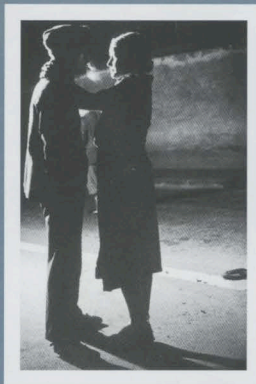


## LYNNE BELL



This interview focuses on Cyndra MacDowall's series of photographs entitled *Penetrating the City* (1999-2001), which represents a lesbian couple flâneuring through the urban spaces of a sensual Montreal night. In discussing this series, MacDowall reveals the significance and subtle workings of intertextual framing in her work as well as her careful research into the history of western urban photographic imagery. In representing lesbian public sex and women's mobility within a male economy of movement in the city at night, Cyndra's work sets out to queer contemporary debates on flânerie (the activities of strolling, loitering, looking, and reflecting upon the city).

## A CONVERSATION WITH CYNDRA MACDOWALL





Cyndra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City*  
*Shadow wall*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print



Cyndra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City*  
*Backyard fence*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

In talking about your exhibition, *Penetrating the City*, you make it clear that your work is in dialogue with the historical photographic record of



Brassai  
*Homosexual Ball*, 1933  
Silver Gelatin Print



Brassai  
*Female Couple*, 1933  
Silver Gelatin Print



Eugene Atget  
*La Villette, Rue Asselin, prostitute*, 1921  
Silver Gelatin Print

gay and lesbian life in the city as seen, for instance, in Brassai's photographs of Parisian nightlife in *The Secret Paris of the '30s* and in the portraits of Berenice Abbott who photographed lesbian subjects in Paris in the 1920s. Can you talk about this history of lesbian urban culture—and its photographic record—and how it provides a frame for your work? Well, Brassai began photographing Paris at night in the 1930s. His work is significant because he photographed lesbians in a social context—he photographed them in lesbian bars—and his images are completely different to the lesbian erotica/porn produced for the heterosexual imaginary. Brassai's publication made these photographs widely available. Berenice Abbott lived in Paris from 1925 to 1929. I've always loved the portraits she did of the artistic and lesbian avant-garde while she was there. She was drawn to Paris, like many women in New York in the 1920s, because it was seen as a site of liberation for both artists and people who were sexually alternative. There is a wonderful book called *Women of the Left Bank* (1987) by Shari Benstock,<sup>1</sup> that maps the women's city of Paris in the 1920s and '30s. Of the twenty-two women she discusses, thirteen are lesbians—more than half of them. Benstock looks at how these women

found ways to build a visible lesbian culture within the existing artistic culture.

The film, *Paris Was a Woman* (1995), by Andrea Weisse and Greta Schiller, also looks at how women negotiated Paris in the 1920s and '30s. Many of the most visible women in Paris during these decades were, of course, prostitutes. But there was also this social world of the lesbian literati, the heiresses, and the artistic avant-garde who found more freedom in Paris than in other places. Some of my images in *Penetrating the City* were shot in Old Montreal. By inserting lesbian figures into the social geography of both historic and contemporary Montreal, I am making visible the historical continuum of the lesbian subject and lesbian desire. I am keenly interested in a historical context for my work. My research and writing, published as *Sapphic Scenes: Looking Through a History* (1991),<sup>2</sup> traces a history of both the representation of lesbians in mainstream media and lesbian self-representation. It is important for me to understand that I work within multiple traditions. My work is enriched, and its nuances become more visible, when I present it within alternative and multiple contexts.

You've noted that a further frame of reference for *Penetrating the City* is the genre of the lesbian pulp novel, popular from

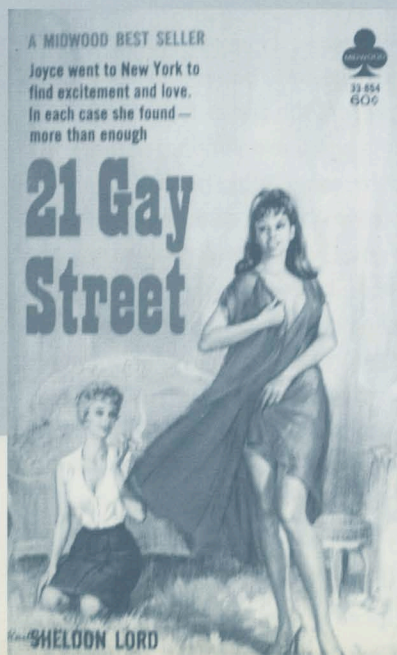
the 1930s to 1970s. In these novels, lesbian activities are frequently represented as taking place in specific neighbourhoods in the city. You also note that lesbian pulp novels, along with the photographic record of lesbian existence in the city, have been instrumental in re-framing urban space for the lesbian subject.

Well, a directive cliché often repeated by lesbian comics, is: "So, you've noticed you're interested in the girl sitting next to you in high school. Move to the City!" This is what you do. The building of contemporary queer culture, whatever we want to call it—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender—is an urban phenomenon that escalates with the Second World War. You have a generation, my father's generation, who when they left the armed forces after the Second World War settled in port cities, like San Francisco in the 1940s and '50s. Young people have always moved away from the farm to find other opportunities. But with the Second World War, they're taken away from rural areas and put into a social, sexual environment that is very different. And it appears many homosexuals didn't go back. Why would they?

Your images in *Penetrating the City*, as you've said, are indebted to late 19th- and early 20th-century urban photography. I'm thinking of all those beautiful black-and-white images of the modernist city by



Alvin L Coburn  
*Broadway at Night, NYC, 1909*  
Silver Print



Lesbian Pulp Novel  
*21 Gay Street, 1960's*



Thomas Annan, Jacob Riis, Brassai, and Eugene Atget, among others. These images, as many critics have noted, were part of a larger emergent discourse on the city as a place of criminal and sexual danger. But in *Penetrating the City*, you clearly re-frame the dark, shadowy corners of the city at night, as spaces that women can inhabit for their own sexual pleasure and mobility.

**This is the intention. I'm entranced by those early photographic images of the modernist city. They represent the city as full of potential. Baudelaire's notion of the flâneur is just one point of departure for a whole series of artists interested in representing urban space. At the same time, this new urban space was being represented in literature and urban myth as unsafe for good women to walk in after dark without a chaperone. Women's mobility, particularly after dark, was narrowed down to the site of the home. You see the effects of this restriction in a lot of photographic work done by women. My own earlier work, for instance, is studio based. I may still return to the**

Cydra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City Shadowy pair*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

Cydra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City Street, Old Montreal*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

Cydra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City Mona Annie*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

Jacob Riis (Attr. R Hoe Lawrence)  
*Chinatown Opium Joint*, c. 1890

Unknown, nd (attr. Alphonse Bertillon) (1853-1914)  
*Crime de La Rue Buchardon, Mme. Daly*  
Paris Police Records c.1890's



studio, but it was important to step outside its contained space to see what was going on in the world. Why was it unsafe for me to move around? Was it gender? What else was going on? At the same time, I understand there is danger in city spaces at night and perhaps that's part of their erotic charm. There is so much beauty in outdoor space. It is full of the murmuring sound of movement. I think I'm meandering on you. (Laughter)

No worries. You are *flâneuring*.

So I wanted to have access to urban space. To be able, as a woman, to go into a park at night. But there is the very real knowledge that these sites can be dangerous. Gay men are beaten up for having sex in parks. As a lesbian, I am aware that a whole section of my community, the masculine end, makes use of public space in a way that scares the horses and makes heterosexuals anxious. As you know, there has been

repeated video surveillance of washroom sex. And gay men have to fight for the right to have sex at night in the park. Yet, as a woman, I had to question why I felt I could barely enter these spaces. What are the obstacles? How real are they?

So your intention is both to eroticise the city for lesbian inhabitation and to represent it as being safe for women's movement after dark?

Right. A primary theme of this work is lesbian public sex—both as metaphor and practice. The idea of lesbian public sex confronts heterosexual notions of sexual practice *and* the movement of women in public space. In this series of photo-



graphs, I populate the dark corners of the city with a lesbian, sexual presence. But, as we've been discussing, the city is not necessarily safe for women. This is a lesbian/feminist utopian vision. One of the things in the back of my mind was the number of "Take Back The Night" marches I've been on. These marches are about women's freedom to move in the city.

As a photographer, I also try to turn things on their heads. Why not take back the city for my pleasure? Who do we see as the most enviable users of public space? It's gay men, who occupy and use city spaces as sexual sites. Straight men, too, because they dominate space. I want to be able to move freely. I also want to have comfort and to be able to be intimate—that is ownership of space, however fleeting. We must be careful how we contain ourselves. It may not be *necessary* containment. It is the propaganda of fear that keeps us in our place. How much of the city is actually dangerous? How much space can I occupy in a fleeting moment? I'm not talking about setting up camp in an alley. I'm talking about a mobile subject—the flâneur is about mobility.

In your exhibition, you unpack and appropriate this male literary figure of the flâneur and his activities of strolling, loitering, and looking. You also build on the history of the flâneuse—streetwalkers, ladies of the night, and passing women (women who pass as men and men who pass as women)—photographing a lesbian couple in dark alleys, street corners, and doorways. It is sometimes difficult, however, to make out the gender of your subjects. Talk to me about the role that indeterminacy plays in your images.

In my earlier work, such as the *Bed Of Roses* (1989) project, I produced more literal images of lesbian sex. In *Penetrating the City*, however, I created shadowy figures that, once discovered, shift the meaning of the images. The figures operate as fleeting apparitions of lesbians

Cydra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City Against the fence*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

Cydra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City Bright Light Alley*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print





Eugene Atget  
*Rue des Ursins*, 1923  
Silver Gelatin Print

Brassai  
*Self Portrait*, 1932  
Silver Gelatin Print

Cyndra MacDowall  
*Penetrating the City  
Corner, Old Montreal*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

and lesbian sex populating the city. I have deliberately established a female presence but kept the work open to multi-desiring viewers. The subjects are photographed in a way that allows the viewer to enter the image and insert their own fantasy. I chose to make the characters and their gender identification open-ended as I wanted to allow a full spectrum of viewers to insert their own fantasy. Of course, lesbian/queer viewers are accustomed to reading against and across the grain. Some have argued that this kind of reading is pleasure in itself for queer viewers—the pleasure of the transgression-seeking gaze. Creating room for multi-desiring viewers is another of my “queerings.” Queers have found a place within the constant representation of heterosexual romance by occupying the shifting positions of both male and female romantic figures. By inviting the heterosexual and gay male viewer to identify with the two women in this work, I require them to perform a similar transposition of gender and desire.

You also deconstruct the gaze of the solitary male flâneur by creating an anthology of different viewpoints on the city.

Yes. The photographs present four different viewpoints. I begin with two shadows. The voyeur, the outsider, sees the

couple somewhere in the shadows. Then the viewer is presented with intimate, close-up views of the city in a pair of photographs hanging nearby. If you deconstruct the viewpoint of these images, you see it represents the gaze of each lover as they embrace. The fourth gaze is that of the couple as they walk together—looking at things in the city. The photographs are also about chance, incidental things—shadows, dogs, people in windows. Many historical photographs depict unoccupied space. That’s part of the function of the technology. Long exposures in low light require stationary subjects. So anything that isn’t still for the duration of the exposure becomes a wisp, a ghost. I like that open elliptical sense of the city as a stage, in which you can play out your fantasies. A lot of Brassai’s and Atget’s images look like empty spaces waiting for you to enter. The cultural geographers, David Bell and Gill Valentine, have written of “the power of particular landscapes as either liberating or oppressive sites for the performance of our sexed selves.”<sup>3</sup>

That is certainly true. I was trying to get at that with this whole notion of the shadows. As we’ve discussed, lesbians have operated “in the shadows.” There is an influential book by Terry Castle called





*The Apparitional Lesbian* (1995),<sup>4</sup> in which she traces a lesbian presence through literary culture in the West. She addresses the notion of the shadowy character of the lesbian. Castle also incisively articulates why lesbians are not gay men. One of the concerns with queer theory is that the specific issues of women are being swept under the table—subsumed into a homogenous queer masculinity.

Can we go back to this notion of taking up space in the city? When you take your images of the city at night, you use a tripod and two-minute exposures. You've said elsewhere that this activity of setting up a highly visible tripod for a night-time shoot involves "taking up space" as a female photographer in the urban landscape. Can you talk about your process of making these large images?

The Latin culture of Montreal allowed me to feel an increased freedom in using the city as subject. In Montreal there is an abundance of public sexuality. In Toronto, however, as soon as you kiss a woman on the streets, the catcalls begin. There is this threat of intrusion. In Montreal, I feel safer in taking up space. While I was tak-

ing the images, the tripod made me very obvious. I used a big camera, not quite as large as Brassai's, but a medium format camera on a tripod. My subjects were often embedded in the site and less visible. Frequently, people would glance at me as their cars passed by, and they'd look startled, not sure of what they'd seen.

Pedestrians would see me and not my subjects. Then they'd follow my view and remark, "Oh!" Often, people apologised! That's funny. So how did you find your subjects?

I asked friends. . .

When you exhibited *Penetrating the City* at Gallery 44 in Toronto in 2001, you included a soundscape in your installation. This addition of an ambient soundscape suggests that the activity of *flânerie* relies on all of the senses rather than just the gaze.

Good point. The random sounds of Montreal interest me. It's not just the optic of Montreal, it's also the sound—fragments of pop radio that you hear zipping by an alley, and the murmuring sound of spoken French, which is very different from the sound of English. I miss hearing that seductive lower case



sound of French; you can't necessarily distinguish the words, but there is a tone to those sounds. I have been recording sounds to create an ambient soundscape to permeate the gallery space—footsteps of passers-by, dogs barking, sirens, cars, people talking, and the sound of wind blowing in the trees. It is another record of my lesbian *flâneurs* as they move around the city on their night-time walks. Michel de Certeau, in his essay *Walking in the City*,<sup>5</sup> makes a distinction between the way a city is conceptualised by urban planners and the way it is experienced at street level, developing what he calls a "rhetoric of walking," a theory of "everyday practices, of lived space." It seems to me that you are doing very much the same



Weegee  
*Transvestite in Police Van*, 1945  
Silver gelatin Print

Unknown, nd (attr. Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914)  
*Affaire de Puteaux (Seine) Murder of Mme. Langlois*  
Paris Police records c.1890's

Hilary Hilton  
*Lesbian Pulp Novel The Shadowy Sex*, ©1963, 1970  
cover



Cyndra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City*  
*Untitled (embrace)*, 1999  
Silver Gelatin Print, 10"x10"

Installation View





Eugene Atget  
*Versailles, Brothel, Petite Place*, 1921

Alfred Steiglitz  
*The Flatiron, NYC*, 1903  
B/W photo

Cyndra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City  
Untitled (Leaf Nikki)*, 2001  
Silver Gelatin Print

Cyndra MacDowall, *Penetrating the City  
Untitled (Alley/Laundry Alley)*, 1999  
Silver Gelatin Print, 10"x20"



thing in this exhibition. Tell me what it was like to be a photographer-flâneur at night-time in the different urban sites of Montreal, Toronto, and Halifax.

Well, one of the freedoms of being a night walker is that you have the freedom of invisibility. You have the opportunity of being sensually alive without being observed. I'm also very interested in Walter Benjamin's vision of the city as an interior, where the neighbourhoods are like different rooms in an apartment. Montreal's alleys, for example, are convivial—people use the back alleys to walk home from the bars. Since starting this project I have heard many confessions, from both straight and gay people, about having sex in back alleys in Montreal. I also walked Halifax at night, shooting sites along the waterfront and in the old city. People told me this was dangerous. But I was fine, probably because the area of the city I walked in is geared for tourism. In Toronto, I walk alone or with friends. I really like European cultures where the walk is part of a larger social activity of display. You go out and walk after dinner and chat with

your neighbours. The whole neighbourhood of little Italy in Toronto participates in this kind of walking. But this is not possible in my immediate neighbourhood in Toronto because it's at an intersection between the poor and the rich.

What neighbourhood is that?

Lower Cabbagetown. It's not unusual to see expensive cars parked along the street. But Regent Park is a block east and the area has a high concentration of halfway houses and shelters. There is quite a bit of drug addiction and alcoholism. My immediate neighbourhood is embattled and it took a long time to find comfortable areas to walk in at night.

They were not far away—in Upper Cabbagetown and along the Danforth.

How important are the titles of your work?

Do you ever attempt to fix the meanings of your images with titles or written narrative?

That's a good observation. I think my images of the city are in themselves erotic. But I wonder what would happen if I put subtitles under them that said: "Three women have been murdered in this alley in Montreal since 1990." Immediately, the eroticism would be gone, the meaning would ricochet, and we'd be thrown into another state that mixes pleasure and danger.

#### NOTES

1 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1988).

2 Cyndra MacDowall, "Sapphic Scenes: Looking Through a History," *FUSE* magazine, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1991, 24-39.

3 David Bell and Gill Valentine (eds.), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 98.

4 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993).

5 Michel De Certeau, "Walking in the City" in S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 157.

6 See also Lynne Bell, *Urban Fictions* (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 1997).

