

Investigations, Meditations, Lamentations

By Bill Jones

Excerpt from artist's statement in the catalogue for Investigations, Meditations, Lamentations, Bill Jones Selections 1970-1990, Presentation House North Vancouver BC

My parents died when I was a teenager. An only child, by 1974 I had no cousins, no relatives left. Then it happened, like a messenger from the past, I received a box in the mail with pictures of my lost family, spanning a hundred years. A personal history in photography dropped in my lap. There were family portraits as far back as my great-great aunt on my mother's side. A weathered bone-thin man in little tin type portraits taped together to stand up on a make-shift mantle. A letter dated August 1869 told the story.

"Father Shedrick, I take pen to paper at this time to tell you of the death of your daughter Sarah. She worked for two hours in the field and died at nightfall." There were hundreds of tintypes and paper prints that chronicled my family as they migrated across the great American continent. I began to piece together a history as the photographs told the story of my grandparents' farm at the turn of the century. The huge horse-drawn bailers, the family portraits like Little House on the Prairie. And the many pictures of my grandfather throughout his life.

I pieced together this history of a lost family but I tried in my art, to divorce myself from my family relations. That is, I attempted to use the nostalgic charge as just another facet of photographic saying. I this allowed myself complete access to the antiquated images set within my conceptual systems of numbers and manipulations. I played the science off the subjective qualities of the image. I made works which were formal studies of the mounting and the framing of the old photos. I never considered that I might be using the conceptualism to hide my feelings. It never occurred to me either that this work was in any way autobiographical. The romantic images of my mother as a teenager with roses were no more than formal exercises in my determination to order the photographic system into a rendered state. Pictures.

I had already completed a number of works in the early 70s, investigations of the photograph as object: folding a large sheet of paper--the drawing support--photographing it, then folding the enlarged photograph. A kind of series procedure reminiscent of a Kaprow happening, drawn out of his rarified theories of assemblage, except that what I made was the illusion of two folds. The exposition of the photograph as both paper object and illusionary rendering was a simple start to my dual role as iconoclast--demystifying the paper object--and iconodule remystifying with a another illusion.

The path taken lead to three images, the window, the book and the table, All of which were photographically two-dimensional, one transparent, one opaque, one a support. In my metaphorical world the table held the book which was illuminated by the light from the window.

In an effort to enhance or challenge the object relation of the image, I covered mural photographs of a picture window, reflecting a distant Vancouver landscape, with plate glass cut to the shape of the photographically distorted windows. Like the two folds, there were two reflections, one overlaying the other. The glass framed the image and made reference to the frame and edge of the picture plane, as had been done in painting many years before.

My iconoclastic quest to test the photographic image by drawing it into the third planar dimension led me to the photo as table in Elevations, Levitations, and the Twist, which revealed two characteristics of the photographic illusion: photograph as literary narrative and photograph as object. The prop table, itself a

four-foot-by-six-foot photograph with legs was shot from seven angles, from overhead to an elevation side view. The idea was to show the table in varying degrees of representation from an image that copied the table's two-dimensional surface to one that was simply "about" the table and its setting—an image whose ontological relationship to the sculptural table mount for each of the seven photographs shifted progressively with each succeeding table. At the same time colour photographs were taken of magazines lying on the prop table. These colour photographs were enlarged to register with, and blend into the black and white "table" backgrounds and were attached to the surfaces of each table just like real magazines might lay there, except that these image/objects became progressively foreshortened as the angle of the camera shifted. It was at this point that I discovered a strange mystical place in the photographic process where a photograph of a photograph became both a representation and a copy of the photographic information contained in the original image. The photographic information, i.e., the document, remains while the paper object disappears or becomes a representation, in my case a snapshot with a scalloped paper boarder. A language problem thus arises wherein what was seen on these "photo-tables" could not be clearly described, without prefacing what was "in" or "on" the table. It was the space between these two positions that I explored for much of the next decade.

I actually had the audacity to think that I could break the ontological link between the photograph and its referent. This pride, and lack of humility is tantamount to the audacity of the iconoclast at meeting the idolater. My search was always toward the abstract, the non-representational within a medium predicated on realism. I carefully followed the procedures carried out by painters in the early twentieth century as they challenged representation with the emphasis on surface and scale.

With *Casino Royale* I took my tidy system, put together to disassemble photographic reality, and put it to the test against another more ancient system, the Tarot. Yes I was a cynic, a disbeliever, and thought such systems as the Tarot or astrology were nothing more than fortune telling. I had little more respect for these traditions than I had for photography itself.

In *Casino Royale*, 1975, there are four photo card tables with cards; sixteen 52-card decks which are in fact colour photographs. They are playable, and have been played, but not since the work became the property of the National Gallery of Canada. Each table represents a different player whose booty is seen in the photograph along the table's edge. The four players, the King, Queen, Jack and Nave were based on real people. This was the subject of the piece, as well as the Tarot, of which I understood little at the time. The game itself would involve the players in a ritual photographic association (placing them in that liminal space between copy and representation) wherein the roles of the four characters were taken on literally and metaphorically.

The window, the book and the table. The representation of reality—the picture, the acquisition of knowledge—the word, the object, the process of ritual, in essence the game. These were the tools of my investigations. The window and the book signify the two opposing strains, iconodule and iconoclast, which since the Renaissance have existed in one person—the artist. But the table on which the book lies is illuminated by the light which falls through the window. That is the light which illuminates the dark room in which the table with its book resides.
