

“the brothel without walls”

With May being the month of CONTACT, a premiere annual photography festival in the Greater Toronto Area, the two photo-based exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Hamilton could be located in opposite corners of what Marshall McLuhan described as “the brothel without walls.” One, “Posing Beauty in African American Culture” explores representation of beauty as a racialized act, and through a wide range of lenses by photographers who are worlds and centuries apart – from contemporary artist Carrie Mae Weems all the way back to Edward Curtis. The other, “End of the American Road: Terence Byrnes” offers a 40-year exposé of people in Springfield, Ohio, “small town America” as described by the curator, from the perspective of a Montreal-based artist.

“Pervasive Influence: Exploring the social and political consequences of the medium of photography, in a world devoted to the image” is the theme of CONTACT 2010. The curatorial statement for the festival references the machinations of mass media as discussed by McLuhan, and poses questions of illusion and authority of image and visual saturation. Although the analogy of the sex trade as a metaphor for all things selling out is fundamentally flawed, in the case of photography, and its public exhibition, the association between exposure of a private moment and consumer interests is obvious. With it, inevitably comes the question of exploitation. For most of us ordinary and extraordinary people, photography is a means of recording happy, proud and other significant moments. What “average” Canadian doesn’t have pictures of graduations, weddings, babies, or with obituaries? As a political tool, photographs can draw attention to injustice. They can effect social change as did Lewis Hine’s series on child labour in the early 20th century, they can document great achievements, or they can be used in propaganda campaigns aimed at complacency and consumerism. The same framed fraction of a second that records one person’s crowning glory, also has the power to steal another’s dignity.

The recent outcry in Hamilton’s activist community over Gary Santucci’s hasty decision to exhibit footage of illegal transactions taking place at his corner of Steven Street and King brings out the ambiguous distinction between public and private space. It poses the question of who holds power over whose voice and image. Sex work may drag a private act into a commercial setting and therefore into a public forum. However, exhibiting a photograph that depicts the sex worker urinating is a clear violation of privacy, even if that bodily function transpires on a public sidewalk. Gary’s intentions, as I understand them, were to advocate for change by drawing attention to municipal hypocrisy. He and his partner Barbara Milne run a multi-disciplinary community arts centre, The Pearl Company on Steven Street, which has a tremendously positive impact on the neighbourhood, and on the larger discourse on the potential of the arts to effect change in Hamilton. It would seem a ‘no brainer’ that Santucci and Milne would get all the public support they need in order to engage an inner city community through the arts. After all, they received the City’s Arts Award for lifetime achievement in 2008. But that sense of community didn’t compute to the City’s illogical zoning that disallows theatre performances in the former factory. Given the anger and frustration that led to the

exhibition, it is no wonder that Gary also lacked the academic distance prescribed for the public presentation of art.

Santucci's exhibition demonstrated how difficult it is to maintain distance in photographs with a personal agenda. That is why we expect more from professional artists. At the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the exhibition "Posing Beauty in African American Culture" achieves great artistic merit in the depiction of some very private moments, among them Carrie Mae Weems' photograph of a mother and daughter putting on lipstick together. Weems' compositions are intimate and politically charged, yet they do not reduce the people to a message. The same cannot be said for "The End of the American Road." While Byrnes' images may well be "flecked with humour, or tenderness," as stated in the accompanying text, the academic and social distance between the subjects and the photographer portray a sense of smug superiority on the part of an outsider who visits them on an annual basis. They remind me of the reason I once drew the ire of a photography professor who thought of himself as a social activist because he took pictures of homeless people. Byrnes' picture of a white picket fence dividing two houses and their stereotypically lower class white occupants says more about abuse of privilege than it does of the people at the end of the road. The curatorial statement suggests that he "looks for things that might often be overlooked, and that many of his images show people living in poverty." This statement reflects a common trap for photographers: hiding behind a camera it is easy to objectify what appears in the lens.

Beyond the long exhausted question about a picture's meaning and message as posed by CONTACT 2010 in their theme statement, "Is the illusion images create now preferable to reality?" the reality is that a photograph is just a thing, and a flat one at that. The global village is only real for the people who manipulate it. McLuhan's legacy lies in his influence on critical thought, not in clichés and pretense. Weems clearly demonstrates that the photographic illusion of form, shape, distance, and meaning, does not need to lose perspective. The thing is the photograph, not the people it portrays. The thing is the camera, not the person selecting a frame in its viewfinder. With the big thing that photography is to contemporary artistic discourse, how we use and perceive the medium is up to people. At least Gary Santucci intended to do something to change things for the people in his pictures.