

Perdre de vue/Grey is a Color, Gray is a Colour

A project-based mode of production is now predetermining a large portion of contemporary art's discursivity. Artists are required to formulate clear hypotheses, supported by statements of intent in the affirmative mode. According to this paradigm, the work, or the research precluding it must necessarily lead to the resolution of a problem (seemingly so). But in fact, formal experimentation and chance encounters are an intrinsic part of this process. Lorna Bauer's recent production exhibited at galerie Nicolas Robert is blending these two methodologies; the first stemming from the consultation of archives, leading to precise conceptual proposals that respond to a given context and the second based on the accumulation of heterogeneous images that might or not, become public.

The photographic series *Grey is a Color, Gray is a Colour* could thus be described as an anchoring point within a larger body of works devoted to the obsolescence of the North American textile industry. The images were produced in the framework of a residency in New York during the winter/spring of 2012. In her previous work, Bauer has investigated the tension between the perception of images - still or moving - and the contingency of an event that these images attempted to record.

Alluding here to some examples of these early works will help the reader understand her multifaceted approach. Most often those experimentations are following a "two steps" temporal structure that blends the moment of production and reception. For instance, the video installation *Four Glasses* (2011) starts by displaying an arrangement of wine glasses on a table. After a few seconds, a detonation breaks contemplation and pulverizes the set-up, leaving a residue of glass shards. The artist then freezes the "aftermath" of this micro-event by collecting and integrating the material leftovers into another photographic mise en scène potently entitled *All the materials* (2011). In *What Is Not But Could Be If*, 2010, the viewer sees what appears first as a misty maritime landscape shot from a boat, but after closer scrutiny, the vista disintegrates to reveals the background curve wall (cyclo) of a photographic studio covered with sparse indexical traces - dust and footprints - left by people performing mundane duties. Bringing back the experimental setting of scientific photography or real time film that attempted to visualize phenomena of rupture in physics and perception, such small narrative cells nevertheless bypasses strict causality¹. Bauer's technical operations thus find an equivalent in the experience of a viewer who can no longer situate herself at the center of representation.

Recently, Bauer has added another layer to those mechanisms of phase shifting characterizing her early works by investigating what could be described as the "biography" of documentation. In one installation within the cycle *Eminence Grise*, 2011, she mapped out the complex trajectory of a 4 x 4 slide representing a 1987 painting by William Burroughs. The image's journey started at a sale pitch for a fundraiser at artist-run center Oboro, Montreal, during late 1980s and ended at the Musée d'art contemporain, where it was re-exhibited as part of the Triennale Québécoise in 2012. A custom-made projector for this unique slide restored the original dimensions of Burroughs' work on the wall. The other element, a text by the Vancouver artist Hank Bull then in charge of the sale, was distributed to visitors as a photocopied handout sheet. In this text, Bull explained the rhetorical tricks he had devised in order to

¹ For a more detailed analysis of those works, see Jon Knowles, *Above, Below, Before and After*, 2011 : (http://www.lornabauer.com/files/sporoboleeng3-copy-1_v2.pdf)

capitalize on the reputation of Burroughs as a writer rather than a painter. Expanding standard definitions of the readymade, this carefully researched and assembled configuration revealed the arbitrary consolidation of the author function, but it also redefined context itself as something that is made-up rather than given as a set of facts. Beyond the anecdote of the pitch that belongs to a minor episode in the history of Canadian art, Bauer was interested in Burroughs's paintings as secondary work needing many agents to establish its meaning and exchange value. In this scenario leaving much to speculation, who could bear the responsibility of distilling the auratic presence of the Burroughs painting in absentia, or to endow it with renewed salability: Bauer, Hank Bull, the museum's curators, the viewers? The photographs gathered in *Grey is a Colour*, *Gray is a Color* stand in dialectically between this recent research based installation, and Bauer's more early experimentations with the phenomenology of perception.

Using frontal shooting techniques, a group of images within the series map up quite literally the architectonics of space used to store fabrics. Most of those photographs represent commodities in a state of abandonment, rather than propped-up and available for sale. In some case (*Come In*, 2012), hastily written notes on sheets of paper plucked to the vitrines seem to address a passerby from another, distant era. At first glance, *Grey is a Colour*, *Gray is a Color* could thus signal a break in Bauer's way of working, manifesting a newfound interest in the stylistic conventions of street photography. However, the artist does not attempt to foreground a particular thematic cluster, a motif, nor tap into the phenomenology of nineteenth or early twentieth century urban experience such as the overused and melancholic (and invariably male-dominated) trope of the flâneur. Conversely, she avoids as well the historical trope of topographical imaging that follows the representation of industrial decay. Aiming the lens on the partially disused storefronts in the textile district of New York, she sets forward to renew ground to investigate once again the tension between the construction of the image and its often pieced-together perception.

Formal or rhetorical attributes of the subject at hand (the way things are put together for the viewer or passerby) are the main concern in this exhibition. The display window as a capitalist technology of seeing is chosen because it itself duplicates the photographic picture frame. In these photographs, Bauer also multiplies analogies between the fabric pattern flattened on a pane of glass and the painterly surfaces of say a canvas while simultaneously highlighting the ubiquitous use of digital flatbed scanners in image production. Adding to this, a great attention has been invested in the placement of the images as sequence to foreground the relationship between the architectural enclosure of the gallery and its counterpart of the retail-shopping district.

Bauer's exhibition title alludes to a word pun: in the United Kingdom "color" is the right spelling, while "colour" is sanctioned in Canada and the United States. This repetition also evokes the modernist trope of stripping language from its predetermined meaning, made famous by Gertrude Stein through the coining of her phrase "Rose is A Rose is A Rose." In Stein, the first iteration of the word "rose" refers to the name of a person, the second to the color, and the third to the sound of the word itself as a "pure" signifier freed from the grip of the signified. In reading Bauer's title, what we decipher and what we see are distinct, but just like Stein's programmatic sentence, all of the words in the utterance point toward an illusion of sameness when spoken out loud. This virtual dimension of color within black and white imagery will be dealt with bellow. For now, let's follow up on the clusters of references within this title, and disambiguate the way Bauer is repurposing modernist tropes. In so doing, one could easily leave the photographic register and transition toward the pictorial space, which is traditionally

equated with aesthetic autonomy. However, in her series, Bauer avoids this shift. She rather repurposes the history of medium specificity while embracing the liminality of heterogeneous meaning systems.

There are a number of exemplary episodes in the history of modern art (or even proto-modern art) where abstraction had erupted within the boundaries of representation. Having Bauer's recent work in mind, it is interesting to note that in those moments, the motif of the wall, of flattened furniture, or more potently here a segment of fabric was conflated to the picture plane. Quoting Marcel Proust, the art historian George Didi-Huberman describes a small patch of yellow wall in *View of Delf* by Vermeer as an example of enunciation (painterly meaning) erupting in the "fabric of the statement" (representation of the landscape)². The Cubist Juan Gris had painted still lifes in which the pattern of a tablecloth is superimposed on the surface of the canvas. In this phase of Cubism as well as in Vermeer's landscape, the architectural setting surrounding an isolated painterly plane produces a push-pull effect. Still bounded to perspectival space, color and motif however veil this frame through a detail that generates fascination, just like the fetishized commodity in the retail space commands the consumer to forget that objects are for sale, and thus exists in a cycle of exchange and value attribution. "Visual pleasure" can only happen when the economic bound of a subject to an object (whether art or commodity) is severed and repressed.

In *Dress/Undress* (2012), a project coauthored with artist Jon Knowles clearly linked to the works in the present exhibition, Bauer embedded this ambivalence into the construction of a situation for a viewer that, this time, was also a passerby. She and Knowles investigated the architectural specificity of two similar shop-fronts transformed into modest exhibition spaces by their current tenants – Convenience in Toronto and La Vitrine in Montreal. Instead of using the storefronts to show preexisting or new works, they slightly shifted the functionality of already existing elements within the architectural settings they were given. The project however circumvented familiar strategies of visualizing contextual markers in a fashion that could be read as either literal or metaphorical. Both locations included tattered awnings pointing toward their use as retail shops (Convenience Gallery, a corner store, La Vitrine, a men's clothier). The artists recycled the fabric of the awnings to create surrogate canvases that were swapped with their counterparts and exhibited in opposite galleries. Shaped according to the standardized formats of photographic paper, the canvases also acted as signifiers of "art value" in given urban settings, and thus eschewed any definition of the abstract as a set of given "aesthetic" or formal attributes. According to Marx, the linen of a coat cannot claim for its former brute existence when it is transformed into a commodity. The operation is irrevocable. Following a similar logic, Bauer and Knowles recalibrated the tattered fabric into simulacra of painting, but at the same time, made it clear that this translation – and their artistic gesture as such – could only occur by canceling the original context. As no information about the project was provided on the premises, the viewer was left to her own devices in order to decipher what had happened to the storefronts, and if this "display" was actually "selling" something. In *Grey is a Colour, Gray is a Color*, Bauer pursues some of the theoretical preoccupations that were at the core of *Dressing/Undressing*. As it was mentioned before, the photographs gathered here, as well as this exhibition realized with Knowles, can be understood as one step within an ongoing project that will investigate the history of "analogue" techniques of image making in relationship to the obsolescence of the textile industry. Enacting a very

² George Didi Huberman, *Devant l'image* (Paris: Minuit, 1990) 303.

productive paradox, Bauer starts her research by dealing precisely with abstract differentiation within sets of similar images (the territory of the “digital”).

In the piece *Bracket* Bauer has juxtaposed three versions of the same image under differing exposure levels (under-exposed, correctly exposed, and over-exposed), this series reveals the process of mathematical encoding and virtual content described by Vilém Flusser³. The theoretician also addresses the cultural automatisms that are distinguishing the black and white and color ontology of lens-based imagery. Because the shades of gray in the representation of a thing or a space create a sense of uniformity, Flusser emphasized that the world restored in a black and white paradigm is primarily experienced as a set of discrete encoded data. By contrast, the color image representation provides an illusion that seemingly fits better with the organic and fragmentary quality of human vision. However, according to Flusser, this mimetic feature depends on the assumption of arbitrary equivalence between the perceived world and its analogue restitution. For instance, the photographed green of leaves or the red of a fabric swatch are the result of matching precisely the exposure time of a negative during the shooting process and a set of chemical equations when the image is fixated onto a light-sensitive surface. Moreover, when a set of color photographs are exhumed and grafted into the archives of preexisting black and white images of the same historical event, new information reveals that a given narrative was based on projections and misrecognitions. For instance, by comparing two sets of similar pictures, one in color, one in black and white, it turns out that on this day of the shooting two parallel film strips, the sky was not veiled, but sunny, or the red fabric on a dress was mistaken for a beige burlap, so on and so forth. Bauer's work stems from an investigation of the most abstract and contingent features of the photographic process. However, the analysis provided by Flusser is entrenched in a purely technological dimension, and neglects the human affects embedded in an image, which in contrast lies at the heart of the artist's practice.

In a similar but different version of her *Brackets* series, the artist displays three iterations of an image of a storefront entirely covered with grey paint. Since it was repeated alongside nearly all of the other works, it thus punctuated the exhibition as such. Besides the familiar indexical rubric of the photographic - Roland Barthes's “it has been” – conveyed by this image, the repeated façade acts as a centrifugal device. It becomes a kind of blind area, fossilized, or unable to “return” the gaze. Its momentarily frozen existence points toward an interval in the cycle of urban decay and renewal, but could as well open to a broader phenomenological or psychological plane. In one of his books, the psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis offers a theory of vision that attempts to transcend the ontology of the image anchored in fetishism and melancholia⁴. The continuous “durée” of everyday life is predicated on the assumption that things will stand still in the arena of the perceived, and thus will be visible after we momentarily leave them while drifting over to other destinations. But when a segment of this temporality brutally disintegrates (after the death of a loved one for instance), the subject needs to foreclose the cut, and fill a gap in the real with a metaphor that covers the absence of meaning. An image is then substituting for another, lost, image. This ritual is performed until pain, attachment or desire wares off. Nevertheless, according to Pontalis, “losing one sight” should not always be equated to mourning or blindness, but

³ Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1983).

⁴ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Perdre de vue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

could also describe a gradual flickering of the perceived. As he points out, we constantly and routinely negotiate between what appears and what disappears in our imaginary relationship to the concrete world of materials and scenes: "The invisible is not the negation of the visible, it lies within. It haunts it, as its horizon and beginning. When loss is in vision, beholding stops being an everlasting longing."⁵ This insistent image within her new cycle seems to follow Pontalis's proposition that a continuum between desire and the void always shapes the material core of the visible.

In a similar fashion, the work exhibited here as a cross-section of an ongoing research allude to what is virtually out of sight, or lies in the margins of the exhibition as a bracketed event. Consequently, even if this work forms a somewhat closed sentence, its incompleteness nevertheless points toward another body of images that may or may not be printed or displayed in the future. By working in a speculative mode rather than according to a set of predetermined rules, Bauer allows herself some freedom to invent strategies and test them in the open. For this reason, the present text is also provisional, as it announces other frameworks in which these images might reappear and be juxtaposed to other previously unseen images.

Vincent Bonin

⁵ Ibid., 392.