

STEPHEN WADDELL  
APRIL 4 TO JUNE 1, 2008  
CURATED BY ROY ARDEN

Stephen Waddell does not wish to stage the images he would like to make and so must hunt them down. Waddell relies on luck, but it is luck he earns through dogged labour. It is clear that Waddell is interested in a variety of types of images and must stroll the city or its periphery hoping to recognize one of these ideal images when he sees it. It is exhausting and often dispiriting work; most street photographers of note produced their famous work in a short few years before quitting or switching to other projects.

There is a fundamental difference between Waddell's work and most of what has come to be called *street photography* – one that makes his job even harder. Waddell would never accept the haphazard, often surreal compositions of a photographer like the American Garry Winogrand. Waddell is interested in making pictures that appear deliberately composed rather than snatched “on the fly.”

Hunting for pictures is hard work but sometimes the payoff is gold, both figuratively and literally, as in the case of Waddell's *Lookout*, 2005, a gorgeous composition of a young woman's golden hair and a gilded iron fence illuminated by the warm rays of evening sun. Such an unbelievably serendipitous alignment of figure, ground, and light are testament to the value of hunting for pictures. While he could have staged this picture, he probably could have never imagined it.

Waddell chose to adhere to direct photography, yet his intention was not “documentary” or journalistic; rather, it was rooted in the tradition of high art, and Realism specifically. The Realism of Gustave Courbet and the “Painting of Modern Life” of Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Gustave Caillebotte and other Impressionists is usually seen as the core of this tradition but it also extends back through Francisco Goya to Caravaggio and forward to Walker Evans, Robert Bresson and the Dardenne Brothers. It is important that this tradition is accurately and exclusively defined – it is a complicated lineage but I think it can be understood as the end of Sacral and Aristocratic styles and rhetoric, and the birth and development of a modern Bourgeois Realism. While many images made under the rubric of the documentary or journalistic could be considered Realist, it is also true that most

“documentary” or “journalistic” images actually engage in dramatic rhetoric that owes more to Sacral and Aristocratic art – as the photos of W. Eugene Smith or Sebastiao Salgado demonstrate.

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*Asphalt Layer 1*, 2001, depicts an asphalt layer in Berlin. It is an image of labour, “dirty” backbreaking work that has not yet been completely mechanized. Both Eugene Atget and the Berlin photographer Friedrich Seidenstücker made images of asphalt layers early in the 20th century. Atget's studies of street workers – the *petites métiers* – have been of special interest to Waddell, who likes to show how much closer we are to the 19th century than we normally assume. The outstretched arms of the worker also remind us of Caillebotte's *The Floor Scrapers*. But the most famous image of a worker on his knees is Courbet's *Stonebreaker* and Waddell's picture shares the same Realist agenda of a sober, unsentimental depiction of labour. Waddell's *A Resting Worker* also depicts a worker in relation to the pavement – the worker has paved the ground and so takes it as his right to lie on it and recoup his energy.

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Scale is important to Waddell, he sizes each print according to its subject. A study of a small object like *Shade* is a small print and a landscape like *Circus Field* is much larger. For the most part the pictures are life-scaled rather than life-sized. That is, they replicate the experience of scale based on an ideal or approximate viewing distance – so that a five-foot tall person might be printed three feet high in order to factor in the experience of the viewing distance. While such consideration of scale was *de rigueur* in the nineteenth century, today's artists largely handle scale arbitrarily; a century of avant-garde experimentation appears to have severed us from even the important, useful, and desirable gains of tradition.

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In “Before Photography” Peter Galassi's focuses on the period before the technical invention of photography when photographic vision was discovered, developed, and explored through painting.<sup>1</sup> That is, a kind of depiction that follows all of the optical rules built into the camera obscura was explored in painting *before* the chemical problem of fixing an image was answered. So “photographic depiction” never needed

photography to exist and, in fact, flourished for many years before photography. Given this little known or understand historical fact, it is easier to understand how Waddell could approach photography from the tradition of Realist painting rather than the tradition of art photography. It also explains why Waddell's photographs exhibit few of the hallmarks of the kind of art photography that derives its criteria from a strictly photographic tradition. —————

Much of Waddell's enterprise has been involved with defining his desire to make pictures with a camera, rather than being a "photographer". Now that photography is finally free of the index, free of its status as document, it will be easier to understand artists like Waddell who choose not to make photographs but pictures. —————  
*Roy Arden* [excerpted from the exhibition catalogue]

1 Galassi, Peter, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1981.

#### BIOS

Stephen Waddell has studied in Vancouver, receiving a BA from Simon Fraser University and an MFA from University of British Columbia. Waddell moved to Berlin in 1998 but maintains a studio in Vancouver and spends time living and working in both cities. His work is in several private and public collections and has been shown in Canada as well as exhibited internationally throughout Europe in shows such as *Talents 03*, Compositions, Berlin, 2006; *Mostly Unforeseen Encounters*, Kunstforum Baloise, Basel, 2006; *Ten Photographs*, Schirmer/Mosel Showroom, Munich, 2004; and *Consigned to the Street*, Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin, 2002. Waddell is represented by Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver and Toronto, and Galerie Tanit in Munich. His work has been published in *Talents 03*, C/O Berlin: "The Contemplation of Sight Itself, The Photographs of Stephen Waddell", by Jeff Wall in *Art on Paper* magazine, New York, 2004; *USE – Multiplicite, Uncertain States of Europe*, Skira, Milan, 2003; *Gruppo A12 + Stephen Waddell*, Openspace, Milan, 2003; and in "A Plot Unfolding: Stephen Waddell" by Shepherd Steiner, in *Solitude* im Museum, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart / Musée d'art Moderne, St.Etienne France, Edition Solitude 2000.

Roy Arden is a Vancouver artist. His work is included in many collections including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Centre Pompidou, Paris. He has also taught photography and art theory in Canada and abroad, curated numerous exhibitions and published critical essays. In 2007-08 the Vancouver Art Gallery presented a mid-career survey of his work from 1981-2007.

#### ARTIST TALK

Thursday, April 24, 7pm at Contemporary Art Gallery  
Co-hosted by the Contemporary Art Society of Vancouver

This exhibition is supported by Phil Lind, Lucia Lundin, Donna G. Molby and Robin Vousden.

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