Immaculate Debris

by Michael Turner

"…an iconological analysis that can range freely, with no fear of border guards, and can treat ancient, medieval and modern worlds as a coherent historical unity…can cast light on great and universal evolutionary processes and all their interconnectedness." – Aby Warburg[1]

"The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magical circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the lock of his property" – Walter Benjamin[2]

In the late-1980s I toured a friend from Eastern Europe (a Soviet "dissident," as they were once called) through the south coast of British Columbia, a province I was raised in and one that my friend had grown up dreaming about. After spending the first three days driving around the Lower Mainland, I suggested a weekend trip to the Gulf Islands. "If we leave Vancouver, I would prefer that we visit the Rockies," said my friend, before adding: "The Rockies are what British Columbia is famous for."

While I did not dispute the Rockies' fame as both a mountain range and a sign for that which is untamed, it is British Columbia's islands, not its mountains, that distinguishes it from other Canadian provinces. As for the Rockies, even though they provide my province with much of its eastern border, they are symbolically "closer" to a more uniform Alberta than they are to a more diversified British Columbia.

I mentioned this to my friend and she responded with an indifferent shrug. However, upon returning from our trip she announced rather cheerfully that she would one day return to British Columbia and open a coffee shop on Saltspring Island. Yet a month after that, in a "thank you" note posted from her exiled home in Graz, she scolded me for not taking her to the Rockies, the result of which, she wrote, "has been a complete erasure of my earliest childhood memories—a place I had grown up dreaming about!"

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I relate the story of my friend's visit on the occasion of Jeremy Borsos' Immaculate Debris exhibition because there was something about it—a sensation—that was similar to what I experienced while viewing the work from which the exhibition takes its name—in this instance, a proposition-based time machine that does not so much alter the nature of its variables but exchanges them with those previously (or subsequently) deployed. A consequence of these exchanges are new statements that allow for new narratives, all of which, at least for this viewer, result in a disorientation, a forgetting ("erasure") of that which these objects contributed to in their previous (or subsequent) arrangements. Although this system is not operative in the other three works in the exhibition, its presence provides them with a reference point, "a bit of the mood," as Benjamin once said of the "anticipation" one feels for a collection awaiting its shelves.[3]

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Immaculate Debris (2016) can be considered part of a local-historical lineage of artworks that draw on archaeology, archiving, collection and display. Like Ian Wallace's *Magazine Piece* (1969–), a minimal work comprised of magazine pages mounted on a wall with five horizontally placed pieces of coloured tape, *Immaculate Debris* employs a similar regime, albeit with five 36' long, 1" x 6" wooden shelves in support of a 20th century array of two- and three-dimensional objects. Of these objects, some are rough and look similar to those unearthed by Kara Uzelman during the excavation of her Strathcona backyard in 2006. In that sense, they have more in common with the antique metal toys Roy Arden used in assemblage-based installations like *Procession* (2013), certainly more so than the expressive cut-outs Geoffrey Farmer sourced from *Life* magazines when making his equally processional *Leaves of Grass* (2012). As for the source of Borsos' objects, they were not the result of correspondence "mail art" networks, like the earliest entries in the Morris/Trasov Archive (1969–), nor directly solicited from other artists, like Glenn Lewis had done for his *Great Wall of 1984* (1973), but gathered casually, sometimes purposefully through the internet, or, as Borsos puts it, "drawn from larger archival collections," like those Uzelman worked with when she acquired entire garage sales towards the making of new work.

With that said, what distinguishes *Immaculate Debris* from the aforementioned works is its logic. Here, Borsos has taken pairs of identical industrially-manufactured objects, as well as their handmade or subject-specific equivalents (two bird's nests, two different photos of the same person taken moments apart), and created a constellation of linked, though shifting, propositions. Complicating the discovery of an object in its "later" pairing includes the form its placement takes. In one instance, the folds in the Woodward's shopping bag hide some of the bag's exterior text; but when that bag is seen again, with new folds, different aspects of the text are revealed, and as such make them look like "new" objects. In another instance, a rectangular piece of cardboard is placed on its horizontal axis, only to re-appear in a second pairing on its vertical axis. The effect, as alluded to earlier, is unsettling, where attempts to take in the installation's vast array of objects, while at the same time trying to locate an object's "twin," amounts to the sculptural equivalent

of the "dolly effect," a filmmaking term used to describe what happens when a camera zooms-in while the dolly on which it is mounted is pulled back.

It should come as no surprise that Borsos worked in the film industry. (I mention this not to qualify the "dolly effect" metaphor, but for the industry's prowess at sourcing props to decorate its sets.) In the bygone days of Hollywood's big studios, property departments oversaw a range of collections that were catalogued and stored in warehouses. Prop departments housed special effects models as well, like the unused model I once saw of the Paolo Soleri designed house in Carefree, Arizona, one of a number of models Michelangelo Antonioni had MGM build for the explosive finale of *Zabriskie Point* (1970). Borsos's *Drive-by* (2016) features a similar-sized model of a shack made of "antique" cardboard boxes held at eye level by a metal "pedestal." To peer inside the entrance of this shack is to again experience something similar to the "dolly effect," where the multi-panelled wood frame window through which one sees a passing car (rear-projected) seems more "at home" in a cupboard-sized water closet than as a wall-sized window in one of Soleri's sprawling modern living rooms. In addition to this shift in physical scale is a shift in social and aesthetic contexts.

The remaining two elements in the exhibition are works from Borsos' *Lens Obstruction(s)* (2005–) photo series and a recently completed 22 minute digital video entitled *The Great Aims Society* (2016).

For *Lens Obstruction(s)*, Borsos entered the words "lens obstructions" into an online shopping search engine and, upon finding photographs that included the photographed fingertips of their photographers, purchased them. The earliest version of this work is comprised of four photos that, by virtue of the photographers' fingertips in the top-left, top–right, bottom-left and bottom-right hand corners, are aligned and "re-photographed" to form a single fingertip, a "magical circle" whose subject is less a collage of unrelated pictorial subjects than a work of "digital" montage ("digital" in scare quotes because *digit* is a synonym for *finger*). In 2012, Borsos acquired a series of slides and transparencies of celebrities (Richard Nixon, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, the Pope and the Brady Bunch) and created with them his own lens obstructions, an exercise where the "fail" that accidentally results from the finger over the film camera lens is in fact "perfected" (to effect) using today's digital technologies.

Like *Lens Obstructions, The Great Aims Society* is also composed of materials sourced from online acquisitions—in this case, black-and-white 8mm home movies from the 1930s to the 1950s that were scanned, parsed and edited together with the help of a computer software program. To accompany the new picture track, Borsos wrote a lyrical script and hired voice actors to supply spoken dialogue that matched the "lip flap" of those featured in what were initially silent films. With dialogue in place, Borsos brought the work further into focus through the

placement of Foley sounds (splashes, footsteps over gravel). The result is a narrative based on what we are led to believe was a hunting accident. However, like the search for "Anna" in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), the behaviour that follows from this "accident" quickly devolves into a series of de-centred and overlapping distractions that, as if in an inadvertent act of forgetting, appear more concerned with what is happening at the fuzzy edges of this "accident" than on its resolution.

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In his essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," Benjamin of course is talking about books, but he could just as easily be talking about anything where the "dialectical tension between the poles of order and disorder" have bearing on "the life of the collector."[4] Although Benjamin speaks of the collector's "very mysterious relationship to ownership," the more relevant discussion here is the collector's "relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but [how the collector] studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate."[5] Like Benjamin's contemporary Aby Warburg, who sought to chart the West's intellectual and emotional "polarities" from Alexandrian Greece to Germany's Weimer Republic through his image-based "mood boards,"[6] Borsos, too, has his system.

Notes

1. Aby Warburg. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance,* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999) 585-586

2. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting, *Illuminations,* trans Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) 60

3. Ibid. 59

4. Ibid. 60

5. Ibid. 60

6. For an introduction to Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–1929), see warburg.library.cornell.edu/about

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