

Images in Transit:

By Bernard Schütze

In the digital age images proliferate endlessly, they can be reproduced, altered and circulated at will; a vertiginous profusion in which the distinction between the original and copy has been all but obliterated. Governed by an ever increasing velocity, images no longer even have the time to take shape in our minds. In assessing this situation the theorist Paul Virilio remarks: “We now have the aesthetics of the disappearance of a numerical, unstable image of fleeting nature, whose persistence is exclusively retinal.”¹ Richard Deschênes counters this logic of accelerated vanishing by accompanying and assisting images in a slow transit from one mode to another. This transit process, which ensures both an origin and a destination for the image, is at the heart of Deschênes’ exhibition *Transfert*. A movement that is operative in both the displayed painting and collage series, but according to different terms: enlargement and isolation of a figure against a neutral ground, for the paintings; subtraction of the figure and substitution of a new ground in its place for the collages.

The never-before-exhibited paintings (with the exception of several earlier works) were all created according to a process of Deschênes’ devising. At first, a small black and white photographic reproduction is enlarged several times using a photocopier. The artist then manually traces the pattern of varying sized dots onto a large sheet of paper vellum. Finally, he covers the back side of the sheet with charcoal, fixes it on a white wooden surface, and uses a pencil to rub in each individual dot to replicate the range of picture tones. In using manual gestures to painstakingly execute what is essentially a mechanical image reproduction, the artist physically accompanies and inhabits every picture detail. In this regard, Deschênes actually travels with the images as they transit from their origin as small-scale reproductions—sourced mostly from old encyclopedias—to their destination (and destiny) as unique paintings. This transiting, however, is not limited to the material constitution of the works—closer to drawing than painting—it is also informed by the choice of imagery.

The idea of an origin is evoked in three large paintings: *Photographe* (2012), *Diane Arbus* (2012) and *Culte - après Martin Honert* (2012). Photographic cameras are the only figure in the two former works, while the latter displays a majestic tree. The image of the camera is particularly revealing, since it is the originator and departure point of nearly all the images in the exhibition. In manually transferring and enlarging this paragon of mechanical image reproduction, Deschênes highlights and pays tribute to this image-generating

¹ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1991, p.36.

source. Placed against a white background, the image of the tree is also laden with originary symbolism, particularly as it pertains to genesis and descent. The series of smaller-scale works comprises portraits of pioneering historical personalities (Kemal Atatürk, Yuri Gagarin, Valentina Terechkova, George Orwell, Louis Pasteur, Anton Chekhov, Billie Holiday, Victor Hugo, Maurice Richard) who variously evoke notions of trailblazing, invention and discovery. In this regard, Deschênes can be said to work as an expedition guide who accompanies these images both literally (transit from small reproduction to large work) and metaphorically (exploratory journeys, fellow travellers).

In the collage series, several newspaper photographs are the object of a different sort of transit that alters their original pictorial status through subtraction and provides them with a new destiny by way of substitution. Operating like a surgeon, the artist makes incisions to remove the central figure from a picture. He then grafts and sutures elements from two or three identical copies of the chosen photograph to reconfigure the new ground in lieu of the ablated figure. Though this last step completes the intervention, it also leaves scar marks which bear witness to the erasure. Unlike virtual picture processes, Deschênes's intervention leaves clear traces that foreground both the images' origin and altered status. Moreover, the disappeared figures are invoked through the collage titles, which consist of the photographs' original captions. The subject of the collage is as much the reconstituted ground which replaces the removed figure as it is the act of the disappearance itself. The rebuilt ground draws attention to the removal of the picture's action source and documentary anchor, that is, the subject-figure. Yet it is not just the figure itself that is disappeared within this process, it is the photograph's very status as document that is vanished by the artist's sharp gestures. In the transit from their mass media context these reproductions are liberated from their referential shackles and take on a new destiny as singular pictures that now exist on their own terms. These collages undeniably open a space from which to reflect on the origin and destiny of images born on the grounds of a vanished figure.

In closing, the relatively objective image status of the collages' figureless grounds and the paintings' groundless figures can be interestingly rethought in the light of two earlier more psychologically inflected paintings also on display in *Transfert*. In *Morulas 3* (2008) and *Morulas 4* (2008) several rams stand improbably upon motion-blurred micro (or macro) spheres floating by in a vast space that is also home to several intriguing pictures of brains; a telling reminder that it is in this central processing organ that images are ultimately destined to transit, take shape and persist for the time of a perception.

This text will be published in a exhibition pamphlet by Expression: Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe

Bio: Bernard Schütze is an independent art critic, curator, and translator. He regularly submits articles to various art magazines and has written numerous catalogue essays and artist monographs. As a speaker, he has been invited to give presentations at several art related events and universities in Canada and in Europe. He lives and works in Montreal.