Accumulated Outlook

29 June to 26 August 2007
at Centennial Square
curated by Peter Ride
At restaurants from Susur in Toronto to Lindsay House in London, England, one of the most popular features is the “tasting menu.” It offers bites of each dish on the menu: large enough to suggest what the complete course might be like; small enough to tantalize; imbued with a rich complexity. Part of the joy of the tasting menu is the unexpectedness of the combinations, a sequence of dishes and wines that can spread across a range of taste sensations and palates. A well considered tasting menu will provide a suite of flavors as artfully constructed as a piece of jazz, in which small motifs link together and moods lead from one to another.

Sampling plays an important part in our culture, whether it is taking part in a managed and composed experience such as a tasting menu, or in something that is logical but which seems random, such as following unexpected links that come up when a phrase is typed into a search engine. Sampling can be seen in an artistic context, or it could be thought of in a purely commercial sense. But, irrespective of the way it is being approached, its roots penetrate deeply into the way we think about our relationship to choice, to giving, to receiving and to accessing materials and experiences.

The artists in the exhibition Accumulated Outlook have all found new ways to look at the world by sampling material from an eclectic range of resources. They take strange and often inconsequential material and turn it into something utterly different. Under their guidance the undistinguished sample becomes a delicacy.

There is a reason for discussing food in relation to arts practice—for one of the things that anyone might anticipate when talking about food is that it is related to pleasure, both for the creator and the consumer. Artworks are not often talked about in terms of pleasure but there is something distinctly emotive in the process of seeking and gathering material to combine together into a greater whole. The shrewd blending and balancing of works to construct an articulate whole suggests more than craftwork, it suggests a deep involvement. And the sense of pleasure, in a very subtle form, appears to be a keynote to the works in Accumulated Outlook: visual pleasure, the pleasure of playing and the pleasure of engagement.

These artists have responded in a very contemporary way to existing in a world of visual saturation, in which a vast amount of the information we receive comes in visual form and arrives through electronic media. Like the artists whose work is in the companion exhibition, Outlook Express(ed), the collection and the archiving are important reference points, but here there are more nebulous notions; the archives are not personal constructions but selections from a sea of data. The material in Accumulated Outlook is not iconic or dramatic but incidental, ephemeral, not designed to be lasting. It represents the edges rather than the centre of the visual world. Neither is it necessarily laboriously sought after. Its inconsequential nature is in part derived from the fact that accumulation is a norm in the world of information technology. Material accumulates on hard disks; it is attached to e-mails; in the cache of web browsers, saved documents and image files that are transferred from one back-up to another, ever increasing and forming a vast digital reservoir of data.

Over the last few decades appropriation in art practice has become hugely significant as a strategy and a form of artistic expression reflecting in particular the discourse of post-modernism. Its influence upon a generation of artists is reflected upon by the critic Michael Glover, who, in reviewing a recent survey exhibition of contemporary art, refers to the “orgy of appropriation.” He typifies it as “post Warhol art, art derived from other art, or from places that are not art at all; art that exists to question the nature of commercial values, art whose display ... tells a story about the relationship between the rarefied worlds of the museum and the raw, raucous, everyday world of shelving in stores.”

However, the works in Accumulated Outlook also suggest qualities and concerns that go beyond those referred to by Glover. Although the artists in the exhibition are concerned with representation, critiquing the status of the image and its context, their greater concern is the reorganisation of the material into a very coherent whole. The work does not look back at its source but instead it projects forward to other possibilities and forms. The artists demonstrate three very different approaches.

Cheryl Sourkes’ images in Homecammer (2006) are taken from “community” Websites in which members use live webcams to reveal themselves, their private spaces and activities online. Grabbed from the live footage, digitally mastered and presented as inkjet prints they attain a richness and vibrancy that takes them away from the casualness of internet images. The clearest visual connections that spring to mind are not to images that suggest a contemporary world mediated by technology, but to the paintings of Edward Hopper, with their heightened visual sense and social observation.

Sourkes’ prints the colours are luxurious, and the graphic formation of the images is bold, but these qualities seem to intensify the empty space the figures occupy; a space that is redolent of the internet.

Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead’s screen animation is a live feed from a news site. Decorative Newsfeeds (2004) takes the idea of news as an abstract formulation of words being taken from one Website to another, data moving endlessly through digital space. Their means of appropriating and sampling is through devising a software tool to select occasional strands of news and turn them into decorative objects, performing loops of text that spiral and twist across the screen until the news item has finished. Not only is the news “aestheticised” but it also serves as a reminder that news is subjectively authored, and it is not “pure data” that exists outside taste sensibilities and culture. Like Sourkes’ images, Thomson & Craighead’s work comes from a world that is constantly online, not a static archive. While in Sourkes’ prints the border between public observation and private space is erased, in Decorative Newsfeeds the notion of a line between information and entertainment is teased and twisted.

Dara Gellman and Leslie Peters create an extra-ordinary space that is both haunting and emotionally charged in their work Impossible Landscapes. Weaving together clips from films and documentaries, they create a tour through a landscape that takes the viewer though dark, forbidding undergrowth to breathtaking flyovers of strange terrain. The source of their material is not apparent, but the film conventions are all strikingly familiar and the vast amount of imagery suggests the depth of their involvement with the material. Gelman and Peters embellish the work with a soundtrack that also references film genres, both building up and abating suspense.

The title Accumulated Outlook refers not only to the way in which artists gather work together but also what happens when it is presented as a coherent whole. Artist John Baldessari discusses how the way things are ordered may seem arbitrary but it is in fact a fundamental structure within a project that samples from many sources: “There are so many different ways you can organise things, but it is so basic to art—how do you put a structure on seemingly random information?... As soon as you put two things together you have a story.”

These three groups of work show how narratives are created when work is drawn together as a coherent whole. Perhaps this
is most obvious in the case of Impossible Landscapes in which a cinematic narrative is constructed out of snippets. However the narrative is open and leaves room for the viewers’ own imagining. It could at times be seen as a threatening drama but sometimes as hopeful and lyrical. The narrative in Decorative Newsfeeds is less obvious, as it is conveyed through performance. The line of news becomes a graphic dance. The dramatic prints of Homecammer have a more complicated relationship to narrative. The images come from a world which is based upon exchange and, when selected and represented they become more than evidence of community, they become a group of personalities and strange spaces, both connected and disconnected from each other.

There is also another, larger, narrative in which these works participate, and that is the narrative of the gallery space. Many artists who work with digital media have explored how information can be taken from one source and replicated in quite a different way, so that sound can be seen as image, or movement generated as text. Transference of material from one form to another has become a cultural norm. And the role of the physical artwork in the age of digital information and virtuality has been questioned.

The works in Accumulated Outlook reflect upon this, but offer a slightly different twist. These are works that create artefacts out of the ephemeral, and ones that have a very strong physical presence. They engage with the audience in a way that requires the physicality of the gallery space. Together these works have a visual intensity that rewards the presence of the viewer. The “tasting menu” becomes as it should be: a complex meal in itself.

— Peter Ride


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