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Al McWilliams

**Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal, September 7th to October 5th
1991 (part of Le Mois de la photo à Montréal)**

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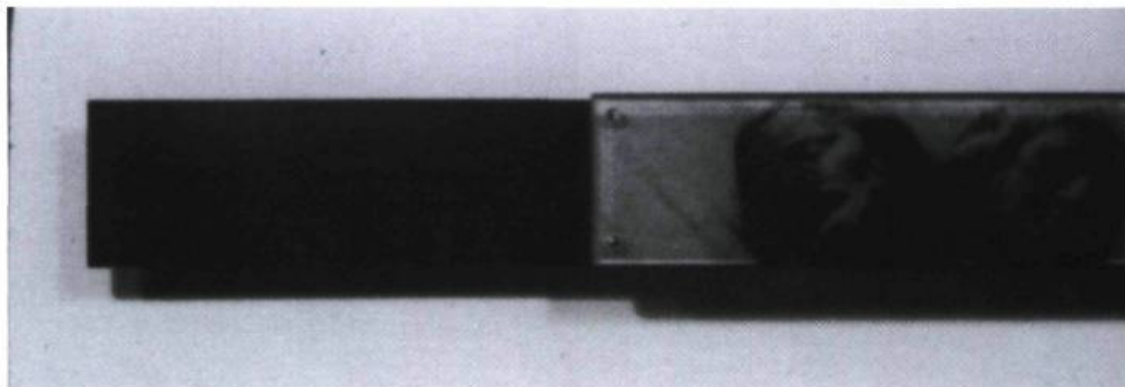
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AL McWILLIAMS



Al McWilliams, *Split*, 1991. Plomb, verre, aluminium et photographie ; 20,3 cm x 201,2 cm.

Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal, September 7th to October 5th 1991 (part of *Le Mois de la photo à Montréal*)

The museum or art gallery functions to classify, preserve and archive aesthetic objects. Museums also publicly display these objects, all the while forbidding, except in extraordinary circumstances, interaction with them. The distance maintained and controlled by the housers of the aesthetic, the inability to touch or experience art other than through the distance of sight, is an important aspect of Al McWilliams' most recent work. McWilliams heightens the sensuality of surfaces with techniques that are formally exquisite. With the inclusion of photography in his minimalist constructions, he investigates the role of the image in the sensual appreciation of the art object.

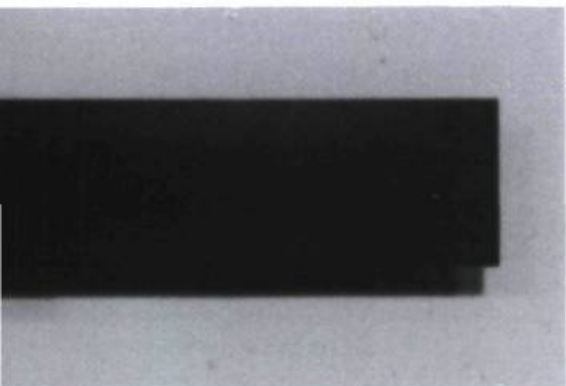
The show, part of the *Mois de la photo*, comprised two groups of works. Nine rectangular panels of thin metal plate were fixed to the wall by means of metal boxes. The panels consisted of sections of photographs and acid-washed or graphite-coated metal. The images on six of the works were coated with a layer of yellow beeswax, while those on other panels were covered with plexiglas.

The photographs, taken in the 14th century Orvieto Cathedral, represent the Biblical myth of the Fall of human Kind. Often, however, it is difficult to place the figures within any narrative. MacWilliams makes a deliberate attempt to isolate, and therefore make intimate, the circumstances of the figures. One sees, for example, the ordinary event of two people talking; a succession of hands supplicating; a series of torsos which, because they are shown from various angles, appear as in a dance (as the title of the work, *Dance II*,

indicates). Figures touch, whisper and gesture to one another. There are also some curious motifs such as a sleeping, two-headed figure, a basilisk-like lizard and veiled statues.

The encasing of the photographs in wax makes the images appear fleshy, and in some cases, almost three-dimensional. Most photographs appear to be blow-ups and are therefore slightly grainy in appearance. In many of the works, this graininess blurs details of the bodies, in particular their sex. The images sealed in plexiglas are of an overall green-blue colour; closer examination reveals grains of various colours that mingle in places to form dark blotches. The overall effect is similar to viewing a pointillist painting; the figures, immersed in and composed of a plethora of coloured dots, are recognized only when seen from a distance.

Viewers, thus, find themselves moving back and forth within the gallery as they examine McWilliams' works. Photography is used both to represent objects (McWilliams did not choose to include stone sculpture in his pieces), and for its own surface qualities. Images of stone sculpture contrast with the brute physicality of exposed metal sections. However, the surface qualities of metal and the lithographic properties of the photograph are treated equally. McWilliams exploits the painterly quality of the blow-up; as the acid-washed metal appears in blotches and spots, so do the colours in the blow-ups. In turn, the wax and plexiglas substances used to coat the images contrast with the representational status of the photograph. The images emphasis on corporality, the material of the body also acts as a point of entry to the



physical experience and appreciation of the works.

The sensuality of the surfaces, and the photograph's further sensualization with the wax coating, are elements of McWilliams' aesthetic of immediacy in experiencing a work of art. Tangled with this notion is the Christian iconography of the Fall, and the repression of sexuality and sensuality. One photograph portrays a torso with leaves molded against its genitals. Experience is depicted as veiled, or understood through some type of secondary device, as shown in the photographs of the statues with nets carved over their faces. The exuberance (and monstrosity) of the sensual is seen in a photograph of a three-faced figure – the tripling of the senses (taste, sight, hearing, smell) harboured in the head. This idea is also implicit in the two-headed figure who, although presently asleep, holds the potential for doubled perception and experience when awakened.

The misogyny of Christian iconography has been explored in McWilliams' earlier works, especially the association of Eve with the snake/deceiver. The separation of the self from the world, and recognition of sexual difference, is another aspect of the netting that stretches over the statues, and the vegetation covering the genitals. The Genesis myth portrays both the birth of self-consciousness and its veiling; knowledge of what may be present externally, and what must be kept hidden. The selective process of knowledge also entails the construction of an identity that relegates others and oneself to certain roles.

The scope of the camera, and its selectivity, or focus, is often used to establish distance between oneself and objects. McWilliams counters this estrangement experienced when viewing the photograph by treating the image as an element of sculpture that can be

transformed and manipulated. The seeming movement that the images of bodies display within the brute substance of wax or colour and the strategic cropping of the figures, which displaces them from specific settings or sexual roles, allow the viewer to enjoy a corporeal presence that is not ideologically defined. The artist stresses a physical appreciation of the works that is suspicious of verbal reductionism. In the past, McWilliams has included braille script in his pieces to represent a language whose tactile quality he feels has greater physical immediacy than the experience of the written word.

The concept of art as an active process on the part of the viewer is always restrained by the formal integrity of the pieces and their position within the context of the gallery. These works cannot be touched. The experience of sensuality McWilliams demands of his viewers is predicated on the delicate position of the art object within the gallery; the dynamics of the works reside in this dialectic of distance and intimacy. McWilliams exploits the restriction of the viewer in the gallery through the construction of an "aesthetic space". The formal qualities of the works in the blow-ups and metal draw the viewer to the work. However, the photographs speak beyond their formal status. The experience of the heightened surfaces, and the intimacy they demand, combine with the empathy experienced through the medievalist's sympathetic depiction of humanity.

This aestheticism has very little to do with postmodernist concepts of the social purpose of art. The repression of sensuality and sexuality represented by the *Fall* is thus understood both narratively and mythically. McWilliams does not investigate constructions of social hierarchies and their role in sexual repression. Images of the body in his work are intrinsic to his treatment of surfaces. The body as a way of sensuality exploring the world is paralleled in the experience of the works.

McWilliams' recent work remains within the dialectic he develops, and the gallery is a perfect venue for its display. It is not open-ended, it does not find or propose a means to escape the subject/object dichotomy it investigates, nor does it seek solutions on materialist grounds. The artist deals with the garnering of information (of all types) from a specific visual field, which is constructed and maintained with precision.

ANDREA KUNARD