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AGAIN AND ONCE MORE, AGAIN

KRISTIE MACDONALD | MYFANWY MACLEOD | MITCH ROBERTSON

NOTES FROM RETURNING TO THE SCENE

BY EMILY MCKIBBON

When an emotional mechanic considers an automobile in which, let us say, gangsters have escaped from police pursuit over a bad road, and finds the frame bent, the wheels out of line, and the motor partially damaged, he might quite justifiably say: "It is not an automobile—devil knows what it is!" Such an estimate would lack any technical and scientific value, but it would express the legitimate reaction of the mechanic at the work of the gangsters. Let us suppose, however, that this same mechanic must recondition the object which he named devil-knows-what-it-is. In this case he will start with the recognition that it is a damaged automobile before him. He will determine which parts are still good and which are beyond repair in order to decide how to begin work... Of course this is only an analogy. Nevertheless it is worth reflecting over.

—Leon Trotsky, October 1939¹

In the archive, objects and images exist in the present, but reek of the past. That trace is what animates our collections, compels us daily to work against their natural tendency to entropy and decay. It's almost too much of a cliché to mention at this point, but a teacup is a teacup until it's inscribed at its base with an accession number and then it's a relic. The utilitarian demands of the world give way to the pristine museum, and the myriad precautions that come with that designation. But what of artists who wish to give historical events—particularly contentious, particularly unfinished—a physical presence in the gallery? Art critic Hal Foster argues that archival art, and artists engaged in that tradition, are "concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps 'anarchival impulse' is the more appropriate phrase)" and these artists' work derives from "unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects—in art and in history alike—that might offer points of departure again."² In Foster's invocation of unfulfilled projects that allow for multiple points of inquiry, I am reminded of Leon Trotsky's mechanic, returning once again to a damaged automobile and salvaging what parts he can.



Installation view of *Again and Once More, Again*. Photo: Andre Beneteau

The exhibition *Again and Once More, Again* takes its title from a 1939 defence of Marxism Leon Trotsky gave while exiled in Mexico, Trotsky offering his mechanic as a metaphor and model for frustrated socialists of the world. Each of the three artists—Kristie MacDonald, Myfanwy MacLeod and Mitch Robertson—works with archival or found materials to make these historical traces present, their processes iterative and occasionally corrective. There is also an interest, shared between them, in unresolved stories, old hurts, frustration and failure. Like that mechanic, MacDonald, MacLeod and Robertson each interrogate and restage their troubled archives, and the success that they achieve demonstrates the mutability of contentious material under conscientious hands.

Mitch Robertson's series *Oak Island* references the strange and convoluted history of Oak Island, a small privately owned island in the Mahone Bay off of the coast of Nova Scotia. Oak Island is best known for treasures purportedly hidden deep in the "Money Pit," a sinkhole or manmade shaft on the Eastern side of the small landmass. Robertson's ten photographs in this series reference not only the ten figures shown in the identical source image, but also ten possible theories of the Oak Island treasure—from Marie Antoinette's jewelry to Elizabethan manuscripts that prove Francis Bacon's authorship of William Shakespeare's plays. The ten photographs are fibre prints made from scans of a photograph Robertson bought from eBay, hand-coloured and with a red shirt travelling to each of the ten figures in turn. The text, carved into the bottom of the frame, references each of the myths in turn, giving each version its own protagonist. The resolution here is not in the dominance of any one narrative, but in their simultaneity. Like Schrödinger's Cat, there is a sense that all competing possibilities can coexist peacefully, and a quixotic stasis is maintained—so long as the "Money Pit" keeps protecting its mysteries.

One of the central legends at the heart of the Oak Island mystery is the theory that the treasure will only be found after seven people have died trying to recover it. To date, six have been killed since the legend of the treasure first emerged in 1795. The darkly imminent



In search of Captain Kidd's treasure, Oak Island, NS

Mitch Robertson, *In search of Captain Kidd's Treasure, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print. Photo: Laura Findlay



In search of Shakespeare's manuscripts, Oak Island, NS

Mitch Robertson, *In search of Shakespeare's manuscripts, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print. Photo: Laura Findlay



In search of the Holy Grail, Oak Island, NS

Mitch Robertson, *In search of the Holy Grail, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print.
Photo: Laura Findlay

seventh death inflects our reading of *Oak Island*, while pointing to Robertson's ongoing interests in folkloric seriality and its consonance with contemporary art practice. Like *Oak Island*, *Superstition Mountain (Versions 1-5)*, is a series of nearly identical hand-coloured photographs of the eponymous mountain ranges in Arizona, each highlighting a new narrative of the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine. *Good to Bad* (2013) is a series of found photographs hand-coloured to represent escalating moral laxity in line-ups of anonymous athletes. What emerges from these disparate bodies of work is Robertson's systematized approach to the serial grammar of folklore. Like other artists engaged in serial practices, Robertson's approach negates his own personal subjectivity by following a pre-set plan—in the case of *Oak Island*, the travelling red shirt—and the work correspondingly designs itself in a deliberately neutral fashion. If Robertson doesn't necessarily pick a favourite narrative from his source material, certainly he returns to them with the dogged fervour that Trotsky wants from his mechanic.

Kristie MacDonald's project begins with an archive of ripped photographs, portraits encountered largely by accident. The first image MacDonald created, *Untitled (ripped picture)* (2008) is a torn school photograph, housed in an innocuous manila folder. All that remains of the original figure is a disembodied left shoulder clad in a white-trimmed, navy blazer, a shaggy brown haircut growing up and around a slightly protrusive ear. MacDonald has recreated the missing part of the image, casting a young woman in the role of the adolescent subject, smiling broadly. The new picture is obsessively torn to match the damage to the original and pasted in. MacDonald's attention to detail is best captured in the part on the subject's hairline, zigzagging across the rip between the images if not seamlessly, successfully enough to require a second look. MacDonald's extraordinary effort—hiring seamstresses, photographers, models—is a reparative gesture undoing a type of iconoclasm that's common to many: how many of us have destroyed a photograph in anger, in sadness, or through neglect? Physical prints bear the brunt of our emotional lives: one print, once kissed, might soon be torn, after taped, later forgotten. Far from vestigial behaviours, these reifying acts continue through the early years of the digital age.



Kristie MacDonald, *Untitled (Ripped Picture)*, 2008, found photograph and inkjet photograph. Photo: Andre Beneteau



Kristie MacDonald, *Young Woman Leaning on a Couch (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph. Photo: Andre Beneteau



Kristie MacDonald, *Woman and Man Seated Side by Side (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph. Photo: Andre Beneteau

MacDonald has engaged in similar reparative practices in the past. Her body of work *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* includes a series of images of homes fallen or torn from their foundations, the photographs angled in their frames to show the houses on a level plane. MacDonald is an archivist by training, and there is an element of transgression in these works: “Within her artistic practice MacDonald acts on the impulses that the objective, neutral role of the archivist refuses. She restores; she repairs”³ critic Caoimhe Morgan-Feir notes. However, in the field of collections management, there is a multiplicity of custodial roles—and in some respects, MacDonald’s practice recalls the tender, provisional gestures of a conservator gone rogue. In a studio visit with MacDonald, examining *Young Woman Leaning on a Couch (Ripped Picture)* she expressed dismay at the tape she used to reconstitute the torn photograph. “It’s not archival,” she said, a blanket term that in this case means that it’s not acid-free and, further, the taping is an intervention that would be challenging to undo. Repairs to damaged artworks are designed to be weaker than the substrate, intended to fail first if the piece should experience some unexpected trauma. Unlike *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past*, which used scans of the photographs rather than originals, this project is an intervention into the damaged original. In doing so, MacDonald’s surprisingly assertive act ensures that the trace of these subjects not disappear; they are dragged back to the surface; an impetuous act of anger is undone through MacDonald’s painstaking—and irreversible—recreation.

With *Flagspreader*, Myfanwy MacLeod works with material from the MacLaren’s Sovfoto Archive of 23,000 Soviet press prints dating from the Stalinist period. On her initial visit to the gallery to view works from this collection, her list of requested scans demonstrated the scope of the archive, as well as some of its conceptual challenges; from images of a WWII soldier’s boots freezing in the snow to stacked sausages to the Moscow school of ballet, this archive straddles the outlying adjectives kitsch and chilling without depicting much in the middle. Certainly, Soviet kitsch is a genre worth recognizing for its *realpolitik*, and not just sentimental, potential; in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera observed that it was only kitsch

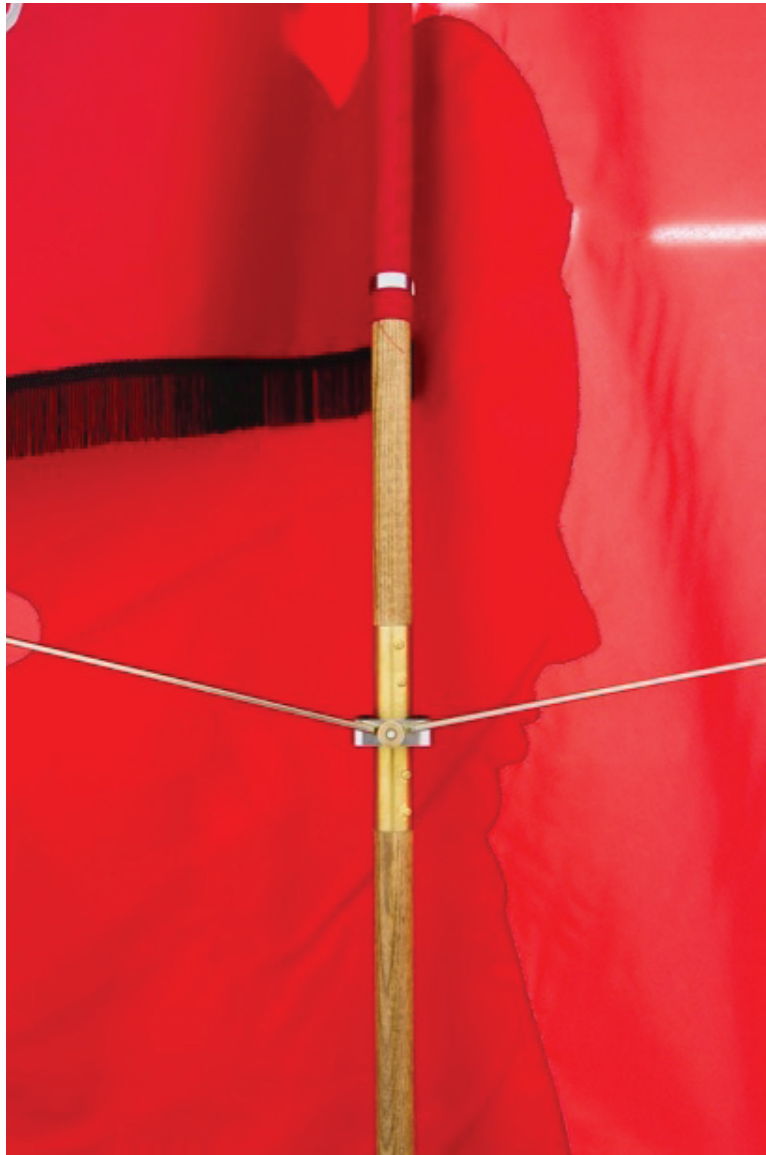


Max Alpert, *All-Union Physical Culture Parade on Red Square in Moscow on August 18*, n.d., gelatin silver print. From the Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre



Myfanwy MacLeod, *Flagspreader*, 2016, nylon fabric, wooden flagpole, brass acorn finial.

Photo: Andre Beneteau



Myfanwy MacLeod, *Flagspreader* (detail), 2016, nylon fabric, wooden flagpole, brass acorn finial.
Photo: Dennis Ha

that could serve as the basis for a true internationalism. “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!⁴ The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!” MacLeod ultimately created works for this exhibition that do not directly reference any one single photograph in the Sovfoto Archive. Instead *Flagspreader* features two portraits of a cheerleader printed on three Soviet red flags, the flags fringed in black and mounted on wooden flagpoles with brass acorn finials. The pictured cheerleader is dressed to perform, her hair up and teased, but her focus directed inwards. Reminiscent of Soviet gymnasts as much as the classic North American cheerleader, her presentation on these flags complicates notions of camp, gender, athleticism and nationalism. In a succinct but subtle gesture, kitsch and its darker potentiality are reunited once more in this work.

“Boredom is a front cover preserving archives from intruders looking for easy excitement: you have to fight your way in a flattening environment, which puts the context above the individual value,”⁵ notes subREAL, a collective of Romanian artists working with archival material after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of decades of communist oppression. MacLeod’s practice is marked by “wry strikes at pop culture and contemporary art,”⁶ and these wry strikes are often direct hits at threads that are both revelatory and easily missed: the absence of bubblegum under the seats of a Sorbonne auditorium, depictions of lovable drunks in the visual culture of the first half of the twentieth century, or new age neon signage in the urban landscape. If archives are flattening environments, MacLeod’s *Flagspreader* and *Dorothy* counteract the reductive consequences of image surplus and redundancy. In *Dorothy*, MacLeod removed centrefolds of murdered former playmate Dorothy Stratten from back issues of *Playboy*, folding them into complex origami shapes and rephotographing them as towering forms. Stratten’s violent history was addressed in this reconstitutive gesture, her body folded and manipulated by kinder hands than those that held it previously, to monumental—and memorializing—affect. *Dorothy* and *Flagspreader* both deal with contentious source material, and both encapsulate a

key element of what Susan Sontag describes as the camp aesthetic: its tenderness. As Sontag notes, “camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy... Camp taste doesn’t propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn’t sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.”⁷

Such failures are not only central to MacLeod’s work: their echoes reverberate through the work of MacDonald and Robertson and archival practice more generally. While the contentiousness of each artist’s source material varies widely, each works through potential pratfalls, creating artwork that resolves some strange tension. Hal Foster comments: “Perhaps the paranoid dimension of archival art is the other side of its utopian ambition—its desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and life into possible scenarios for alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no place of an archive into the new place of utopia.”⁸ The use of archival and found materials—materials bearing the trace of histories unknown and unknowable—gives presence to the past within the pristine space of the gallery. Sly, messy or menacing: these traces refuse to be silenced; their emergent qualities point to the latent potential inherent in our unrealized projects and failed visions. A transmutation is at play in these artworks, suggesting that passionate failure is as generative a starting point as any.

¹ Leon Trotsky, “Again and Once More Again: on the Nature of the USSR” from *In Defense of Marxism*. Available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/tdom/dm/04-again.htm>. Accessed July 22, 2016.

² Hal Foster, “Archival,” in *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2015): 34.

³ Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, “What Was Will Be and Yellow Font Forest Green,” in *Christina Battle, Kristie MacDonald, Alexis Dirks: What Will Be*, (Toronto: Gallery 44, 2014): p. 7-8.

⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1999): p. 251.

⁵ subREAL (Călin Dan and Josif Kiraly), “Politics of Cultural Heritage,” (1999) in Charles Merewether, ed. *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006): p. 115.

⁶ Bryne McLaughlin, “Myfanwy MacLeod Revisits 1970s London in Bittersweet Survey,” *Canadian Art*, available online: <http://canadianart.ca/reviews/myfanwy-macleod-museum-london/>. Accessed September 7, 2016.

⁷ Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (1964). Available online: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>. Accessed July 25, 2016.

⁸ Foster, “Archival,” p. 60



Kristie MacDonald, *Four Children (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph.
Photo: Andre Beneteau

BIOGRAPHIES

KRISTIE MACDONALD (b. 1985, Canada) is an artist who lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Her practice engages notions of the archive and the collection, as well as their roles in the evolving meanings and contextual histories of images and artifacts. MacDonald is inspired by the phenomena of recollection, remembrance and forgetting which drive the human urge to collect, memorialize and revisit. She has recently exhibited her work at BABEL Visningsrom for Kunst (Trondheim NO), Reed College (Portland OR), G Gallery (Toronto ON), The International Print Center (New York NY), and Gallery 44 (Toronto ON). She holds an MI from the University of Toronto specializing in Archival Studies and an MFA from York University specializing in Visual Arts.

MYFANWY MACLEOD (b. 1961, Canada) lives and works in Vancouver. Recent solo exhibitions include *Public Projects: Myfanwy MacLeod*, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg (2016); *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, Or Gallery (2015); *Myfanwy MacLeod: Or There and Back Again*, Vancouver Art Gallery (2014) and the Museum London (2013); *Dorothy*, Presentation House Satellite, Vancouver (2012); *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2016); *Miss Moonshine*, Catriona Jeffries (2001); *A Brief Overview of Personology*, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver (2000); *How Not to Be Seen*, VTO Gallery, London, UK (2000). Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *Like a Rolling Stone: An Exhibition About Rock and Rock*, Charles H. Scott Gallery (2016); *The Daily Grind*, Museum London (2015); *Carbon 14: Climate is Culture*, Royal Ontario Museum, ICC Space, Toronto (2013); *Oh Canada*, MassMoCA, North Adams, MA (2012); *Builders: Canadian Biennial 2012*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2009); *Keep the IS in FEMINISM*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2008); *Stories, in Pieces*, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto (2008); *The Banal*, SBC Galerie d'art contemporain, Montréal (2007). In 2014 Black Dog published a monograph of her work. She is represented by Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver.

MITCH ROBERTSON (b. 1974, Canada) is a conceptually based artist in Toronto, Canada. His work considers the intertwined paths of superstition, globalization and consumerism. With over 40 solo exhibitions since 1998, Robertson has shown across Canada as well as in New Zealand, USA, Switzerland, Northern Ireland, England, Germany, Scotland and Australia in public, artist run and commercial galleries. His work is in numerous private, corporate and public art collections. He is represented by Birch Contemporary in Toronto.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Kristie MacDonald, *Untitled (Ripped Picture)*, 2008, Found photograph in paper folder, inkjet photograph, dimensions variable.

Kristie MacDonald, *Young Woman Leaning on a Couch (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph, 14 cm x 6.35 cm.

Kristie MacDonald, *Woman and Man Seated Side by Side (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph, 7.5 x 11.75 cm.

Kristie MacDonald, *Four Children (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph, 9 x 8.5 cm.

Myfanwy MacLeod, *Flagspreader*, 2016, nylon fabric, wooden flagpole, brass acorn finial, 386 x 252 x 28 cm. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of Captain Kidd's treasure, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of French valuables from the Fortress of Louisbourg, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of Blackbeard's treasure, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of the Ark of the Covenant, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of Shakespeare's manuscripts, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of a Rosicrucian vault, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of treasure from a Spanish galleon, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In search of British treasure from the Battle of Havana, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In Search of Marie Antoinette's jewels, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

Mitch Robertson, *In Search of the Holy Grail, Oak Island, NS*, 2016, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 56 x 64 cm. Courtesy of Birch Contemporary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

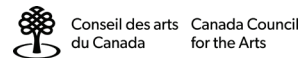
Publication to accompany the exhibition *Again and Once More, Again: Kristie MacDonald, Myfanwy MacLeod, Mitch Robertson*, held December 3, 2016 to March 5, 2017 at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, curated by Emily McKibbon. © MacLaren Art Centre in collaboration with the individual contributors, 2016. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-987895-11-7

Design: Shannon Linde

Cover: Kristie MacDonald, preliminary study for *Four Children (Ripped Picture)*, 2016, Found photograph, inkjet photograph

The MacLaren Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of its Friends, Patrons, Donors, Sponsors, Partners, the City of Barrie, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts, and exhibition sponsor Barriston Law.



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