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Exhibition Review

Compte rendu d’exposition

JULIA LUM

Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage
Organizing Institution: The Art Institute of Chicago
Venues: The Art Institute of Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto)
Curator: Elizabeth Siegel, Associate Curator of Photography, Art Institute of Chicago

Imaginary flirtations take shape inside a drawing room, where cut-out photographic bodies mingle with watercolour-rendered furnishings. Gentlemen of leisure perch comfortably on a giant lily pad, while a sea of colourful fish swim below. A monkey dressed as a court jester juggles the detached heads of powerful members of England’s high society, known as the “Upper Ten Thousand.”[1]

Such descriptions evoke the theatre of Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball or the nouveau Surrealist imaginings of Winnipeg-based Marcel Dzama. But what I just described is in fact a sampling of photocollages by a circle of Victorian aristocratic women, on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto from June 5 to September 5, 2010. A touring exhibition, *Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* debuted at the Art Institute of Chicago (October 10, 2009, to January 3, 2010) and made its second stop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (February 2 to May 2, 2010) before arriving in Toronto. Curated by Elizabeth Siegel, Associate Curator of Photography at Chicago’s Art Institute, the exhibition brought to public attention a set of meticulously-crafted photocollage albums by women of Victorian high society, created by the likes of, among others, Frances Elizabeth, Viscountess Jocelyn (Fig. 1), Georgina Berkeley, Elizabeth Pleydell-Bouverie, Maria Cator (Fig. 2) and Mary Georgiana Caroline, known as “Lady Filmer.”

Many of the photocollages on display reveal a wry wit and a penchant for the absurd—qualities that don’t always spring to mind in association with Victorian high society. As catalogue essayist Patrizia Di Bello observes: “being a Victorian woman could involve a lot more humor and playfulness than is commonly acknowledged” (Di Bello in Siegel 2009: 50). For instance, the album pages of Kate Edith Gough (English, 1856-1948) are riddled with visual puns, puzzles and bizarre combinations, many of which comment on contemporaneous social, scientific and political topics. In one photocollage, Gough depicts three ducks paddling on a pond (Fig. 3). She creates human/animal hybrids, replacing each duck’s head with a photographic head—with at least one of the images being her own or that of her identical twin sister, Grace (Siegel 2009: 185). Elsewhere, Gough’s hybrids make clear allusions to Darwin’s recently-published evolutionary treatises. On one page, she satirically composes a family of primates out of images of her own family.

Reviewers, bloggers, visitors and the exhibition’s curator have all pointed with astonishment to the fact that Victorian amateur artists, half-a-century before the emergence of collage as an avant-garde practice, could produce such irreverent images. What is perhaps more astonishing, however, is that the producers of these photocollages have been largely overlooked by scholars, museums and art-going publics before now. Resurrected from private collections and museum storehouses, the

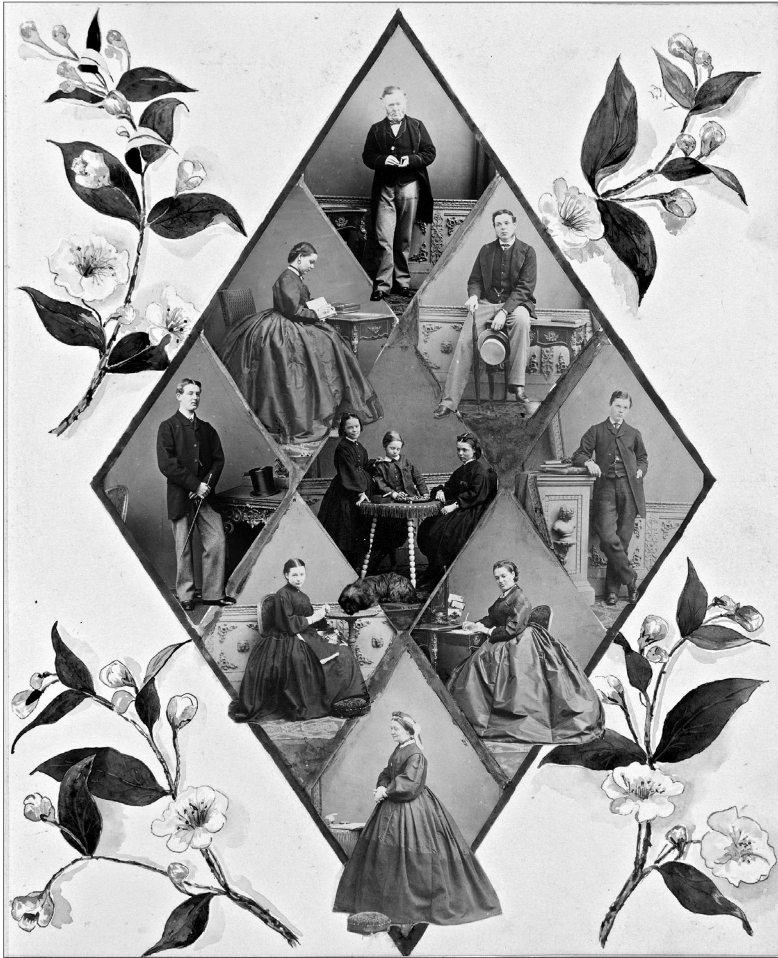


Fig. 1
Frances Elizabeth, Viscountess Jocelyn (English, 1820–1880); Diamond Shape with Nine Studio Portraits of the Palmerston Family and a Painted Cherry Blossom Surround*; from the Jocelyn Album, 1860s Collage of watercolor and albumen prints; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.*

exhibition marks the first time that many of these albums have been on public display.

In the age of the blockbuster museum show, why does this charming single-room exhibition hold appeal? A confluence of factors has generated public interest and primed audiences' reception of such works in an art gallery context. A connection made by many reviewers is summed up by *Toronto Star* art critic Murray Whyte, who views the collages as direct precedents of modern art traditions such as Surrealism and Synthetic Cubism.[2] Recent art and design culture's renewed interest in collage imbues the albums with contemporary potency, echoed by the exhibition's main didactic panel, which announces that the collages can be read as "remarkably current, even today."

With its undeniable ties to contemporary artistic phenomena, *Playing With Pictures* is also significant for the following reasons, which I will discuss in this essay: it effectively bridges the space between the pages of female amateur artists and the art institution's walls, it obliquely registers contemporary preoccupations and anxieties about the state of photographic representation and it forms an important part of a growing body of scholarship on amateur visual culture, which has brought into focus the gendered art and craft practices that have long been overlooked by historians, critics and curators.

Though the material strikes a chord with contemporary art-goers, the twelve albums on display were not originally intended for a white cube environment. Produced primarily during the 1860s and 1870s, the bound volumes cannot be separated from their material origins. The albums were designed to be passed around at private social gatherings and salons, and Victorian women spent their leisure time collecting and trading photographs with friends and acquaintances that could be later cut up and pasted down. The popularity of *cartes-de-visite*, the portable portrait-cards mass produced by European and North American studios of the period, meant that photographic representations were available on an unprecedented scale. Women of the upper classes, whose education and leisure time encouraged album-making, could re-purpose, re-assemble and embellish these *cartes* in scenes of imaginative fancy.

More than forty works are on display within the AGO's gallery space, including seven intact volumes presented to the viewer in five glass vitrines.[3] Gallery visitors peer inside the cases to view a single open page of each album, along with an accompanying description of the album maker. The gallery walls, on the other hand, are graced with a selection of framed, loose pages primarily from the albums of Georgina Berkeley (whose works stretch an entire wall), Lady Filmer, Charlotte Milles and an anonymous "Madame B," thought to be Marie-Blanche-Hennelle Fournier (Fig. 4). While most of the loose pages are hung together with others of their source album, highlighting authorship and stylistic similitude, some choices draw out thematic connections.

A selection of Lady Filmer's works foreground the uses of photocollage for social advancement. Lady Filmer, wife of Sir Edmund Filmer, purportedly used her good looks and social standing to win favour with the Prince of Wales (Siegel 2009: 183).

The act of trading *cartes-de-visite* with London's elite gentlemen was a key component of Filmer's social prowess, and her well-known flirtation with the Prince plays out over several album pages—most overtly in a drawing room scene in which Lady Filmer is seen gazing at the Prince while her husband sits off to one side beside the family dog.[4]

Other selections seamlessly incorporate photographic images into the object depicted, blurring the boundaries between drawings-as-representation and photographic realism. On display are works that transform photographic images into portrait miniatures, postage stamps and framed paintings. The visitor is greeted at one end of the gallery by a large reproduction from the Gough album, upon which an array of playing cards is laid out. The faces of the Kings and Queens are those of England's fashionable set. In the collage "What are trumps?" (Fig. 5), the Countess of Yarborough's niece renders her acquaintances as playing cards in her aunt's album. The young collagist, Eva Macdonald, places her own portrait in the bottom left hand corner, signalling both her authorship and place apart from the games of courtship and flirtation unfolding before her.

Album-makers sometimes make references to the materials and products of their pastime, creating self-reflexive meta-statements about their art. Lady Filmer's aforementioned drawing room scene shows Filmer beside a table, her glue pot at the ready and her album-in-progress open as if she is in the process of documenting the scene as it happens. One page from the Madame B album shows a group of *cartes* suspended in a menacing spider's web, mimicking the web of high society's entangled relationships. Simultaneously, the album maker is implicated as the one who "catches" her prey with every new photograph collected or traded.

The challenges of presenting such material in exhibition form become apparent at an inauspicious computer terminal in the corner of the gallery space. It is impossible for the visitor to view the whole of the intact albums, guarded in their pristine glass vitrines. The computer makes this task a digital possibility. A user interface allows the visitor to interact with individual albums—turning pages, zooming in and examining details. This aspect of the exhibition provides an invaluable window into the skill of each album-maker and the scope of her album, revealing stylistic nuances and surprising variety within each album. It also reveals the extent to which the albums were works-in-progress. In many of the albums, several pages are unfinished: in some instances lacking one key portrait to complete the scene, in others the basic design elements have been laid out with photographs yet to grace the page.

Fig. 2
Maria Harriet Elizabeth Cator (English, died 1881); Untitled page from the Cator Album, late 1860s/70s Collage of watercolor and albumen prints; Hans P. Kraus, Jr., New York.

The AGO has gone one step further, making the entirety of the *Madame B album* available on its website: www.ago.net/madame-b-album. Online users can peruse each page and witness the variety of layouts and design strategies—some intricate like geometric puzzles, others embellished with hand-drawn objects and decorative flourishes. The AGO site also links to a *Playing With Pictures* flickr group[5] where fifteen group members have created and posted their own photocollages. The exhibition's website provides collage-makers with downloadable templates, which are comprised of pages from the Madame B, Kate Edith Gough and Maria Cator albums digitally excised of their original photographic elements.

Numerous studies have examined the impact of technology and digital imaging in the museum

Fig. 3
Kate Edith Gough (English, 1856–1948; Untitled page from the Gough Album, late 1870s Collage of watercolor and albumen prints; V&A Images/Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

(Hooper-Greenhill: 1995), many echoing Howard Besser's sentiment that "these interactive processes engage viewers and encourage them to function more like participants than spectators" (Besser 1997: 119). The function of digital technology in the museum is, however, beyond the purview of this paper. Rather, while watching AGO visitors click their way through the albums on the gallery's computer monitor, I began to see potent parallels between contemporary digital interactivity and Victorian photocollage practice. Photocollage allowed the album-maker to re-appropriate the structured conventions of portrait photography, producing shifting signifiers out of a medium that was itself in flux.

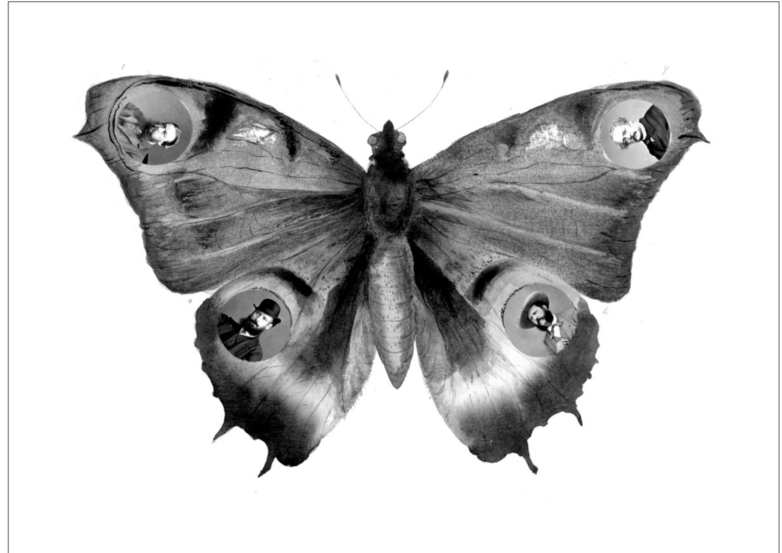
With the introduction of the *cartes-de-visite* in 1854, Victorian life was being documented in unprecedented ways (Wichard and Wichard 1999: 5). Photography itself was a young medium. If at first its role as an artistic medium was denied, its impact on the arts was deeply felt. Whereas commissioned portrait paintings were once the sole province of the upper crust, anybody with middle class means could obtain a photographic image of their likeness. Highly constructed *mise-en-scène* conventions were carried over into portrait photography—precarious sets with prop furnishings, backdrops and signifiers of taste, class and wealth, signalled the familiar conventions of portrait paintings with one key difference: the painted body was replaced with the indexical trace of the real body. Open to new classes of society, portrait photography not only represented a democratized means of representation, it could register an image at a real moment in time and space, possessing what Roland Barthes has referred to as an "evidential force" (Barthes 1981: 88-89).

A fear and suspicion of photography was cultivated among certain members of the artistic elite, precisely because photography's primary function was difficult to pin down. Believing that photography limited the human capacity for imagination, Baudelaire proclaimed: "each day art further diminishes its self-respect by bowing down before external reality; each day the painter becomes more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees" (qtd. in Marien 2000: 88). At the same time the introduction of photography represented a challenge to artistic creation, it also presented a paradoxical relationship to lived subjectivity. The photographic portrait, limited to a single moment in time and space, signifies both eternity and that which can never again be experienced. As Amelia Jones observes: "We desire these things in order to make ourselves feel coherent, independent of others, and thus closer to transcendence and immortality. However, the photograph, documenting the 'that has been,' also ultimately ends up indicating nothing other than our mortality" (Jones 1996: 259).

Victorian photocollage challenged that driving force behind portraiture, the desire for corporeal permanence—the lasting image of the self. On the pages of each album, individuals are literally disembodied, their heads floating outside the stable context of the photographer's staged studio salons and artificial garden backdrops. As prominent critics and writers mourned the death of imagination, Victorian ladies of leisure seized hold of the portrait painting's mechanical surrogate, subjecting it to their laborious, one-of-a-kind handiwork and becoming artists in their own right.

Fig. 4 (top)
Marie-Blanche-Hennelle Fournier (French, 1831–1906); Untitled page from the Madame B Album, 1870s Collage of watercolor, ink, and albumen prints; The Art Institute of Chicago, Mary and Leigh Block Endowment, 2005.297.

Fig. 5 (bottom)
Eva Macdonald (English, 1846/50–?); What Are Trumps?*; from the Westmorland Album, 1869 Collage of watercolor and albumen prints; The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.*



One need not look far to see the same kinds of anxieties and re-appropriations played out in our own day. In 2006, when the Kodak factory at Chalon-sur-Saone, France, announced it would be closing its film production facility, English artist Tacita Dean documented the factory's production of film with the medium itself, a 44-minute film on 16mm. *Kodak* foregrounds the artist's soon-to-be-obsolescent medium, following its production and migration through a series of mechanical processes. Just as the digital age has hailed the near extinction of analogue photography and celluloid, we have seen a surge of interest in hand-made art, craft and design techniques. In 1998, Toronto-based artist Paul Butler started "Collage Party," a roving event-based work that invites artists and members of the public to gather and create collage-works with found imagery, scissors and glue, using methods much like those employed by Victorian women. A few short months before *Playing With Pictures* came to the AGO, the institution was host to one of Butler's parties, documented on its website at http://www.ago.net/ago-next-collage-party.

With the AGO's highly-anticipated 2008 renovation (or "Transformation," as was hailed by the institution's marketing strategies) came a shift in institutional focus. The gallery's permanent collection was re-hung according to over-arching thematic categories rather than more traditional stylistic, period or movement-based ones. The gallery aims to create new dialogues by combining and juxtaposing non-Western art, works of material culture and visual culture and works belonging to the "high art" category, resulting in the display of subjects, works and materials not typically associated with a fine art context. This has produced mixed response

from critics and the public, from the widely panned, yet immensely popular *King Tut: The Golden King and the Great Pharoahs* blockbuster exhibition to the more innocuous display of the Thompson Collection of Ship Models.

I would argue, however, that embracing multifarious approaches to art and culture has facilitated new dialogues within the art museum. *Playing With Pictures* is evidence of the institution's acceptance of visual and material culture within the paradigm of fine art exhibition practices, a turn that has been gaining currency among leading institutions and scholarly circles. Among these, an interest in female and amateur artistic production in Europe, long neglected by art history scholarship, is gaining foot not only in the academy but also in staid cultural institutions.

Along with a number of cultural historians, Marcia Pointon and Anne Bermingham have led the way with their historical overviews of women's visual production and female accomplishment in 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century Euro-American contexts (Pointon 1997; Berminham 2000). Their research uncovers practices that fell into categories outside of art-making, such as flower studies, but which are nevertheless illuminated by art historical and visual studies analyses. In 2000, the British Museum mounted a show of amateur art called '*A Noble Art': Amateur Artists and Drawing Masters c.1600-1800* (Sloan 2000) drawing attention to more than 200 works of watercolour drawings, sketches, miniatures and needlework by members of the English court and elite. A single amateur artist is featured in the recent exhibition *Mrs. Delaney and Her Circle* (Laird and Weisberg-Roberts 2010), which exhibits the late-18th-century flower collages of Mary Delaney, who produced more than 1,000 examples of her self-invented technique.

It is no surprise, then, that *Playing With Pictures* should emerge to critical praise from both scholars and contemporary art critics. Its audiences are perhaps better primed for a view into the lives of unknown Victorian album makers than ever before. With a dose of wit and a good deal of mischief, these women rearranged their ordered, socially-prescribed worlds into charged, often disorderly tableaus. Only time will tell if the names of Georgina Berkeley and Lady Filmer go down in art history alongside the likes of recognized photocollage pioneers such as Hannah Hoch. Until then, we have Siegel and her team to thank for unearthing these albums and their makers.

Notes

1. The "Upper Ten Thousand" was a popular term referring to members of the English aristocracy and landed gentry (Siegel 2009:15).
2. Murray Whyte, "The Roots of Surrealism in Victorian Collage." *Toronto Star*, June 9, 2010.
3. Due to exposure limitations, the AGO was unable to display the Alexandra album from the Royal Collection and the Sackville-West and Bouverie albums from the Eastman House, which were on display during the exhibition's run at the Art Institute of Chicago (Elizabeth Siegel, personal correspondence, May 18, 2011). All albums are indexed by maker in the exhibition's catalogue, as noted by Elizabeth Siegel in a lecture ("Society Cut-ups") delivered at the Art Gallery of Ontario on June 5, 2010.
4. Ibid.
5. Flickr is an online photo-sharing community that allows users to post their own photos so they can be searched and viewed by the public or other flickr users. To view the *Playing With Pictures* Flickr group, visit: www.flickr.com/groups/playingwithpictures.

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