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AGO's Light My Fire Part 2 flickers but still burns

Work of Kristan Horton, Julia Margaret Cameron, Hannah Höch, Suzy Lake, Barbara Kruger, Tess Boudreau, Mike Disfarmer and others at Art Gallery of Ontario until May 2014.



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CRAIG BOYKO PHOTO

Beatrice by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1866, shares the distinction with Kristan Horton's Octavius of being an example of the medium at its most manipulated.

Among its holdings, the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#) counts some 40,000-plus photographs — no, the comma is exactly where it belongs and, yes, that's the right number of zeroes — and voluminous as it might be, it's getting bigger all the time.

On Tuesday, in fact, Ann and Harry Malcolmson, legendary Toronto photography collectors, added another 268 to the pile, bolstering the gallery's archives with such names as Atget, Kertész, Man Ray and Rodchenko.

In the art world, too much stuff can be a nice dilemma to have, but a dilemma nonetheless. The AGO has chosen to address this particular one with a year-long foray into the collection in its full breadth, from the dawn of photography right up to the here and now.

They called it *Light My Fire* and Part 1, which opened in May, lived up to its sparky billing nicely; amid the flashing lights and monumentality — David Bowie and Ai Weiwei, respectively — it was quietly captivating and one of the best things the gallery did all year.

The question becomes what to do for an encore? Into this slips [2.0 Light My Fire 2.0](#), a sharply assembled set of pictures, like and unlike, that suffers slightly by treading the ground Part 1 broke so beautifully in the spring. Room 1, an enveloping cocoon of aubergine, with pieces glowing in low light, could have used the same hooks in the walls: where hung Paul Graham's gauzy, smouldering image of a young woman lighting a cigarette is Kristan Horton's *Octavius*, a gruesome mash-up of multiple self-portraits that the artist reconfigured digitally into a single mysterious image.

To the left is a ghostly glass-plate negative, backlit, of Russian Empress Maria Alexandranova, from 1865. I could be wrong, but a similarly archaic, backlit plate (*Portrait of a Seated Man*, 1850, googling my May review tells me) hung in this exact spot in the spring. Why move the wiring if you don't have to?

Anyway, have faith. If the presentation seems familiar, I'm inclined to believe that's part of the point. Familiarity is an inevitable byproduct of the medium, ubiquitous as it's become in the 20th century, and a certain déjà vu seems appropriate. Travelling a familiar path and finding it the same but different plays the same trick physically as photography does on your eye and mind. Memories can seem real enough to touch in a mind's eye, only to find a picture that eradicates all but the truth.

Part 1, subtitled *We Are Monuments/We Are Multiplied* engaged the medium's odd duality: able to capture single moments that become iconic while designed to be throwaway; perpetual product for an image-consuming world. Part 2 is called *We Are Not Ourselves/We Are Always Ourselves* and here, Horton steps into Graham's role as the touchstone of the exhibition, which seems hooked to the medium's power to deceive.

Horton's self-portrait, however many times removed from his real image, is nonetheless that, filtered through a medium slippery enough, in these technological times, to be many things at once. That it stands back-to-back with *Beatrice*, a gorgeous, silvery-pale 1866 portrait of a woman by Julia Margaret Cameron, isn't the counterpoint it appears to be: soft-focus and tonally even, *Beatrice* and *Octavius* seem to share the distinction, in their respective eras, of being examples of the medium at its most manipulated.

Signposts of similar hands-on efforts dot the walls nearby, both in form — Hannah Höch's 1925 cut-and-paste collage serves as a Surrealist precursor to Horton — and in content.

Pictures are straight but not, toying with the nature of portraiture and the medium itself: Henry Lambeth's self-portrait at Union Station, from 1959, deliberately blurs the signage behind him ("Take Your Own Photo") while he appears razor-sharp, camera in hand. Nearby, Spring Hurlbut's *Mary #1*, from

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...ared to dream. That but doesn't answer so much as imply the question to a visceral experience: that is a pile of cremated ashes, artfully sprayed on a black sheet.

The show torques its theme further in the second room, where the artist Suzy Lake, a pillar of the medium and its conceptual applications in this country over the past 40 years, transforms herself into a man named Bill Vazan over six incremental self-portraits.

Barbara Kruger, an early adopter of advertising's design strategies to manipulate desire, is represented by *Make Over*, a rough, appropriated image of a head caked in mud that seems oddly heavy-handed and out of place here; though if the notion was to represent extremes, mission accomplished. Still, a counterbalancing hand is at play. Not far away, Duane Michals' portrait of Joseph Cornell, a ghostly silhouette seeming to dissolve with the breeze, is subtle as a whisper and just as compelling.

Curator Sophie Hackett devotes the last half of the show to the second part of her title, *We Are Always Ourselves*, with a selection of street and studio portraits that toggle back and forth from playful to urgent to mysterious to quotidienne with a relaxed ease. After the manipulations of the previous two rooms, you're tempted to blink back the clarity, like a mole poking its nose out into the sun for the first time.

Even here, though, straight is not so straight and that's its principle joy. The show sets you up with moments of street photography that feel furtive, stolen — a suite of pictures by Leon Levenstien, of New York from 1960 to '70 have that sense — while setup portraits of lovely ladies here underscore the contrivances of the studio.

But the studio can be spontaneous and the street contrived, and Hackett works a quiet reversal here with aplomb: A cluster of images from the early '60s by Tess Boudreau, of Canadian artists like Rita Letendre, captured mid-brushstroke, or Toni Onley, slumped in front of a wall papered with his watercolour sketches, are as fresh and dynamic as anything here.

Nearby, a clutch of studio shots — kids, families, friends — from the 1940s and '50s by American Mike Disfarmer seem to bundle the entire show up nicely.

Hung salon style, they appear almost as they might have in his studio: product on display.

Look closely though and they reveal the range of human emotion a camera can portray. One, a boy in scout uniform, casually at ease and smirking comfortably, stands at the opposite extreme of a young man, locked in a grimace, withering in front of the lens. We are always ourselves — even when we're trying not to be.

Light My Fire, Part 2, continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario to May 2014.