

Lifeworks

Missing persons

My grandfather discovered that he was going to die while sitting across a desk from his doctor. Apparently the doctor reviewed the test results, looked up, and said, “You have lung cancer. You’re going to die.” At least that’s how my grandmother remembers it. My 77-year-old grandfather spent the winter cross-country skiing and the spring playing golf. Six months after the doctor’s pronouncement, he was dead.

(No) Vacancy, a quiet group exhibition on view at the Art Gallery of Hamilton until Jan. 6, 2002, claims to be about “presence and absence in postmodern representations of the human body.” Clearly, it is. There are no traditional figurative images or textbook sketches of human anatomy here. From a scholarly perspective, the exhibition opens up a flood of possibilities for a dissertation on postmodernism. But from a casual viewer’s point of view, *(No) Vacancy* isn’t as much about the body as it is about the loss of the body:

of any body, or of somebody. After all, postmodernism is predicated on the notion that the interpretation of an artwork does not exist outside the personal experience of either the viewer or the creator. The exhibition’s signature piece, *Sofa* (1980) by Richard Robertson, encapsulates these ideas, and it’s an excellent start to this exhibition.

I knew the influence my grandfather had on my life; what I wasn’t prepared for was the effect of his absence. As I looked at Robertson’s *Sofa* that absence was recalled to me. This piece is as much about what isn’t there, as about what is. A large-scale pencil drawing of a couch shrouded in a white sheet, *Sofa* is true to its realist style right down to the Ken Danby-like detail in the parquet flooring. It could easily be mistaken for a photograph. Yet a closer look reveals scratches and folds in the paper. These conscious imperfections remind the viewer that this picture is a painstakingly rendered construction.

The result is strangely dramatic and understated. The viewer is left to draw from personal experience and insert an absent body onto the couch and into the drawing.

Les Levine’s series of untitled photo-based aquatints on paper is equally vigil-like, but laments the missing body more overtly than *Sofa*. Each of the eight images contains a circle of candles; inside each circle is a different piece



Brian Wood, *Array*, 1977. Chromogenic prints on paper.

of clothing: eyeglasses, a bandana, sweater, jacket, T-shirt, a man’s underwear, socks and shoes. Reaching the end of the series, the viewer is almost able to construct an image of this person on the basis of his clothing selection, and consequently to postulate ethnicity, character and social status. Again, the actual individual is missing. Except here the substitute is someone imagined rather than known.

Before the experience of this exhibition becomes too morose, the curator includes several works over 20 years old



Richard Robertson, *Sofa*, 1980. Graphite and wash on paper.

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of Wintario, 1980

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that reflect the decades they were created in. Jasper Johns' *The Critic Sees* (1967) adds a subtle edge of levity to the show. Johns, an American with links to the Pop art movement of the 1970s, has created a primarily white piece of paper with a pair of embossed eyeglasses in the centre. On each eyepiece is a sheet of acetate containing the word "mouth." *Trapped Shirt* (1977) by Andrew Smith is a white shirt pressed into handmade paper and encased behind glass. The artist calls this process "pulp painting." This piece echoes Levine's preoccupation with clothing (rather than the physical self) as a source of identity.

Finally, Brian Wood's *Array* (1977) would be thematically out of place if it were not for its connection to *Sofa*. Wood's background in cinematography and Cubist painting is apparent in his collage-style grouping of square colour photographs. The image of a middle-aged white man is recognizable, but overlapping him are other photographs of a 1970s suburban home, cars, furniture and other people. His "body" is thus made up of material and domestic comforts.

If *Sofa* is the opening line of this exhibition, Geneviève Cadieux's work is the exclamation point. Known for her work with large-scale colour photographs of human body parts, Cadieux makes a natural addition to *(No) Vacancy* with *untitled (Dos)* (1994), a close-up photograph of a human back. Gender is not clear, but judging by the gray hair the subject is older. What we see is a clinical view of a person's back, complete with imperfections and flaws so different from the airbrushed images we are used to seeing in magazines.

What we also see in Cadieux's work is vulnerability, and this is true of the entire exhibition. Any art show concerning the body can't help but include references to the limitations of our physical selves. Mortality is the great unifier, not only because we will all eventually die, but more importantly because we all know someone who has.

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