



GALLERIES



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Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage Memorializing friends and lovers in scrapbooks and albums has been around as long as there have been over-educated women with time on their hands

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BY DAVID BALZER June 16, 2010 21:06

EDITORIAL RATING: To Sep 5. Tue, Thu-Sun 10am-5:30pm; Wed 10am-8:30pm. \$10-\$18 (free Wed 6-8:30pm; free for high school students only Tue-Fri 3-5:30pm). Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas W. 416-979-6648. www.ago.net.

Extensive anthropomorphism, naive watercolours, collage, cutesy quirk: no, it's not a new show by some scruffy West-Ender, but the AGO's "Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage," organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and recently hosted to great acclaim by the Met. The exhibit shows work from 12 albums -- about half of these with individual pages on display, the others accessible on touch-sensitive screens -- by prominent Victorian women who used the new phenomenon of photography, in particular cartes de visite (in essence, keepsake pictures taken during social calls), to make elaborate scrapbooks. Why do these ladies have so much in common with the latter-day hipster? The answer is obvious:

both are over-educated, have superfluous time on their hands and, as a result, obsess over the specificities of friend- and lovemaking.

Mary Georgiana Caroline, a.k.a. Lady Filmer, for instance, typifies the Victorian -- or, rather, post-Industrial Revolution -- tendency to associate people with objects. In this era, it seems, the metonym or synecdoche -- in which the part stands for the whole -- takes complex flight, in no small part due to the photograph, itself a piece of the person it represents. Among her peers in the exhibit, Filmer seems the most aggressive social climber. Everything is hierarchy for her. In a collage representing her drawing room, she arranges her circle with cunning strategy, giving pride of place to the Prince of Wales, with whom she had an ongoing flirtation, and relegating her husband to the bottom-right-hand corner, with the dog. Due to a number of playing-card motifs, you will definitely think of Lewis Carroll when you visit the show (curator Elizabeth Siegel makes the clever assertion that the photocollagists are like Red Queens, always cutting off people's heads), but, if you can, you should also call to mind Henry James, whose villainesses, from The Portrait of a Lady's Madame Merle to The Wings of the Dove's Aunt Maud, thrive on playing poker with people's lives.

There is so much to look at that repeated visits are recommended. If Filmer is the exhibit's foremost social climber, Georgina Berkeley, Madame B (a.k.a. Marie-Blanche-Hennelle Fournier) and Kate Edith Gough, whose abundantly witty pages are only viewable on screen, are its foremost artists. And like all good artists, they are not bound by time. Gough's chattering monkeys with human faces, Berkeley's vignette of figures riding a tortoise and crane on a beach and Fournier's spider web arrayed with dignified personages all say as much about mid-19th-century Darwinism as they do about the rich, weird, imaginative life of people who amuse themselves for a living. Forget hipsters: a certain brand of modern art is born here.

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