

***Alone.* Curated by Penny Cousineau-Levine. Gallery 44 and
Gallery TPW, Toronto. September 14 – October 28, 2006**

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Alone

Curated by Penny Cousineau-Levine
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Loneliness, existential or otherwise, has been the informing condition of twentieth-century society, and it looks as if it will continue to be so in the twenty-first century. Penny Cousineau-Levine's recent two-gallery exhibition, *Alone*, was a vivid, surprising, and ultimately troubling presentation of carefully selected modalities of aloneness.

Of course, Cousineau-Levine meant considerably more by "Alone" than aloneness. The exhibition(s) not only presented essentially incarnations of the struggles enacted by the eight emerging photographers featured (d. Bradley Muir, Lori Newdick, Mackenzie Stroh, and Chih-Chien Wang at Gallery TPW; Jennifer Campbell, Kate Greenslade, Dawit Petros, and Marisa Portolese at Gallery 44) against what she termed the "culturally dictated restraints" that confront any entry into the agon of self-definition, but were also photo-manifestations of that asymptotic approach to the hard-won stability of self-presentation offered as "solitary performances and pursuits, bereft of social context or support." As she points out in the catalogue essay ("Alone: Fitting In") that accompanied the exhibition(s), these photographers offer the viewer access to their "private observances" played out along their particular roads to a constantly adjusted sense of individuation.

Some of the work, such as d. Bradley Muir's "autobiographical yet not biographical" (as he characterized it during a panel discussion at Gallery 44) *Artist as Worker* photo series, involved multiple layers of rather tensely accessed experimentation with the self-as-surface (what Cousineau-Levine calls the "tropes of masquerade"). In his version of desperate dressing-up, Muir not only donned and doffed the uniforms of various identifiable occupations ("Artist as Corporate Courier," firefighter, doctor, cook, executive, etc.), he photographed himself in this multifarious drag while folding into the poses, gestures that referenced images found in works by Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Donigan Cumming, Wolfgang Tillmans, and the other usual suspects. What I liked most, though, about Muir's photographs – whether it was deliberate or not I don't know – is that in all of his "incredibly temporary" self-tableaux, he kept his sneakers on – as if they were some sartorial given, some low common denominator of being (*feet of clay*), the saving index to his own focus-less selfhood.

Considerably more effective as an exploration of forced self-erasure recollected in tranquillity were the wrapped portraits and, juxtaposed against them, the icy photographs of landscapes and glass vitrines by Boston-based artist Dawit L. Petros. To call Petros's bleached – indeed, whited-out – portraits "wrapped" is a bit misleading, of course, in that his subjects are not wrapped the way mummies are wrapped (to preserve) or the way cocoons are wrapped (to engender) or the way the airy protagonist of H. G. Wells's novel *The Invisible Man* is wrapped (to ameliorate), but are – the pain inherent in the word is chosen advisedly – bandaged: plastered over with gauze. Selfhood thus becomes a wound. Skin colour and gender traces are effaced equally, and the resulting personage, now released from both the tyranny of exclusion and the more insidious tyranny of belonging, is bound to freedom, the ultimate paradox of being.

The work of the other artists in the exhibition added meaningfully enough to Cousineau-Levine's contentions about negotiations toward subjecthood, but, except for Jennifer Campbell's contributions (about which more in a moment), tended toward a kind of conventionalized pointedness, an immediately recognizable language of trial and error and of self-castigation offered as a critique of the very idea of a pursued selfhood. This is made literal, for example, in the photograph *Red Man* by Montreal-based artist Chih-Chien Wang – a work that Cousineau-Levine locates as a coda to Wang's prodigious two-hundred-image series *Counting* (an epic journey through what she terms his "awareness of himself as a designated Other") – in which the raw, red scoring of his otherwise pale trunk positions his now transformed "sacrificial" scapegoat body as an



Jennifer Campbell
Dish it out
2004

emblem of alienation and cultural adjacency, placing it alongside the "redskins" that are Canada's First Nations peoples.

The works offered here by Lori Newdick, Mackenzie Stroh, Kate Greenslade, and Marisa Portolese were, in comparison, milder, more delicately honed in their isolating and acquiring of identity tools: Mackenzie Stroh's low-volume manifestations of "femininity turned demonic" (in a brooding, high-schoolish sort of way) seemed merely morphologically banal and psychologically whiny to me, while Lori Newdick's works from her almost aggressively soft-focused *Lucky* series have always struck me as less committedly informative than they might have been, though Cousineau-Levine provides a useful enough response to the muzziness when she suggests that "the lack of visual definition in her recent series of photographs . . . is of a piece with its blurring of gender assumptions" – an idea ingenious enough to make me want to look more patiently upon Newdick's recent production.

Kate Greenslade's hallucinatory study of angelic pre-pubescent boys in thrall to their Gameboys and other electronic, hand-held blandishments (*Fervour and Longing*) possesses a quietly moving aura in which the contrast between the enforced otherworldliness of her little boys – these Little Princes, marooned on the tiny planets of their hand-held programs, dreamily dreaming somebody else's dreams – and the often pastoral or domestic settings (forest, bedroom) of which they seem disturbingly unaware, quietly builds to an unappeasable sense of loneliness, fuelled by what Cousineau-Levine cunningly calls the resulting "tenuousness of their acculturation." The work of Portolese, who sometimes shares Greenslade's predilections for pastoralism, seems to me – unlike Greenslade's work – to attempt (and accomplish) too little. Portolese's *Hush*, for example, in which a supine, meagrely dressed woman with a cloth over her face begins to rise from the ground, is rendered bathetic by Cousineau-Levine's analysis of it: "As she lifts herself off the floor of the forest, the woman in Portolese's *Hush* is in danger of dislodging the covering that has been placed on her face. Perhaps she rises up from a state of entrapment induced by attempts to mask and control the transgressive female body." Yeah, maybe. But, for me, the photograph simply cannot hold this much thesis. And that is the time-honoured route to anti-climax.

The work of the afore-mentioned Jennifer Campbell, however much it may strive, in some measure, to index the procedural ploys of the Dada and Surrealist artists of the past, is bathetic to a degree far more disturbing than Portolese's occasional forays into that discomfiting realm. I agree with Cousineau-Levine that Campbell's images are "disturbing," but I find her photographs of women with kitchen appliances tied to their faces (echoes as much of the commedia dell'arte grotesques of a Jacques Callot as of a "misogynist Surrealist photographer" such as Hans Bellmer) to be more goofy than any contrivance that, as Cousineau-Levine suggests, could contribute to our understanding "that the woman who dares to seek her expressive voice will inevitably suffer for it." Campbell's photograph *Roadkill* is so awkwardly made and so gratuitously gamey that it becomes, in the end, irrepressibly funny. It reminds me of Oscar Wilde's response to the expiring of Little Nell in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: "A man would have to have a heart of stone, not to die laughing." **Gary Michael Dault**