES, New Haven, CT., 28 January to 6 April 2003.

This timely exhibit, which opened two weeks before one of the largest coordinated international peace demonstrations in history, provides a thought-

11 Kaplan, *Pop Photographica*, p. 24. This problem also may be rooted in the fact that many objects in *Pop Photographica* are from private collections – that is, gleaned from the marketplace.

12 Marianne Hirsch terms this phenomenon “postmemory” and first applied it to the context of Holocaust photographs viewed by the children of Holocaust survivors. She has also looked at postmemory in family photos in her book, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997).