

Donigan Cumming: Biographical Note

Donigan Cumming addresses themes of the body, taboos of representation, social engagement, and photographic truth. He uses photography, text, sound, video, collage, animation, drawing, and painting in artworks, installations, projections, and books. Cumming locates his work in a created community formed over many projects and sustained over decades. These close relationships have allowed him to explore the social and ethical implications of the observational image characterized by an ongoing analysis of the reality effects of documentary film and photography, and the realities of the subjects they depict and describe. The results are marked by an interest in the threshold between the public “onstage” and the private “backstage”—the psycho-social performances of all the actors, including himself, as maker.

Cumming was born in Danville, Virginia, in 1947. In 1970 he came to Canada to resist the American War being fought in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. He moved to Montréal, Québec, where he resumed his art practice. In 1978, he obtained a BSc from Florida State University (Tallahassee). In 1985, he completed a MFA at Concordia University while working on the cycle of photographs and sound recordings that became *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986). This project was previewed in solo and group exhibitions, notably at the NFB/ONF Photo Gallery/Galerie de l'image, Ottawa; The Photography Gallery (TPW), Toronto; Coburg Gallery, Vancouver; and Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon, sparking critical debate in leading art magazines, such as *Parachute*, *Vanguard*, *Canadian Art*, and *C Magazine*.

Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography was launched in its completed three-part form in solo exhibitions at OK Harris and 49th Parallel, New York, and the Centre national de la Photographie, Paris, both in 1986. Organized by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the show toured in Europe, the United States, and Canada, with excerpts from *Reality and Motive* included in influential group exhibitions, such as *Photography: Suggestions and Facts* (Mandeville Gallery, La Jolla CA), *Foto(con)tekst* (Perspektief Gallery, Rotterdam), and *Culture Medium* (International Center of Photography, New York).

The next major projects were premiered in solo exhibitions: *The Mirror, the Hammer and the Stage* (Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, 1990); *Diverting the Image* (Art Gallery of Windsor and CIAC - Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal,

1993); *Pretty Ribbons* (Les Rencontres internationales de la photographie d'Arles, 1994), *Moving Stills* (Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 1999, and International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2000), and *Gimlet Eye* (Chapter Arts Centre and Ffotogallery, Cardiff, 2001). Cumming's work was featured in key, discourse-enlarging exhibitions, notably *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography*, from the Museet for Fotokunst, Odense, Denmark (1992); *The Body/Le Corps* (Kunsthalle, Bielefeld, Germany (1994) and Lutz Teutloff Modern Art, Köln, Germany (1994-5); *The Dead*, National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television, Bradford, England (1995); *El cos, la llengua, les paraules, la pell: Artistes contemporains de Québec*, Centre D'Art Santa Mònica de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain (1999); *Le cadre, la scène, le site*, Centro de la Imagen, Mexico, and Mexican tour, 2000-2002); *Portraits intimes*, Foto Instituut of Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2002); *Immodest Gazes*, Fondació la Caixa, Barcelona, Spain (2000); and *World without End*, Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia (2000). Cumming's ground-breaking work from this period has featured in important museum exhibitions from their collections: *Beau: a reflection on the nature of beauty in photography/ Beau: une réflexion sur la nature de la beauté en photographie*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa (1992); *Une aventure contemporaine, la photographie 1955-1995*, Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France (1996); *Bearing Witness: works from the collection*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver (2010); *La photographie d'auteur au Québec - Une collection prend forme au Musée/Auteur Photography in Québec: A Collection Takes Shape*, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, Montréal (2013); *From Ferron to BGL: Contemporary Art in Québec*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec (2016); *Photography in Canada: 1960-2000*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2017) and works from the collection of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in *Le langage silencieux* at the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie d'Arles 2022, France (2022).

In 2005, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (now MOCA, Toronto) presented *Moving Pictures*, a major exhibition surveying a great variety of Cumming's work. Curated by Peggy Gale, the exhibition premiered two monumental panels, *Prologue* and *Epilogue*, a collage constructed from the artist's photographic and video archives. *Prologue* and *Epilogue* were also the centrepieces of *Donigan Cumming : La somme, le sommeil, le cauchemar*, curated by Catherine Bédard for Le Mois de la Photo à Paris (Centre Culturel Canadien, Paris, 2006). A survey of Cumming's work in multimedia, photography, and video was presented in the 2008 exhibition *Ex Votos* at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery

(Halifax). As an artist-in-residence at Centre VU (Québec), Cumming produced *Kincora*, a vast suite of prints based on drawings of his photographs, which were exhibited at VU (2008) and Galerie Éric Devlin (Montréal, 2008). This transition also took form as a magazine work for the “Alive: Artist Pages” of *BlackFlash* (2008), a project for *Cinematic Folds: The Furling and Unfurling of Images* (Pleasure Dome, 2008), and as an outdoor multimedia installation for ATSA’s *État d’urgence 09*, Place Émilie-Gamelin, Montréal, Canada (2009). Animation also flowed episodically into medium-length and short video work, starting with *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (2009). *Too Many Things* (2010), combining observational documentary and animation, premiered at the Cinémathèque québécoise in a six-year survey of videos, *Donigan Cumming : preuves nouvelles et choses trouvées*, accompanied by an exhibition of associated prints and drawings, all emanating from his imagined community *Kincora*. In 2011, Cumming and Matthieu Brouillard conceived a co-curated two-person exhibition to explore intersections between their works. This resulted in a touring show and an artists’ book: *Coming Through the Fog: Les rencontres de Donigan Cumming et Matthieu Brouillard* (Centre Sagamie éditions d’art, 2012).

Cumming’s monographs and artist’s books include *The Stage* (Maquam Press, 1991), *Pretty Ribbons* (Stemmle, 1996), *Gimlet Eye* (Chapter Arts Centre and Ffotogallery, 2001), *Lying Quiet* (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), *Kincora* (Maquam Press, 2008), *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (J’ai VU, 2009), and *Kerr’s Suitcase*, Maquam, 2015), which evolved from an imagined collaboration between Cumming and David Kerr (1945-2007) and whose exercise of remembering would be performed in a video, *Out of Kerr’s Suitcase* (2016). More recently, a photographic series of immersive still lifes, *Even as the Falcon Plummets* (2022), was produced as a series of prints and a boxed set. This was followed by a bookwork, *Falcon’s Guide* (2023). Cumming’s most recent bookwork is *Primer* (2025), edited from photographs taken in Montreal in the fall of 1980.

Cumming took up video in 1995, following the death of his collaborator and model Nettie Harris. *A Prayer for Nettie*, conceived and widely circulated as a photographic and multi-channel video monument, was edited into theatrical form and premiered at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Montréal) in 1996, winning the Telefilm Canada Video Prize for Best Canadian Discovery. His videos have since screened in Canada and internationally, both in theatrical and continuous projection. In 1998, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) featured Cumming’s work in its program *The Cruel Machine*. In 2000, his video installation *Moving Stills* was featured in IFFR’s Exploding Cinema program, while his work *Fountain*

premiered at IFFR in 2005.

Cumming's videos have screened at New York festivals and houses for experimental film: the New York Video Festival, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Anthology Film Archives, Museum of Modern Art, and Millenium Film Workshop. Programs of his work have been shown at Lux Centre for Film, Video, and New Media (Shoreditch Biennale, London, UK), Pleasure Dome (Toronto) and Méduse (Québec). *Continuity and Rupture*, a VHS collection of his video works, was published by Cinéma Libre in 1999, leading to a series of screenings in France and a complementary publication, *Donigan Cumming: continuité et rupture* (Centre Culturel Canadien, Ambassade du Canada à Paris, 2000). A DVD box set, *Donigan Cumming: Controlled Disturbance*, with essays by Catherine Bédard, Sally Berger, Peggy Gale, Marcy Goldberg, Marie-Josée Jean, Jean Perret, Nicolas Renaud, and Yann-Olivier Wicht was published by Vidéographe, Montréal, in 2005.

Cumming's controversial work has been the subject of critical examinations and retrospectives, including programs at the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley CA, 2002) and at Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland, 2002), as well as several monographs: *Splitting the Choir: The Moving Images of Donigan Cumming* (Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, 2011; web edition, 2023), *Donigan Cumming: Monographie* (Dazibao and Vu, Montréal and Québec, 2012); and *Donigan Cumming: The Stage: Books on Books #19* (Errata Editions, New York, 2014). He has participated in insightful interviews for publication with Robert Enright, Jean Perret, Mike Hoolboom, and Philippe Gagan. In 2015, the Cinémathèque québécoise, in collaboration with Vidéographe, presented a two programs and a master class of Donigan Cumming's works. The same year, his video *Culture* was included in the program *L'œil du photographe : la photographie et le documentaire poétique / A Photographer's Eye: Photography and the Poetic Documentary* (Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal, 2015). The breadth of his video work is explored in Vidéographe's online compendium *Body-to-Body: The Works of Donigan Cumming* (2020).

Numerous theoretical works and reference books address Cumming's work, including *Contemporary Photographers* (St. James Press, 1996), *The Photography Book* (Phaidon, 1997), *Art and Photography* (Phaidon, 2003), *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), *Das Lexikon der Fotografen* (Knaur, 2003), *The Photobook: A History, Volume 2* (Phaidon, 2006), *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), *Touching Surfaces: Photographic Aesthetics, Temporality, Aging*

(Brill Rodopi, 2008), *100 Video Artists/100 video artistas* (EXIT Publicaciones, 2009), *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010), *Une Collection. Maison européenne de la photographie* (Actes Sud, 2015), and *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Photography* (Thames & Hudson, 2015). Scholarly studies of his work include Scott Birdwise, "Life Support: The Documentary Means Without End of Donigan Cumming," (Carleton University, 2010); Élène Tremblay, *L'insistance du regard sur le corps éprouvé. Pathos et contre-pathos* (Forum Edizioni, 2013); and Florence Le Blanc, "Les Épaves scintillantes": emplois autofictionnels de la photographie au sein du récit filmique," (Université Laval, 2019). Cumming's extended portrait of Nettie Harris, *Pretty Ribbons*, continues to attract scholarly and artistic attention, including Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," (2006), Vicky Hodgson, "Stereotypical Representations of Women and Ageing: A Review of Literature and Photographic Practice" (2018), and GraceGraceGrace, the three-person British artists' collective, in their *GraceGraceGrace explore gen-age* (2019). In 2024 Ann Massal's book, *Photo Against the Machine*, a collection of exchanges with a chatbot on legends of contemporary photography, the conversation revolves around an image from *Pretty Ribbons*.

Donigan Cumming's photographic and video works have been acquired for the permanent collections of major institutions in Québec, Canada, and abroad, including: the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (Ottawa), the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris), the Musée de L'Élysée (Lausanne), the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Québec City), the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), as well as national museums in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Switzerland, and the United States.

Cumming's work was initially supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, followed by project and visual arts grants from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts, including a Long-Term Grant (2008–10). The Canadian Discoveries prize of 1996 was followed by the Telefilm Canada Prize for the Best Canadian Short or Medium-Length Film or Video (1998 – *Erratic Angel*); Barbara Aronofsky Latham Memorial Award, 11th Annual Dallas Video Festival (2002 – *After Brenda*); and The Best Québec Documentary, Québec Cinema Critics Award (2002 – *My Dinner with Weegee*). In 2008, his short video *Monument* was commissioned by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian for a DVD collection, *Tão Perto / Tão*

Longe [So Close / So Far; Si Proche / Si Loin], Lisbon. Highly productive residencies include VU, centre de diffusion et de production de la photographie (Québec) and PRIM – Recherche et Création Expérimentale (Montréal). In addition to artist's talks and workshops, Cumming was a member of the visiting faculty at the École de Photographie de Vevey (CEPV) in Switzerland from 2011 to 2017. His work is represented by Vidéographe (Montréal) and Video Data Bank (Chicago).

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