

Cyndra MacDowall: Index

October 29, 2005 – January 22, 2006

Curator Cassandra Getty

Essay Alison Kenzie

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List of Works

Backyard 2005

Bowmore 2005

Canopy 2005

Dad's Shoes 2005

Dark Water 2005

Dock 2005

Mom Sewing 2005

Rainy Window 2005

Neck 2005

Playground 2005

Kew Beach 2005

Rain 2005

Schoolyard 2005

Chromira prints

Collection of the artist



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Cover *Playground* 2005; Chromira print
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To grow old: by the time we reach adulthood, it's something that most of us rarely want to do. When we finally begin to admit that we, too, are aging, it is often in times of loss — the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, the recognition of new physical limitations.

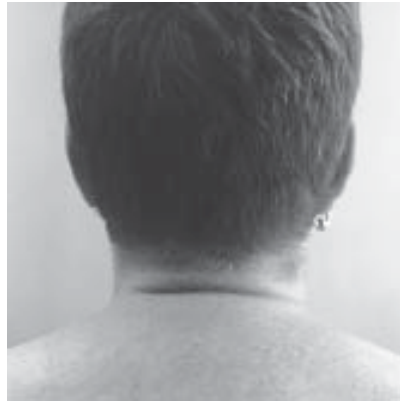
What would happen if we could stop time, stem the tide of advancing years, and simply inhabit the age of 'as is'? In fact, we can, and we don't need cryogenics to do it. All we need is photography, a nearly 200 year-old invention that does not look a day over 25.

Yet photographs also harbour a peculiar paradox when it comes to time. A photograph will allow us to scrutinize a moment while reminding us of this moment's imminent demise. No matter how confidently 'current' they seem to be, photographs inevitably show us a present that is already the past.

In *Index* (2005), a collection of large-scale, black and white photographs of people, objects, and places, Cyndra MacDowall embraces the temporal paradox at the heart of photography. Alternating between close-ups and long shots, MacDowall's images offer headings and subheadings that, like any good index, economically guide the user-viewer through a broader and more complex subject. That broader subject is MacDowall's life as well as life in general: her images revolve around themes of childhood, growing up, growing older, growing old, and death. In short, time is MacDowall's subject, and her own vacillations between present and past, memory and in-the-moment experience echo the instability of her medium.

MacDowall's images are at once extremely personal and dispassionately generic. Her subject matter contains people and places important to her own history, yet her use of depopulated spaces — stages awaiting actors and action — allows the locations to serve equally as types of urban geography. That MacDowall's camera shifts between the viewpoint of a participant and that of an observer deepens this sense of seeing the 'here and now' and the 'anywhere and anytime.' On one level, these perceptual jumps seem to imitate the way memory works, giving us startling immediacy as well as a heightened awareness of distance from past experiences, both in space and in time.

In *Index*, MacDowall ostensibly moves out of the shadows that she had explored in *Penetrating the City* (1999–2001), a series that followed the nocturnal passage of a lesbian couple through the streets of Montreal. Even when her subjects are dark — water off the dock, a canopy of leaves, a rain-spotted window — they are clearly distinguishable, permitting close examination of their



Images (clockwise from top left)

Neck 2005

Kew Beach 2005

Rainy Window 2005

Bowmore 2005

Rain 2005

Schoolyard 2005

Dad's Shoes 2005

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forms, their texture, their arrested movement, and their expansive, uninhabited space. This is perhaps because *Index* is not about reclaiming spaces for expressing marginalized desires as much as it is about examining with an unflinching eye the realities that implicate every one of us.

And as it makes — and invites *us* to make — this examination, *Index* breaks radically from MacDowall's oeuvre to date. It offers not seduction but a muted sense of loss: consigning viewers to the edges of the schoolyard, lakefront, streets of our own childhoods, compelling us to recognize that although memory and imagination can re-people and personalize these places, they cannot truly return us there and then. If *Index* does conjure desire, it seems to do so in the form of a question. Given that our bodies will continue to betray the passage of time that remains frozen in photographs, will desire, too, die over time?

By virtue of her strategy of abbreviation, her indexical approach, MacDowall lets this question rest between heading and subheading, close-up and distance. For all its size,

Index avoids presenting a tragedy writ large.

It conjures sadness on a more intimate scale, and requires human experience — and invites the viewer — to complete its story.

Alison Kenzie

Alison is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto.



Cyndra MacDowall lives and works in Windsor and Toronto. She is professor of photography at the University of Windsor School of Visual Arts. MacDowall is also a writer, educator, curator, and arts advocate. Her recent exhibitions include *Unexpected Encounters* (2002–03), *Peep* (2001), *Road Trip Diary* (1995, 1998), *Home is Where the Heart is: Our Family Values* (1997), and *A Vocabulary of Hands*

(1995) among several others. MacDowall is the recipient of over twenty Canadian grants and awards, and her photographs are found in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Canada Council Art Bank, University of Toronto, and the Lesbian and Gay Community Archives, National Portrait Collection.

In her photography, Cyndra MacDowall examines the philosophical and social issues underpinning the history of photography and by extension of cultural representation in general. Series such as *Bed of Roses* (1989–92) and *Penetrating the City* (1999–2001) explore constructed notions of gender and specifically homosexual identity, the gaze, and the idea of the city, with its public and private realms and more indeterminate, flexible sites of potential transgression and subversion.

Her new series, *Index*, presents images featuring what MacDowall describes as "the background contexts found in family album portraits — yards, trees, water, streets, and edges of the home that usually surround the portrait subject of the family photo." Importantly, these elements eschew references to any one protagonist or narrative. Paired with the representation of familiar, almost universal Western environments, this absence alludes to feelings of loss, time and aging.

