



Slowness in Dominique Rey's
Under the Rose Arch

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My journey into the sisters' lives has been a kind of pilgrimage. My experiences of slowness and mindfulness within the walls of the convent have marked me and these qualities are the essence of what I intend to convey. Their practice of prayer, silence and meditation serve to deepen their faith; it also affects their relationship to time and their ability to pay close attention.¹

– Dominique Rey

Throughout her career, Dominique Rey has promoted slowness as a counter-narrative to the incessant cacophony of contemporary life. In 2011, she installed four billboards reading “Do Less, Slowly” across Winnipeg. An extension of her research into the “Slow Movement”, the *Do Less, Slowly* project underscored the importance of slowness as a path to experiencing timelessness and becoming present-minded rather than future-obsessed. *Under the Rose Arch*, Rey’s solo exhibition at the MacLaren Art Centre, is similarly an embodiment of slowness.

For the past ten years, Rey has remained concertedly dedicated to the ongoing documentation of the profound lives of a disappearing Catholic order of nuns, the Sisters of the Cross. Although the order has roots across the globe, it is, like many other religious congregations, a community on the verge of extinction. Rey avoids a straightforward documentary approach. Instead, she employs a variety of imaginative and introspective strategies to articulate the stillness and precarity that surround the nuns. Since its inception in 2005, the Sisters of the Cross project has evolved into an extensive archive of material, including photographs, postcards, paintings, videos, collages, sculptures and installation works. This archive, as a whole, records a living history. In addition, it presents a nuanced portrait of the sisterhood that ruminates on notions of impermanence, the experience of time passing and, in particular, the idea of slowness.

Growing up, Rey regularly visited two of her aunts at a Sisters of the Cross convent on Moore Avenue in her native Winnipeg. She was fascinated by the convent’s extreme marginality and the polarities between their traditional lifestyle and contemporary



culture. She began painting portraits of the sisters and conducting one-on-one interviews, and then proceeded to photograph and videotape them in their communal spaces and personal living quarters. In 2011, the Moore Avenue convent closed due to declining numbers. The nuns were forced to move into a convent with a different order, the Oblates Sisters, whose numbers were also dwindling. Today, the two convents cohabitate in St. Boniface and share their building with a retirement home for laypeople.

In the work she produced about Moore Avenue, Rey focused on the quotidian details of the sisters' lives. Empty interiors and commonplace objects function as surrogates for the nuns. The banality of the scenes reverberates with a deep sense of humility that typifies the order. Haunted by an absence of bodies, the isolated spaces flag the congregation's demise.

The Moore Avenue work functions as the first of four chapters that comprise the *Sisters of the Cross* project. The second and third chapters take place in Argentina and Brazil, respectively. These chapters are more sociological in nature, with an emphasis on the order's altruism, activism and goodwill. Here, we witness communal and individual rituals including song, prayer and sermon. The fourth chapter focuses on the sisterhood's historic motherhouse and monastery in La Puye, France. It references the origin of the sisterhood, which activates the commemorative aspect of the project. As the community is now the last generation of its kind, and sisterhood in general is a vocation reminiscent of another



era, we are left with the question: Who will carry on their legacy once these women are gone? These four chapters are distinct in their aesthetics and modes of representation, but remain highly interrelated nonetheless. At each convent Rey immersed herself in order to build strong, sincere connections with the sisters. She refers to them as collaborators rather than subjects, and portrays them respectfully and with tenderness.

Under the Rose Arch brings together select works from all four chapters of the project. The exhibition comprises three large-scale experimental photo assemblages, a suite of five photographs and an immersive sound and video installation. Thematically, *Under the Rose Arch* expresses the temporality of the larger *Sisters of the Cross* project but, through its inclusion of photo assemblage works, it places a special emphasis on the deliberate slowness in Rey's practice.

The atmosphere of stillness Rey experienced in the convents is especially apparent in the video, *Les Filles de la Croix*. The black-box installation is an immersive space that beckons from within, inviting us to experience qualities of slowness firsthand. Unhurried footage and slow-motion embody a radically different understanding of time. Prolonged glimpses of sisters' faces, camera pans down deserted hallways and the echoed chime of church bells conjure notions of temporality and ephemerality. Too, the audio component complements the video's conceptual framework. Rey collaborated with Montreal composer and musician Benoit Morier to produce a soundtrack that, in its austere ambience and lamenting tone, evokes a sensory response.

In addition to conveying slowness in her work, Rey also demonstrates slowness in her process. On the making of *Sisters of the Cross*, she notes:

*The extensive archive of photographs and videos I had created required nearly a year to review, compile and edit. Although I often resisted it, slowness was unequivocally the only method possible for doing a careful and considered inventory of all the raw material. Many of the photographs as well as the video speak to moments when the sisters and the environment are imbued with qualities of slowness.*²

Rey's careful and considered methodology is evident in her artist book, a preparatory work in which fragments of furniture, décor and personal objects are meticulously excised from her photographs of the convents and rearranged into airy, uncluttered collages. The objects become, as Rey notes, "evidence of the detritus of life and the traces we leave behind, making visible a rapidly disappearing community that typically goes unseen."³ The scrupulous process of pulling apart and rebuilding is a form of meditation in itself. It embraces slowness and stymies current notions of efficiency and effectiveness as keys to the successful production of artwork.

The collages in the artist book also function as templates for the three photo assemblages that anchor the exhibition. The two most recent (Untitled #2 and #3, both 2014) are free-standing, while the earliest (Untitled #1, 2012) is wall-mounted. Each is constructed of colour photographs mounted to clear, laser-cut acrylic pieces, which are installed in overlapping layers that replicate the original





collages. The fragility of the pristine structures parallels the precarious existence of the sisterhood itself.

With these assemblage works, Rey brings the materiality of her photographs into a new, malleable form. Like traditional photographs, the sculptures incorporate visible traces of the convents (a table lamp, an empty chair, the leaves of a house plant). Yet at the same time, they offer a fresh model for what documentary work can be. Their experimental nature pushes documentary photography—a field that is expanding in light of radical technological shifts and image oversaturation—farther into its destabilized position. Rey's assemblages, like other "new" documentary work, espouse slowness by hindering a quick reading—the primary fallibility of reportage photography.

In its broadest terms, *Under the Rose Arch* builds on Rey's fascination with the representation of alterity and peripheral existences. To Rey, alterity, or "the other", can embody our suppressed fears and longings and the complexities of human life. The Sisters of the Cross, in their scarcity and in their steadfast devotion, add to this complexity. Their lifelong commitment to piety prompts us to reflect on our own values and vocations. In her portrayal of the Sisters, Rey foregrounds the transience of human existence and encourages us to embrace slowness as a space where listening and paying close attention are paramount.

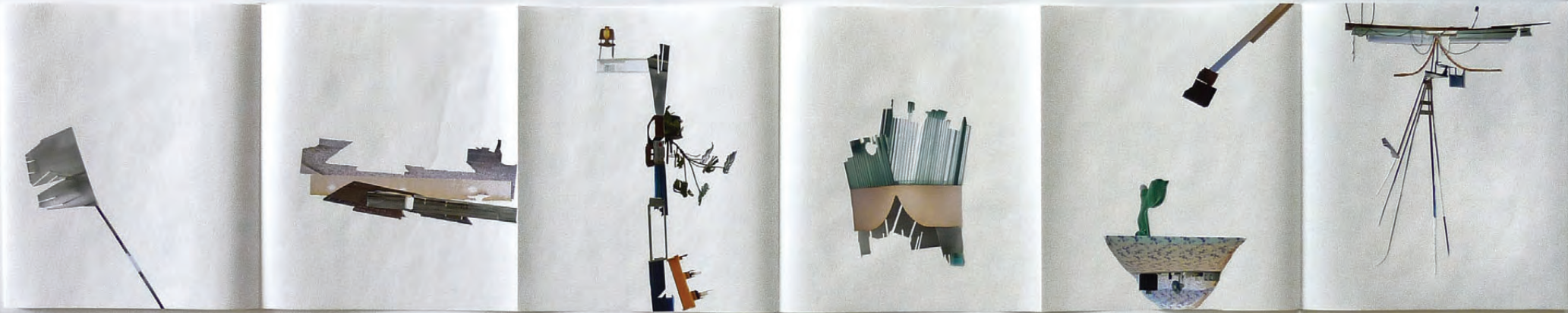
By RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD

¹ *Radical Slowness in the Dromocratic Era* (Berlin: Transart Institute, 2009): 16.

² *Ibid*: 17.

³ Dominique Rey, *Les Filles de la Croix* (Artist Statement, 2015).





DOMINIQUE REY holds a MFA from Bard College, NY (2007) and a MFA from Transart Institute in Berlin (2011). She is a multidisciplinary artist whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, with recent presentations in Miami, Toronto, Lethbridge, Winnipeg, Montreal and Calgary. Her work is in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Province of Manitoba and Wedge Collection. The artist gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Manitoba Arts Council and the University of Manitoba.



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Small Chapel, 2006, colour photograph, 76 x 102 cm (Cover)

Under the Rose Arch, 2009, colour photograph, 61 x 91 cm (Page 3)

Sr Neuza, 2009, colour photograph, 61 x 91 cm (Page 4)

Infirmiry Kitchen, 2006, colour photograph, 76 x 102 cm (Page 4)

Under the Rose Arch, 2015, installation view, MacLaren Art Centre (Page 5)

Untitled #1 (Photo Assemblage), 2012, c-prints mounted to acrylic support, 295 x 221 cm (Page 7)

Les Filles de la Croix (installation view), 2012, HD video with 5.1 surround sound, 10:20 min. runtime (Page 8)

Untitled #3 (Photo Assemblage) (detail), 2014, c-prints mounted to acrylic support, 213 x 102 x 170 cm (Page 8)

Sr Carmen, 2009, colour photograph, 61 x 91 cm (Page 9)

Assemblage Studies, 2010-2012, artist book (Page 10)

Untitled #3 (Photo Assemblage), 2014, c-prints mounted to acrylic support, 213 x 102 x 170 cm (Page 11)

Photography: Pages 5, 7, 11, André Beneteau; Cover, pages 3, 4, 8-10, Courtesy the artist.

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