

## Reviews

### MONTREAL

#### Angela Grauerholz

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Many of the thirty-two large black-and-white and sepia-toned Cibachrome photographs in this exhibit show us people who, despite their presence in a public venue, are engaged in a private activity or lost in thought. A queue of solitary individuals, newspapers in hand, waits in a parking lot; a middle-aged couple in bathing suits lounges on a blanket, the man absorbed in a book; two men talk in a tavern; two other men carry on a discussion in a cavernous library lined from floor to ceiling with books. All of these photographs, most of

which were made over the last four years, have the graphic authority and the human interest of vintage Cartier-Bresson. But in Grauerholz's photographs a haze falls between the subject and the viewer. Her soft-focus images appear veiled, somehow beyond reach.

In this, they invite comparison to the blurry mock-impressionism adopted by turn-of-the-century pictorialists. But Grauerholz's predecessors would never have deemed worthy of notice the pedestrian subject matter characteristic of many of her

images. Rather than representing an attempt to look painterly, the vaporous quality in Grauerholz's work questions the viability of the documentary mode in photography, a nod to a climate in which the straight photograph is no longer believed to have any significant ontological relation to the persons or objects to which it refers. Along with the more abstract landscape images that accompanied them, Grauerholz's documentary photographs manifest an almost palpable ambivalence towards her chosen medium.

The play between the knowable and the unknowable at work in Grauerholz's landscape and documentary images was reiterated in the installation piece titled *Églogue* or *Filling the Landscape*, which stood alone in the exhibition's final room. Consisting of a plexiglass cabinet containing twenty-seven boxes of landscape photographs, most of them never exhibited before, the work seemed to promise an easy entrance to the artist's personal archive or "museum" until one realized that the images were accessible only when a white-gloved attendant was present to display them. The cover of each box was embossed with words that

suggested the conceptual system by which the artist classifies her photographs. One read PARKS PUBLIC POPULAR DESERTED PERIPHERAL OPEN EXPANSIVE WATCHED, another HORIZONTAL.

When Robert Frank published, fifteen years after the fact, an unedited contact sheet from his revered series *The Americans*, viewers were taken aback by the way in which the authority of his famous photographs was subverted. A peek at the master's files served to undermine the seeming infallibility of what had become icons of photographic history. Here, there was the expectation that a similar dénouement awaited the viewer. Yet Grauerholz has never sought to establish photographic verity. Instead, her bank of landscape images reinforced the view — apparent everywhere in this exhibit — of reality as inexhaustible and impenetrably thick with meaning, to be apprehended, if at all, not as an image one can capture but as an atmosphere of incertitude in which we are all immersed.

Penny Cousineau



Angela Grauerholz  
*Les Touristes* 1992  
Cibachrome  
48 x 72 in.