RODNEY GRAHAM

Installation view: Rodney Graham: Collected Works, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, May 31 - October 4, 2014.

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Public and Museum Collections

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Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, Poitou-Charentes, France
Frac Centre, Orléans, France
Frac Haute, Normandie, France
Friedrich Christian Flick Collection, Berlin, Germany
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The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
La Colleccion Jumex, Mexico City, Mexico
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Musée Départemental d'art Contemporain, Château de Rochechouart, France
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Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
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FRAC Bretagne, Chateaugiron, France
S.M.A.K. - Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Netherlands
ARCO Foundation Collection, Madrid
Dia Foundation for the Arts, NYC
CGAC - Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela
Whitechapel Gallery, London / UK
Rennie Collection, Vancouver
Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
Art Institution of Chicago
MUDAM, Luxembourg

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Rodney Graham pulls at the threads of cultural and intellectual history through photography, film, music, performance and painting. He presents cyclical narratives that pop with puns and references to literature and philosophy, from Lewis Carroll to Sigmund Freud to Kurt Cobain, with a sense of humour that betrays Graham's footing in the post-punk scene of late 1970s Vancouver. The nine-minute loop Vexation Island (1997) presents the artist as a 17th-century sailor, lying unconscious under a coconut tree with a bruise on his head; after eight and a half minutes he gets up and shakes the tree inducing a coconut to fall and knock him out, and for the sequence to start again. Graham returns as a cowboy in How I Became a Ramblin' Man (1999) and as both city dandy and country bumpkin in City Self/Country Self (2001) – fictional characters all engaged in an endless loop of activity. Such dream states and the ramblings of the unconscious are rooted in Graham's earlier upside-down photographs of oak trees. Inversion, Graham explains, has a logic: 'You don't have to delve very deeply into modern physics to realise that the scientific view holds that the world is really not as it appears. Before the brain rights it, the eye sees a tree upside down in the same way it appears on the glass back of the large format field camera I use.' (2005)

click here to watch artist interview

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Installation view: Rodney Graham, You Should Be An Artist, Le Consortium, Dijon, November 19, 2016 - February 19, 2017.

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Installation view: Rodney Graham, Canadian Humourist, Vancouver Art Gallery, May 26 - September 30, 2012.

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Andersson, Patrik. "Hitting the Nail on the Head: Rodney Graham's Impressionist Game", That's Not Me, JRP|Ringier, 2017, pg 101-106

Hitting the Nail on the Head: Rodney Graham's Impressionist Game

Patrik Andersson

> [A]lmost all our originality comes from the stamp that 'time' imprints upon our feelings.
> **Charles Baudelaire**[1]

Rodney Graham shares with the avant-garde of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries an interest in the mechanics of vision and a preoccupation with what Charles Baudelaire referred to as 'modernity'. Since the 1970s, Graham has interpolated himself into aesthetic and philosophical systems of the past as a way to explore, employ and expose the characteristics of a variety of media including photography, film, video, music, sculpture, painting and books. As diverse as this process may seem, and despite the fact that he employs a disorienting number of references, Graham has established a clear logic of his own that stamps his wry sense of humour on historical figures and tropes in a way that brings them into contemporary paradigms. What makes this practice so rich is that complex layers of history and ideas are condensed into physical and material manifestations that have the stamped-out immediacy characteristic of relief printing, with its techniques such as embossing and debossing.

While always responding to the contemporary, Graham's practice functions like a time-machine, which returns us to pivotal historical moments that have shaped our common culture but that also mark Graham's personal history. For example, *Basement Camera Shop, Circa 1937* 2011 sets up an Ariadne's thread that leads us to Graham, long before the advent of Photoshop, absorbed in the act of filling out an order by putting pen to paper behind a store counter displaying an array of analogue cameras and film. As if to make clear what Graham's business is all about, a Kodak advert boldly announces 'DEVELOPING, PRINTING, ENLARGING'. This counter also divides the space diagonally, setting up a masculine/feminine encounter between foreground and background that not only places Graham in the background, but, as it turns out, places a framed photograph of his mother playing badminton in the foreground.[2]

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Sunday Sun, 1937 2012 is another work that takes us back to the quaint days of private absorption in printed matter. But as cosy as this picture may look, 1937 was also the eve of the Second World War and a moment in art history when the battle between realism and abstraction could not have been more intense. Not only did Pablo Picasso's response to the blanket bombing of Guernica make headlines worldwide, but this was the year when art historian Meyer Shapiro published 'Nature of Abstract Art' in *Marxist Quarterly*.[3] In this article, Shapiro made an argument for the legitimacy of abstract art by arguing that artistic styles can only be explained in the context of larger historical changes in social conditions, values and ways of seeing. For Shapiro, form (abstraction) and content (realism) are not distinct from one another. Further to this, what made Picasso's *Guernica* so powerful was the fact that it was both realistic and abstract – an important third option at a historical juncture characterised by divisive politics in both art and society.

Sunday Sun 1937 shows us the flip side of this political and traumatic moment. Here we see the Sunday funnies of the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper hiding a body (on closer inspection we notice that the hands belong to two different bodies) lying underneath a quilted blanket. Despite the bright 'pop' colours of the comic, there is a mysterious and even sinister feeling in this picture, evocative, perhaps, of a tale from the Brothers Grimm.[4] Graham himself has said that this picture took its inspiration from the 1938 film *The Lady Vanishes*, the last film Alfred Hitchcock made in England before achieving pop cultural success in Hollywood. One could also say that Graham has physically vanished from this picture (he usually appears in his pictures), only to reappear in a future work (*Newspaper Man* 2017) behind a spread of advertisements in an 1887 issue of *The Victoria Daily Standard*.

To fast forward in time, Graham's abstract reliefs, entitled *Possible Abstractions* 2010, and first exhibited at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, reference a mid-century stag magazine cartoon in which two men debate the progress of abstraction in two almost identical works by an artist named 'Picado'. One says to the other, 'If you ask me, his earlier paintings were much better.' It is at this point in history, when Picasso's work has been turned into a joke (or at least a cliché) through multiple reproductions and disfigurations, that Graham takes interest and interpolates himself into the realism-abstraction debate – this time in dialogue with American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, who earned a living in the 1940s producing satirical cartoons such as 'How to Look at Modern Art in America'. The actual design of Graham's pieces, lifted from the cartoon, reminds us of Sigmar Polke's well-known piece *Moderne Kunst*, which also makes comedy out of the conventionality of abstract painting. Made of polyurethane and acrylic polymer on wood, Graham's three-dimensional paintings transform all these references into giant woodblocks that are simply physical yet make a strong retinal impression. In this way, like Graham's early works *75 Polaroids* 1976 and *Camera Obscura* 1979, they explore the relation between visuality and memory.

As a late arrival on the stage of art history, Graham appears to accept that his task is to repeat history. Without this repetition, the original moment is lost. In other words, the original is nothing without its copy, and the copy is nothing without an original. A psychoanalytical reading of this compulsion for repetition might suggest that there is trauma embedded in this desire to return to an earlier state of things. Perhaps it is his combination of trauma and humour that gives Graham's work its uncanny edge. In *Cylindro-Chromatic Abstraction Construction* 2015, the history of Impressionism returns via references to art with a visual punch, namely op and pop art. In view of the importance of cartoons in *Possible Abstractions* and *Sunday Sun*, these three-dimensional paintings bring to mind Roy Lichtenstein's employment of Ben-Day dots. In Graham's hands Lichtenstein's hand-painted pop art has become an exploration of the sculptural dimension of two-dimensional mechanical reproduction. Popping out of the flat surface of the picture plane at different depths, colourful dots hit us with both a retinal and physical impact. This is Georges Seurat's nineteenth-century chromoluminarism ciphered through more than a hundred years of avant-garde tactics.

Continuing in Graham's time-machine, *Canadian Humourist* 2012 firmly locates us in the 1970s with a striking portrait of Graham himself, complete with side-burns, white turtleneck and brown tweed jacket, in what appears to be the reading room of an 'old world' manor, with a homespun tea cosy awkwardly placed among more fashionable mid-century modernist furniture. As striking as Graham's pose is, it is the bookshelf behind him that reveals the humorous mind of this out-of-date and seemingly out-of-fashion Canadian intellectual, who Graham loosely modelled after the Canadian author, journalist and television personality Pierre Berton.[5] As this library reminds us, behind Graham's many personae and artistic strategies are literary figures and tropes that continue to be stamped into our unconscious through printed matter such as books, newspapers and photographs. Perhaps as a nod to Canada's role as a peacekeeping nation in the 1970s, or Picasso's many representations of doves, a decorative ceramic dove sits perched above the fireplace. Or is this bird, which stares at us from the background, a reminder of Muffin, the parrot which starred alongside Graham in the film adventure *Vexation Island* 1997, where she witnessed Graham repeatedly being knocked unconscious by a falling coconut? The similarity is striking if we consider the meticulous attention to colour in both *Vexation Island* and *Canadian Humourist*, something that is stressed in six off-print posters produced as a 'spin-off' edition. Here again we encounter printing processes – not only the colour separation of a chromolithograph, but the repeated double-hits of Graham himself, which evoke Andy Warhol's innovative use of mis-registration.

If *Canadian Humourist* brings us back to an era before digital printing, *Newspaper Man* 2016 frames the advent of offset printing. In a fully saturated colour photograph, we find the artist hiding behind the double-page spread of a late nineteenth-century black-and-white newspaper. Graham is seated on a park bench in front of a small waterfall, peeking through two small holes in the broadsheet. The picture metonymically calls up the African influences on Picasso's synthetic cubism as well as the voyage into voyeurism represented by Duchamp's *Étant donnés* 1946–66.

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Keeping this confrontation between Picasso's cubism and Duchamp's conceptualism in mind may illuminate Graham's *Assisted Readymade* 2016, an assemblage that could easily be dismissed as a cheap art joke if we didn't recognise the centrality of jokes in Graham's practice. While clearly referencing Duchamp's first successful foray away from painting towards the more conceptually driven readymade (he quit painting in the cubist manner in 1912), Graham provides insight into his own conflicted relationship with both retinal and non-retinal art. Unlike Duchamp's readymade, Graham's *Assisted Readymade* is covered with evidence of the painterly practice that preceded the act of putting a hammer and nail to it. Stuck in the position of removing a nail from the chair, the hammer in this assemblage points to repeated attempts to hit the nail on the head in an effort to expand his artistic repertoire – the endless fussing, fiddling and redoing familiar to painters. When we really think about it, Graham's time-machine brings us back to 1912, and provides us with a glimpse into the parallel practices of Picasso's first collage work, *Still-Life with Chair Caning* 1912, and Duchamp's sudden abandonment of painting in favour of readymades. Locating himself within the 'infrathin' spaces that history tends to ignore, Graham activates a relationship between intention and expression that gives his practice its own 'art coefficient',[6] and in turn imprints time on our own feelings.

As I have tried to suggest, Graham is an astute reader of the surface of history. It is on this surface that we find the marks of time. In his monumental triptych *The Avid Reader, 1949* 2011, Graham literally points us to this surface. A street scene meticulously constructed in his studio, it shows Graham putting his hand to the large glass window of a closed-down Woolworth's five-and-dime store as if to read one of the newspapers used to block it out.[7] As absorbed in reading as he appears to be, he may also be watching a woman walking away – a fictional figure, who on closer inspection turns out to be his non-fictional wife. Whether this has to do with bachelors and brides is maybe beside the point, but it is hard to ignore the reference to Duchamp's days in New York if we consider the fact that in 1916 he suggested that the Woolworth Building, the city's tallest at the time, should be proclaimed a reciprocal readymade by simple inscription. Is this Graham contemplating the origin of *The Large Glass*? If so, couldn't we say that Graham's gesture of touching the glass is locating the picture's *punctum* – that space between interiority and exteriority that calls up the biblical figure of St Thomas, and his desire to overcome conventional boundaries of knowledge and intuition by reaching out and touching the wound of Christ – by seeing and feeling.[8]

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Rodney Graham was born in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada in 1949. He graduated from the University of British Columbia, Burnaby, Canada in 1971 and lives and works in Vancouver, Canada. Solo exhibitions include Serlachius Museum Gösta, Mänttä, Finland (2020); Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Germany (2017); Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands (2017); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2017); Le Constortium, Dijon, France (2016); Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany (2015); Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada (2014); Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada (2012); Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria (2011); Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain (2010); Jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2009); Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, CA, USA (2004); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK (2002); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany (2001); and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (1999). He has participated in group exhibitions such as the Carnegie International (2013), the 13th, 14th and 17th Sydney Biennales, Australia (2002, 2006, 2010), the Whitney Biennial, New York, USA (2006) and the Biennale d'Art contemporain de Lyon, France (2003). He represented Canada at the 47th Venice Biennale, Italy (1997) and among awards he has received the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, Toronto, Canada (2004), the Kurt Schwitters-Preis, Niedersächsiche Sparkassenstiftung, Germany (2006), and the Audain Prize for lifetime achievement in visual arts, British Columbia, Canada (2011). Rodney Graham was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2016 for his contributions to Canadian contemporary art.