



# Peep

Cyndra MacDowall | Suzanne Grégoire



**November 1 to December 1** 2001

Opening Reception

Thursday November 1 | 6 to 8 pm



Suzanne Grégoire, *Tout-bas*  
(detail), 1999, gelatin silver  
print, 28 x 35 cm

# Peep

Katy McCormick

*This peony is an empty house  
In which each of us recaptures night*

Jean Laroche, *Mémoires d'été*, Cahiers de Rochefort.

Outside and inside, private and public, visible and invisible: pondering such issues can easily lead to an entanglement within the dialectics of black and white, off and on, good and bad. As Bachelard warns in *The Poetics of Space*, "It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into the basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative."<sup>1</sup> Artistic projects, like philosophical constructs, are always in danger of oversimplification. Life is messy, truth often lies somewhere 'in between' and many contemporary artists identify themselves with multiple subjectivities, forging a system of beliefs composed from elements of various ideologies. We are attached to the idea of mobility and stability, born of both urban and agrarian histories. Our photographic representations of those histories generally grow out of a practice which is partly (nostalgic) preservation and partly (deliberate) invention.

*Peep* offers intimate views of two sites existing along a continuum of female subjectivity: sexual adventure (*flânerie*) and domestic tranquillity. Refuting their mutual exclusivity within the scope of desire, the juxtaposition of Cyndra MacDowall's lesbian couples in *Penetrating the City* with Suzanne Grégoire's homestead views in *Tout-bas* sets up a dialogue around notions of intimate space and its various readings as both private and public, inside and outside, visible and invisible. These artists share a common desire to position the viewer as *promeneur* (stroller) within a landscape of intimacy, and to bring to mind the workings and subjectivities of intimate relationships.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 211





In Grégoire's *Tout-bas* (soft spoken) miniature views of home interiors, alleyways, and fragments of landscapes emerge in diaphanous tones, placed like stones across a series of white photographic prints. Reminiscent of a book unbound, this piece occupies the wall like a pathway. Contained yet open, the images serve as portals, inviting entry even as they urge us forward. Moving in to read these impossibly small scapes, proximity makes visible exquisitely drawn impressions of a distant world. "The isolated villages on the horizon become homelands for the eyes. Distance disperses nothing but, on the contrary, composes a miniature of a country in which we should like to live."<sup>2</sup> Entering these spaces, we escape the dangerous present, the work-a-day deadlines and breathe a momentary calm. Arranged intuitively as irregularly spaced diptychs, some elements are sharply framed, solid and anchored in our presence. Others, however, float on the page like pinhole projections, lacking defined edges, still others seem to be on the brink of disappearance. Even as these scenes provide rest and comfort, there is an implicit tension in their sense of impending dissolution. In creating a diaristic work, an 'open book' constituted by the non-events of everyday life—a woman tending to her plants, two people walking in the country, a man raking autumn leaves—Grégoire reminds us how precious the simple moments in our lives can be. More importantly, the people and places within them describe cardinal points on the compass which guides her through life. Both preservation and invention, *Tout-bas* is a history contained, like an album, forever "domesticated and protected from contamination," even as it sits vulnerable and exposed to the breath of strangers.<sup>3</sup>

MacDowall's *Penetrating the City* describes subjects moving on the edge of visibility—literally emerging from the darkness of her exquisite black and white prints—deliberately playing upon the cliché metaphor of lesbians as 'women of the shadows.' Author Terry Castle argues that the perception of lesbianism is that it is "somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind..."<sup>4</sup> MacDowall acknowledges this stereotype while creating a series of images which actively inverts such assertions, placing lesbian subject(ivity)s front and centre, as they tango through the sensual city night. In a publication aptly named *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Sally Munt suggests "a subculture made invisible by its parent culture logically resorts to space-making in its collective imagination. Mobility within that space is essential, because motion continually stamps new ground with a symbol of ownership."<sup>5</sup> The territory of the *flâneur* was first articulated in 19th-century Paris, a city remade in the interest of the gaze. "Landscape—that, in fact is what Paris becomes for the *flâneur*. Or, more precisely: the city splits...into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room."<sup>6</sup> MacDowall's *lesbian flâneur* follows the impulse to promenade even as she takes possession of the city as 'a room of her own.' Photographically

2 Ibid., 172

3 Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 69

4 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2

5 Sally Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 120

6 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 417



Suzanne Grégoire, *Tout-bas* (detail), 1999, gelatin silver print, 28 x 35 cm

speaking, her stomping ground is Montreal. Metaphorically, it is a multifarious place in the collective imagination: a site, a map, and a locus of exchange. Giving shape to the space of lesbian desire, it precedes an actual place. Beautifully crafted, these images are shot using several viewpoints, making room for (multi-desiring) viewers to actively imagine an erotic/sexual interaction. Punctuated by a subtle ambient sound piece, this city penetrates even as we move through it.

These bodies of work tease, whisper, and seduce, drawing us in, urging us along. Exploring psychic space, likened to an intimate landscape, these artists navigate the complexities of female desire in order to expand upon existing maps. Presenting poetic images, both artists adopt modest forms. In the face of bigger is better, Grégoire employs subtle means to engage the viewer in a treasure hunt whose object contradicts the obsessive materialism of our age. Managing a subversive seduction, MacDowall's images allow for an open engagement.<sup>7</sup> Inviting us to position ourselves alternatively as *flâneur*, voyeur, and participant, MacDowall draws us in enough to 'try on' her gaze, effectively co-opting the dominant heterosexist one. Within the gallery, private lives are etched on walls and the public realm is made over, its possibilities re-imagined. Home is an open door. There is no outside too large to be encompassed by our subjective countries, framed à la loupe. ■

7 Cyndra MacDowall, in conversation with the author, September 2001

COVER + LEFT  
Cyndra MacDowall, *Untitled*,  
from *Penetrating the City*, gelatin  
silver prints



**Cyndra MacDowall** (MFA Concordia University, 1995) is a Toronto-based artist, writer, and educator. Since 1987, her work has shown across Canada, the US, and the UK, and is widely collected by private and public entities, including the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and others. Currently, she teaches photography at Sheridan College/University of Toronto, and the Ontario College of Art & Design. In addition to teaching, she researches and writes about photography and representation and has been politically active on behalf of artists' rights. *Penetrating the City* has been shown at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, in Halifax, and in Saskatoon.

Originally from Ontario, **Suzanne Grégoire** lives and works in Montréal. She has participated in several shows in Québec, Ontario, and Europe. Recent exhibitions include: *Tour de Villeneuve*, produced in conjunction with le Mois de la photo à Montréal (2001); *Les interstices* at Galerie Vox, Montréal (2000), and *Demi-Veille* at Centre Vu, Québec (2000). She also participated with the Fovea collective in *Private Parts/Parties Intimes* at FOTOFEIS, the International Photo Festival in Scotland (1997). In 2002, she will be part of a group show at the Moser Fine Arts Center Gallery in Joliet, Illinois. Grégoire holds a BA degree in Fine Arts from Concordia University, Montréal.

**Katy McCormick** has exhibited in Chicago, Montréal, Toronto, Saskatoon, Banff, and Santa Barbara. Her work is in the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France and private collections in the United States and Canada. She received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 1987. Since completing her studies, she has taught photography, printmaking, and book arts, most notably at Concordia University in Montréal and the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is currently Exhibition Coordinator at Gallery 44.

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### Gallery Hours

Tuesday to Saturday, 11 am to 5 pm

INSIDE FLAP Suzanne Grégoire,  
*Tout-bas* (detail), 1999, gelatin  
silver print, 28 x 35 cm