

JULY 30 - AUGUST 27, 2016
THREE KINDS OF ABSTRACTION
VIKKY ALEXANDER, JOI T. ARCAND, ANGELA FAMA, BRIAN LYE, JAMES NIZAM, ED SPENCE, NOAH SPIVAK

CURATED BY APRIL THOMPSON

This exhibition is concerned with the increased presence of abstraction in our daily experiences. It assembles the work of seven artists who engage with three kinds of abstraction to varying degrees. The word abstraction derives from the Latin *abstractus*, literally 'drawn away.' When we think of something becoming abstracted, we often think of separation—the removal of a quality or idea from its origins. The development and ongoing regeneration of capitalism has relied heavily on processes of abstraction. Money, an abstract constituent of value to begin with, has become further abstracted in finance capital where one can make money from money. The economics of land speculation and hedge funds depend on the risk of abstract monetary values either inflating or receding in response to events and trends. In the current information age, profound abstractions are embedded in the social and technological realms to further conceal processes of labour and the interactions between people. When abstraction comes to mediate reality in such powerful ways, how does art respond?

Photography has always held a unique relationship to abstraction because of its ability to dislocate an image from its unique moment in time and space. *Three Kinds of Abstraction* examines the corollary between heightened forms of abstraction in society and shifting forms of visuality in photography. The artworks on display are not abstractions of the world, but representations of the abstracted nature of the world. They engage with the realities of lived abstraction without recourse to the visual language of modernist abstraction.¹

In order to understand how everyday abstractions align with shifts in contemporary photography, we must first relocate our attention toward the use of space. Photographs are traditionally understood as indivisible from the device of the camera. This situates the medium in a time-based narrative that is rooted in the nineteenth century and conjoined with industry. Consequently, photographs—and by extension, their makers—are often perceived in relation to matters of time and place. This exhibition differs by prioritizing how the medium operates in space over the primacy of the device. Here, it is important to distinguish between space and place. Undifferentiated space, as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has posited, becomes place only once it is known and familiarized.² The artists featured in this exhibition are not concerned with localized ideas of place, but rather take up critical engagement with the constructs of space outside of how we have come to perceive it.

Ed Spence's *Infinite Updates/Unlimited Artefacts III* is a hand-assembled collage of a photograph of a sculpture on a plinth. The material of the original sculpture was inherently volatile, made from an iridescent heat transfer foil commonly used in textiles and sign-making. Unsited to the rigidity of statuary, the foil sculpture could only temporarily retain its shape before unfurling itself. The atomization of the final image, wherein an excised portion of the photograph is re-arranged and glued back onto the surface, mimics the appearance of a digital glitch. Yet, where we read a digital glitch as random interference, this square by contrast acts as purposeful reorganization. Its careful tessellation takes on a paradoxically hand-made quality, becoming order within disorder.

Angela Fama's *It's A Sign 002* engages with the uncanny repetition of the empty signage that litters the postmodern landscape. Part of a larger series in which Fama documents the relics of defunct signs across highways of North America, the captured object takes on a plaintive quality when weathered and stripped of its signifiers. These objects, removed from their origin as trees as well as their functionality as signs, serve no purpose other than to add another layer of visuality to the landscape. It is a layer that merges back into the scene and demands recognition as an altered fragment of it. Another loop within their materiality is added to their final form as art object, printed on dibond – a strong aluminum composite designed to print high quality graphic or text in signage.

The absurdity of the sign surfaces again in Brian Lye's series *Positive Affirmation Night Lights*. Lye plays with the self-help rhetoric that has become heavily prescribed to quash our daily insecurities. There is a humorous irony between the bold empowering statements and the flimsy material of these cheaply bejeweled illuminated signs, which barely manage to project their beam. These objects require the photographic device and its deposits to be disarticulated; the lamp shade is composed of analogue slides and a film canister, which lies hidden within to channel the flashlight's beam. By uprooting the prescribed practicality of these materials in the service of an altogether different purpose, Lye highlights the arbitrary nature of the devices we buy and use.

Joi T. Arcand explores the unstable materiality of memory via the outmoded apparatus of the Viewmaster toy. To create hand-made dioramas, Arcand spliced together family photographs and imagined settings. The lived moments are re-situated into three-dimensional dioramas and eventually further flattened into film. The resulting brightly saturated snapshots benefit both the surreal nature of memory and the original use of the Viewmaster toy as a touristic souvenir for viewing exotic postcards. In similar ways, Vikky Alexander's cibachrome print is both luminous and faded, creating an unstable snapshot of a layered moment. The title of Alexander's work, *Between Dreaming and Living #6*, articulates the very space in which memory exists. This series also signals a crossover moment in Alexander's practice, when she moved from working with the figure to working with the landscape, as well as from working with appropriated imagery to her own images.

The complex space of the lived moment is also explored in the work of Noah Spivak, who used alternative dark room processes to create abstract time lapses of his daily routine. A hand-made pinhole camera was loaded in the dark room then nestled into the bed of his truck before driving about his day. There is a tension between Spivak's use of basic traditional photographic technologies (light sensitive paper, a lens-less camera) and his final images, which in their non-representation would have qualified them as "incorrect" or blemished photographs by earlier nineteenth century standards despite being made by quintessential "photographic" methods.

The primary methods of photography are also explored in the work of James Nizam, though renewed by the contemporary conditions of commodity circulation and image reproduction. Nizam's *Article* is based on a previous artwork, *Drill Holes Through Studio Wall* (2012), a photograph of a sphere of light created through drilling apertures through the exterior wall of his studio. After the work gained substantial visibility online as a searchable image for "light art," it was appropriated as a printed graphic and sold as a T-shirt in a U.S. based fashion retail outlet. Nizam, who chanced upon the appropriation, now re-situates it within the space of the gallery where it retains traces of its altered materiality from original sculptural space, to photograph, to online content, to printed commodity, and back to art object.

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Processes of dissection run throughout many of these works and can operate as an antidote to the shattering effects of abstraction. Shattering is the disintegration of an ensemble, a breaking down of cohesion. Dissection, however, is a means of understanding the whole by unpacking its various parts. The social circuits of production and consumption have normalized abstraction in our daily experiences: in commodity fetishism, in excessive land speculation, in the recurrence of economic crashes. With the abstract becoming concrete, we are placed in unfamiliar territory in which the spaces of social organization are becoming increasingly layered. *Three Kinds of Abstraction* monitors how these shifts are reverberating within contemporary photographic works. It draws together a selection of artists who use the spatial properties of the medium to occupy a rare and critical viewing space from which the stitching of these layers can be detected.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The title of this exhibition is derived from the three kinds of abstraction discussed by George Baker in his 2008 essay "Photography and Abstraction," published in *Words and Pictures*, ed. Charlotte Cotton and Alex Klein (Los Angeles: Aperture/LACMA, 2010) 358-382

² Yi-Fu Tuan in Helen Westgeest, *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (Valiz: Amsterdam/New York, 2009), 100.

BIOGRAPHIES

VIKKY ALEXANDER is a leading contemporary artist who has exhibited internationally since 1981. Working as a photographer, sculptor, collagist, and installation artist, Alexander has been recognized within Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Europe, and the United States. Alexander has been a professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Victoria since 1992. She is represented by the Trepanier Baer Gallery in Calgary, Alberta.

JOI T. ARCAND is a photo-based artist from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan, currently living in Ottawa. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Saskatchewan in 2005 and since then has exhibited across Canada and internationally. She was the co-founder of The Red Shift Gallery in Saskatoon and in 2012, created *kimiwan* 'zine, a magazine for Indigenous artists and writers.

ANGELA FAMA's work investigates themes of meaning, emotion, memory and change. A multidisciplinary artist, often working with photography. Fama is interested in exploring the tension inherent in our collective desire for both the temporal and timeless. Born in Tennessee, raised in Ontario and Zimbabwe, Fama currently works out of Vancouver, BC.

BRIAN LYE is a filmmaker and visual artist who lives and works in Vancouver. His award-winning films have screened internationally at many film festivals around the world. He is currently completing his Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of British Columbia.

JAMES NIZAM is a Canadian artist based in Vancouver. His practice investigates photography within an expanded field of the sculptural. He has exhibited in Canada and internationally. Nizam holds a BFA from the University of British Columbia and is represented by Gallery Jones in Vancouver, Birch Contemporary in Toronto, Maerz Galerie in Leipzig/Berlin, and Christophe Guye Galerie in Zurich.

ED SPENCE is a Vancouver-based artist whose work spans many disciplines and calls upon text, photography and public installation. Spence studied fine art at University of British Columbia, Okanagan with a focus on Video and Sculpture. His work has been exhibited in Los Angeles, Montreal, Vancouver, the United Kingdom and Germany.

NOAH SPIVAK is a recent graduate of Emily Carr University for Art and Design, who majored in photography and sculpture but retains heavy interests in installation and curatorial practices. He lives and works in Vancouver.

HELGA PAKASAAR is a curator and writer based in Vancouver. In addition to an independent practice, she has been Curator at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver since 2003. Her writing on visual art and photography has been widely published.

IAN WALLACE has played a critical role in the development of contemporary art since the late 1960s, through his important work as an art historian, critic and educator, and through an art practice that queries the possibility of representation as a method of constructing meaning in the world. Based in Vancouver, Wallace was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in December 2012.

APRIL THOMPSON is an MA candidate in the Critical Curatorial Studies program at the University of British Columbia. She has worked within Research, Curatorial, Education and Commercial capacities at the Frick Collection in New York City, The National Portrait Gallery of Australia, The National Gallery of Australia, and the Natural History Museum, London, U.K. Her curatorial and art historical practice is geared toward contemporary and modern art, photographic practices, postmodern geography and spatial politics.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday July 29, 2016, 7:00 PM

IN CONVERSATION: Ed Spence with Helga Pakasaar and Ian Wallace
Thursday August 4, 2016, 7:00 PM

Featuring exhibiting artist Ed Spence in conversation with renowned artist Ian Wallace and Presentation House Gallery curator Helga Pakasaar, this event considers the ways in which the photo-conceptual avant garde photographers emerging in Vancouver from the late 1960s have become subject to the creative branding, artistic expectations and historical narrative of the city.

CURATOR'S TOUR WITH APRIL THOMPSON
Saturday, August 13, 2016, 2:00 PM

Curator April Thompson wishes to extend her gratitude to important mentors who guided her through this endeavour: Jaleh Mansoor, Scott Watson, John O'Brian, and Kimberly Phillips, as well as the Staff at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and her UBC peers in the Art History, Visual Art and Critical Curatorial Programs.

This exhibition is possible through support from the Killy Foundation and the Audain Endowment for Curatorial Studies through the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory in collaboration with the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at The University of British Columbia.

Access Gallery is a platform committed to emergent and experimental art practices. We enable critical conversations and risk taking through new configurations of audience, artists and community.

