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## PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY OR CHRONICLES OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Vaidehi Chitre files in her diary on 'Art in Portland'

I Want To Show You Somewhere' is a photography and mixed media installation show at the Douglas Cooley Gallery at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Having opened on November 4, the show continued till December 10. Although showing together, the intentions of the artists seem to fall on opposite sides of a spectrum. The Lebanese born artist from New York, Lucien Samaha's images are autobiographical, culled from a personal collection while those of Vancouver-based artists, Hadley+Maxwell (Hadley Howes and Maxwell Stephens) take on a political overture.

The Douglas Cooley Gallery is a teaching gallery at Reed College in Southeast Portland; the college's Tudor Gothic architecture, clamour of students on their way to classes and lounging about makes it an ideal venue for Hadley+Maxwell's exhibit. The mixed media installation is an appropriation of John Filo's iconic photograph of the Kent State riots of May 1970, during which the Ohio National Guard fired at unarmed students protesting the bombing of Cambodia, killing four. In Filo's photograph, a woman student is crying in horror over the dead body of a friend, while a bystander watches, uncertain and slumping.

Hadley+Maxwell's shoot on the college grounds at Reed in summer 2006, revisiting this image, has resulted in an installation, which includes pen on paper drawings, photography, vinyl cutouts, light-boxes, video and audio. Upon entering the space, one is drawn, unwillingly, into the haunting tones of Hadley Howes' rendition of "Gloomy Sunday", written and composed by Hungarian pianist and composer, Rezső Seress in 1933, and dispassionately referred to as the 'suicide song', on a pair of speakers. Howes croons the words of a mourner contemplating suicide to join her deceased lover, over the tunes on an acoustic guitar of 'Angels have no thought of ever returning you/Would they be angry if I thought of joining you?'. This is even as the viewer confronts a triptych of drawings representing the Kent State scene.

The first drawing only depicts the 'victim' and 'bystander'. Motion lines between the two figures in the shape of a person crouching down to the victim or getting up to the bystander, draw attention to the interchangeability of the two roles. In the second drawing, the victim and bystander are surrounded by students on the college grounds. The mourner kneels between them, crying. In this drawing, the mourner and students are mere outlines, ethereal, their features stark white and without detail compared to the victim and bystander, looking as if they had been caught in the act of disappearing. The third depicts the victim and bystander on a stark white background, with the mourner and other students having slipped away.

Inside, the darkened room is set up with a large video screen playing a loop in which the victim and bystander are in their places, black silhouettes against a white background, one lying face down, supine, while the other looks on, awkward. The image dissolve into the picture of a college park, which is out of focus, students mill about. In the foreground, Hadley and Maxwell play the parts of the victim and bystander intermittently exchanging positions.

The action on screen has its counterparts in two light-boxes five to six feet from the projector; one placed horizontally, while the other is vertical. Next to them, two vinyl cutouts, representing the victim and bystander, are propped up on a scattered pile of books, including Herman Melville's volume, [Bartleby and Benito Cereno](#), Fredrick Engels' [Socialism: Utopian and Scientific](#), Rousseau's [Social Contract](#) and some college textbook regulars such as [Pathways to Data : Field Methods for Studying Ongoing Social Organizations](#) by Robert W. Habenstein and [Words and Things](#) by Ernest Gellner. The images on the cutouts and light-boxes change with the movement on screen.

The shadowy substance of the images on screen self-consciously connects the impossibility of Hadley+Maxwell's attempt to bridge the gap between now and then, to understand the violence and futility of the Kent State riots and Vietnam, to Howes' voice singing, "...in shadows I spent it all." This work also explores the iconic nature of journalistic photographs and their dramatic after life in history and public memory, for example, Alfred Eisenstaedt's photograph of a sailor kissing a nurse in New York's Times Square after Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, Nick Ut's photograph of a young girl hit by a napalm bomb in Vietnam, or in our times, officers torturing prisoners in black hoods in Abu Ghraib.

If Hadley+Maxwell's work creates many versions of one iconic photograph, Lucien Samaha's contribution appears to destroy the very concept of the iconic, seeming to say that all pictures have equal evaluation. This appearance is deceptive, however, and the seeming ordinariness of Samaha's intention is revealed to be a cover.

Culled from his collection of 300,000 personal photographs, Samaha's 91 images are autobiographical. The prints are held up informally on the walls with magnets, like postcards from a family travelling abroad on one's refrigerator. They are chronological, beginning in the 1970s from Samaha's days as a TWA flight attendant to the present day.



Lucien Samaha



Hadley Maxwell

In his artist's statement, Samaha writes, "For me personally, photography and its related activities become more than a mere obsession, but a true 'second nature'. Hardly a day goes by when I don't take at least dozens of photographs with one of my 45 cameras, or spend countless hours cataloguing my archive of almost 300,000 photographs with pleasure." The images, starting with black and white and ending in color, are shot at various locations; construction sites, outside stores, in living rooms, bedrooms and bars. Some are erotic pictures of couples and threesomes, in one a waiter hands a dancer at a bar some hors d'oeuvres on a plate, while others document workers and revellers, a kangaroo, dancers, friends talking, a child basking in the sun and people carrying on with their lives.

The show is interactive and Samaha himself is part of it, typing on his laptop, flanked by a printer, Lacie external hard drive, camera and a comfortable couch for visitors should they engage him in conversation. He invites visitors to take home any print they like, bringing it first to him, thereby luring them to participate. He then gives them another copy to put back in the blank space and takes a picture of the visitor holding the print. He then asks them to take it back and photograph it in an environment of their choice, sending the artist a copy. The visitors having complied, Samaha then sends them a link to a webpage where they may read the story and title behind the photograph.

This picking out of pictures and refilling of the resulting blanks by hands other than that of the artist or gallery workers also ensures that the piece is living. Thus, what starts out as a neatly arranged row of photographs ends up taking on rakish angles and dog ends like photographs "laid out on a table" in a casual setting. The number of photographs on the wall at any point remains constant.

In an informal conversation, Samaha says that he was frustrated with the regular gallery experience in areas like New York's Chelsea and the process of 'framing' and determining the value of art; this way the viewer is able to participate in a more intense way. He particularly finds the involvement increasing when the viewer finds that all s/he has to do to take the artwork home is take off a magnet. He adds that a lot of people find his presence in the space a bit odd, especially since he can't help turning around to look every time someone chuckles or reacts, although several make it a point to engage him.

Samaha has done this show once before in Germany, at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany, (where it was part of a group exhibition "Gut ist was gefällt." - "Good is What Pleases." from January 15 February 12, 2006, with Hans-Peter Feldmann and Wolfgang Tillmans) He was interested to find that the one picture that was picked most often there wasn't picked at all in the US. The artist will have a greater chance to observe how different demographics respond as he is planning to hold similar exhibitions in 12 more venues.

In Samaha's photographs, history flows from autobiography; the black and white of diffident young men in tentative embrace soon gives way to a flamboyant and joyful celebration of the subject's homosexuality. By sending the story behind the photograph after receiving the 'picture of the picture' from the visitor, the artist recreates the casual moment when a friend shows you their holiday album over a cup of coffee. For Samaha, the image in the album begins to mean more than, "this is a Bob eating a hamburger." The structure of the photo album that this exhibit appropriates is also a negotiation of memory and for all that the image is hanging loosely from a magnet, it takes on an iconic quality.

Taken together, Lucien Samaha and Hadley+Maxwell seem to face each other on different points on a continuum, while the gap between them, which appears to get smaller, seems to nudge and tease the ideas of art and communication, truth and the role of the photographer as historian.

The writer is a filmmaker and script writer based in Portland

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Archives

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