

Faking Death: Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination. By Penny Cousineau-Levine. Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2003. 312 pp. ISBN 0773525262.

In *Faking Death* Penny Cousineau-Levine discusses Canadian art photography as indicative of a culture striving towards a mature, national identity. The book is a product of her more than three decades of studying Canadian photography. In the introduction Cousineau-Levine notes that the impetus for the book was "the desire to present Canadian students of art and culture with an appreciation of the richness of Canadian photography" (p. 4). She confines her focus in the text to photographs "that were expressly created to enter into the art arena" (p. 6), and further delineates the topic by focusing on work produced since the 1950s. This second parameter is only briefly explained as the decade in which Michel Lambeth, who Cousineau-Levine identifies as the quintessential Canadian art photographer, developed a cohesive body of work. In addition to work by Lambeth the book includes examples of work from over 120 photographers including Jeff Wall, Lynne Cohen, Evergon, and Dianne Thorneycroft. The book contains 150 black and white reproductions and 16 colour plates.

Despite the numerous images included and the number of photographers referenced, the book is not an historical overview or survey of Canadian art photography. Rather, the main thrust of the book is Cousineau-Levine's argument that Canadian art photography, and by extension Canadian art and culture, is defined by its preoccupation with death. She writes "in their treatment and choice of subject matter, photographers in this country betray a fascination with the phenomenon of death that goes far beyond that of any other group" (p. 57). She stresses that the conception and representation of death in Canadian art photography is not the literal death of the body; instead, it refers to a process of regeneration and transformation. The title, *Faking Death*, is a reference to a 1977 installation of the same title by Jeff Wall in which the artist staged his own death in two images.

For Cousineau-Levine Canadian photographic art since the 1950s is representative of a uniquely Canadian culture in search of "transformation and maturation." She suggests "our photographs indicate that unconsciously, on a collective level, we continue to regard ourselves as immature" (p. 173). She sees an emphasis on death, dying, bondage, and entrapment in Canadian photography that speaks to a culture in the midst of a rite of passage. Cousineau-Levine equates this drive for transformation and maturation in Canadian culture to the state of mind of the female anorexic, specifically to a lack of sense of self.

The book is divided into four sections, the titles of which point to a second theme in Cousineau-Levine's argument. "Dislocation," "Inside and Outside," "Rehearsal," and "Entering and Leaving" reference the author's belief that Canadian culture exists in an "in-between" or liminal state. She argues that American and European photography is grounded in the literal, material world and that this grounding is also reflected in strong national and cultural identities. In contrast to this, she describes Canadian art photography as not tied to a referent, as something that is "severed from the body of the world" (p. 31). Cousineau-Levine documents the continued presence of cages, frames, windows, doors, and shadows in the works of Canadian art photographers and argues that this references an underlying dualism that is characteristic of Canadian culture, what she refers to as the "here and elsewhere," the "in-between" and the liminal.

Cousineau-Levine combines art historical and psychoanalytic perspectives in the book and has compiled an extensive bibliography. She draws numerous parallels between art photography and other arts including film and literature in Canada and makes continued reference to the writings of Linda Hutcheon, Northrop Frye, and John Ralston Saul. At times her discussion is compelling and convincing; however, in several instances continued cross-referencing and citing make it difficult to find and follow Cousineau-Levine's argument. This is further complicated by the use of the photographs in the book. In some

instances the photographs work in conjunction with the text, providing illustration of a specific point or effectively summarizing and supporting Cousineau-Levine's discussion. This is particularly evident in Chapter Two in which the author discusses Canadian art photography in comparison to European and American traditions. In other sections of the text, the photographs take on significantly less importance and the subject of the book, photography, is relegated to the periphery.

The most compelling aspect of Cousineau-Levine's book is the portrayal of faking death as a rite of passage and a process of regeneration and transformation. She draws on a wealth of sources and examples to develop a unique interpretation of art and culture. However, the extent to which the practice of faking death in artistic imagery reflects a uniquely Canadian perspective is less clear. Cousineau-Levine provides numerous examples of American and European photographic work that deals with the same subject matter; however, in these cases she finds different meaning in the images, arguing that American and European photography is concerned with a literal interpretation of death. In these examples, as in others, the reader is left to rely solely on Cousineau-Levine's own reading of the images, which ultimately detracts from the argument for a uniquely Canadian art photography.

Faking Death offers many provocative ideas on art and culture. The book provides access to the work of numerous Canadian art photographers in a single source; however, the photographers and images included in the text are primarily addressed in accordance with the author's argument on Canadian identity. This may leave readers wanting further social and cultural context for the work being discussed. The book is a reflection of Cousineau-Levine's extensive knowledge of Canadian photography and, as such, it is likely to be of interest primarily to scholars in the field. The psychoanalytic themes and discussions of Canadian identity presented throughout the book may appeal to a broader audience interested in Canadian art and culture.

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