

REVIEWS



Angela Grauerholz, *Disparition (Disappearance)*, 1994,
gelatin silver print, ca. 48 x 72".

MONTREAL

ANGELA GRAUERHOLZ

MUSÉE D'ART
CONTEMPORAIN

Brooding, heavy, sometimes sentimental or even mundane, Angela Grauerholz's photographs play on our nostalgia for that style of documentary photography pioneered by August Sander and André Kertész, depicting scenes that range from a couple unloading their bags from a car, to people standing on line, to the interior of an opera house. But Grauerholz uses this style to different effect. Blurred and out of focus, homogenized by the dark sepia tones that permeate each of the 33 Cibachromes, her images are less the real thing than an evocative simulation of the "authentic" artifact. All of the works in this exhibition are scaled to recall Romantic painting (for the 1992 Documenta Grauerholz mounted an exhibition of her works along with German Romantic paintings), while their standardized frames serve to accentuate the pictorial side of photography.

The textural contrasts and quirky obscurity of Grauerholz's photographs question our stereotypical assumptions about beauty and the tension between the photograph as document and as artwork. *Paar* (Pair, 1994), a hazy close-up of a woman's face captures a momentary glance so that, as in *Lessing*, 1992, the fragment, the favored trope of Romanticism, becomes the site of meaning. In *La Bibliothèque* (The library, 1992) two men stand conversing in front of

a wall literally constructed of books—an obvious metaphor for the collective accumulation of knowledge as material memory of which the photograph is the visual record. The notion of memory as material is explored in *La Conductrice* (The conductor, 1992), in which light floods a streetcar, creating a dreamlike sense of unreality, emphasizing that, paradoxically, we are looking at a record of a fleeting moment. *Mozart Room*, 1993, is an overtly romantic scene of window panes, muslin curtains, and pristine white walls in which light effects work in a variety of ways. Parallels exist between the emptiness of this interior and the photograph as an empty field in which images are reconstituted. Because they hinge so much on ambiguity per se, we find ourselves going from one image to the next, trying to construct meaning not from what we recognize but from the ineffable world evoked by Grauerholz's neutral tonalities and expressive use of contrast and movement.

Both *Druid I*, 1990–91, a close-up of the light/dark patterns of a tree trunk, and *Druid II*, 1990–91, with its tangled blur of tree branches and leaf fronds read as complex abstract patterns, as if they were images inside the mind rather than of the external world. The decontextualized environment in *Disparition* (Disappearance, 1994), in which an old woman can be seen walking toward a tree, recalls how images appear to us in memory, as somewhat ethereal and free of references to a specific place. As if to underscore this evanescent quality, Grauerholz presented *Églogue ou Filling the Landscape*, 1994, a six-drawer Plexiglas filing cabinet on wheels filled with 27 archival boxes containing 216 photos with a series of words that are loosely associated ("Landscape," "Screen," "Dense," "Barrier," "Resisting," "Exclusive," "Hidden," "Unseen") embossed on their covers. With all those fragments of visual experience neatly boxed up and hidden away it was as if the landscape had been filed rather than filled. The viewer could only examine the contents with the assistance of an archivist wearing white cotton gloves. Treading that fine line between the photo image as document and as a trigger of memory, this four year overview of Angela Grauerholz's most recent photographs tentatively questioned the "confrontational gaze" of conventional still photography.

—John Grande