

Vacationers poses a challenge to such notions as photographic truth, historical accuracy, and the reliability of memory, while addressing issues related to the salvaging of lost and fragmented narratives and the preservation of meaning. Because found photographs are loaded with ambiguous – yet powerful – physical, metaphorical, and symbolic content which is severed (or perhaps, liberated) from its original context, these images offer unlimited opportunities for viewers to create new narratives through a multiplicity of perspectives, viewpoints, and creative means. 'History' can then be proliferated, not through traditional archival methods, but through dialogical processes in which the artist, subjects, and viewers all play a role. In the end, Williamson says that he tries to make beautiful paintings because "shouldn't a memory, even if it's sad or faded, be beautiful?"

- Harmony Raine

1. Manovich, Lev. 1995. "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography" in Photography after Photography. Exhibition catalogue. www.levmanowich.net.

Ben Williamson lives and works in Montréal. He has studied at Capilano College in North Vancouver, Concordia University in Montréal, and the University of Alberta in Edmonton, where he received his MFA in painting in 2010. He has lived in many places, including Cranbrook BC, every part of Vancouver, Montréal, Edmonton, Philadelphia PA, and now Montréal for a second time.

Harmony Raine has a Master of Arts in Integrated Studies with dual specializations in Cultural Studies and Equity Studies, a Bachelor of Arts, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Raine is an artist, union and disabilities activist, popular educator, and lifelong learner. She lives, works, volunteers, writes, and makes art in Kamloops BC.

Arnica Artist-Run Centre

Old Courthouse Cultural Centre,
7 Seymour St West, Kamloops BC
www.ArnicaArtistRunCentre.ca

- Gallery Hours -
Tues - Fri 10am-5pm
Saturday 10am-4pm

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BEN WILLIAMSON

Vacationers



Europe by Train (Bavaria), 2014 - 2016. Ben Williamson.

MARCH 26 - MAY 7

Arnica Artist-Run Centre

Ben Williamson *Vacationers*

Regardless of what it signifies, any photographic image also connotes memory and nostalgia, nostalgia for modernity and the twentieth century, the era of the pre-digital, pre-post-modern. Regardless of what it represents, any photographic image today first of all represents photography.'

A picture really is worth a thousand words, and a family's collection of photographs speaks volumes. The family album has long been considered a cultural institution, valued as a primary means by which narratives are maintained and passed from one generation to the next, and recognized as an indispensable adjunct to the recall of events and preserving collective memory. But the sheer ubiquity of the snapshot has led to 'information overload,' especially in the digital age. The accumulation of masses of photographs has contributed to their devaluation; and countless personal image collections and family albums have been orphaned through displacement, loss, rejection, or being discarded.

This phenomenon has led to thoughtful interrogations concerning what might happen to a family's history when its treasured photos are lost. Moreover, what are the implications when personal images are found, re-contextualized, and publicly exhibited by a stranger? Can meaning be conserved when it has been disconnected from its original source or context? Or is it lost forever?

Ben Williamson explores such issues as our tenuous grasp on personal and family history with *Vacationers*, a body of work in which he has reconstituted a selection of enigmatic photographs (extracted from a massive collection of found family documents) by painting them in oil onto discarded plastic sheets he found in an abandoned sewing factory.

Williamson views the ubiquitous snapshot as an item of anachronism and nostalgia. These particular portraits and scenes are certainly anachronistic, but they do not evoke feelings of nostalgia – at least in the traditional sense. Williamson's purposeful choice to replicate imperfect images – those that are banal, slightly out-of-focus, faded, 'wrecked,' or poorly composed – engenders a sensation of common ground that resonates with viewers, who may instantly recognize themselves, their experiences, or their relationships with friends and loved ones reflected in the standardized poses and compositions. But because the images reside in a liminal space between fulfillment and expectancy, self and other, they are both voyeuristic and introspective – complicating the viewing relationship. The works are provocative in a strange, unsettling way that tends to disrupt any feelings of familiarity.

Williamson's use of materials may seem atavistic in the sense that prior to the inception of photography, people could only attain portraits by commissioning paintings. But it is evident that the artist's unconventional choice of the thin, reclaimed, semi-transparent plastic sheets as a substrate is a purposeful strategy by which he exposes artifice, construction, manipulation, deterioration, fragility, obsolescence, disposal, and loss. Just as importantly, the works read as photographic, a thoughtful consideration given that rapid technological changes in the 20th and 21st centuries have incited universal anxiety surrounding the stability and longevity of both printed and stored documents, as well as the potential for irretrievable losses.

Williamson's innovative combination of materiality and technique not only underscores the elusive boundary between the ubiquitous image and the art object, but the hazy, slightly out-of-focus images also echo the blurring of lines between truth and fiction. Metaphorically, these ethereal, ghost-like images stunningly convey the ephemeral nature of photographs in the digital age, the impending erasure of our collective memory, and the transitory nature of life itself.