

Luis Jacob's Unfixed Images

Annie MacDonell

Part of the pleasure I take in Luis Jacob's ongoing Album series comes from imagining him cutting the pictures from their original sources. The process has a bit of violence to it, like pulling teeth from a mouth mid-speech. The scalpel slides under the gum and with a twist the tooth is released from its mooring. Pop. It no longer answers to the jaw, the tongue, the breath that came and went across its surface as the mouth formed words. Separated from its original system, the tooth is now free to engage with the outside world in new and unpredictable ways.

Appropriation is always an act of displacement on some level. An image or thing is removed from one context and inserted into another, and it's through this movement that its meaning and function are transformed. But the images in Luis's albums are most often taken from the pages of books and magazines, which means that they are not only displaced spatially, they are also detached from the captions, headlines, and stories that were their intended framework. This is no small gesture. We are accustomed to finding text and photographs together and to reading their separate messages side-by-side. The image illustrates the text, and the text grounds the image in facts that lie outside its frame. They work together to deliver a clear and coherent message. Roland Barthes, who gave us the concept of the *punctum*¹—which is referenced early in *Album XIV*—believed that photographs actually require language in order to be decoded by the viewer. Without their accompanying captions, the language of images becomes unfixed.

In separating the photographs from text and framing them instead within his transparent sheets, Luis is significantly altering the way that they engage the viewer. They become images captioned only by other images, and this generates a new space of possibility. In the absence

of text, the hard facts make way for messy and generative overlaps. A hole becomes an eye, becomes a lens, becomes a camera. A cube becomes a frame, a page, a plot of land. A figure becomes a shadow, a twin, a statue, an image within an image. Without the normalizing effect of language, narratives merge and form differently for each of us, depending on how many images we can hold in our minds at once, which ones we recognize and which ones we don't, where and how deeply they touch our experiences, our politics, our own legibility.

Elsewhere, Luis has spoken of the Albums as a way of getting outside of his own personal subjectivity. This distancing effect is often what draws artists to found images, and certainly it is at play in the Albums. But as I spend time lost in their pages, I find I am always aware of Luis's mind at work there. I can't help it. Sometimes, I play a game of imagining every person pictured within as a stand-in for Luis himself. There he is in a suit and tie, surveying a diorama of the city. There he is with his hands framing his eye, or his finger pointing out a picture in an open book for me. There he is with a single perfect mole on his chin and his hair coming loose from his ponytail, or seated high on his own shoulders with his child-size fist plunged deep into his adult mouth. He is both there and not there, in this selection of images which he has selected and combined rather than generated. His creative and communicative gesture is one of framing, pointing, coordinating, but also of stepping aside to allow viewers to make their way through each image, each page, each album on their own terms.

To engage in a genuine aesthetic experience, we must achieve a very particular frame of mind, one that lingers in diffuse receptivity at the same time as it allows for the hard intellectual work of interpretation. It is an in-between state that can be difficult to access and maintain. Luis has described it as a "super-thin, super-transitory space ... where artists love to dwell. It is the opening of this space that is Art's gift to Life, and that makes of art such a vital living experience."² This for me is precisely the space that the Albums invite the viewer into. In the absence of language, in the distance between where these images came from and where they ended up, in the unpredictable ways they mix and proliferate, the Albums serve to both produce an aesthetic experience of the very best kind: slippery, associative, and beautifully unfixed.

¹ In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes described the punctum found within a photograph as follows: “it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. [...] for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981): 26-27.

² Jacob quoted in Andria Hickey, “Without Persons: Luis Jacob interviewed by Andria Hickey,” *Luis Jacob: Pictures at an Exhibition | Cabinet (NGC Toronto) | Project by Luis Jacob*, Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2011, n.p.

This text accompanies the exhibition *Habitat* by Luis Jacob at Gallery TPW, May 5 – June 10, 2017.

Co-presented with the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival

Habitat Conversations

Gallery TPW has commissioned three short texts in response to the artist Luis Jacob's explorations of place-making, the visual regimes of the city, and the force of photographs.

On Saturday, May 27, 2 – 4pm, join us to discuss this text by Annie MacDonell in a public conversation facilitated by MacDonell and Luis Jacob

Annie MacDonell is a Toronto-based visual artist. Sometimes she finds it easier to understand the world when she's looking at pictures of it.

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