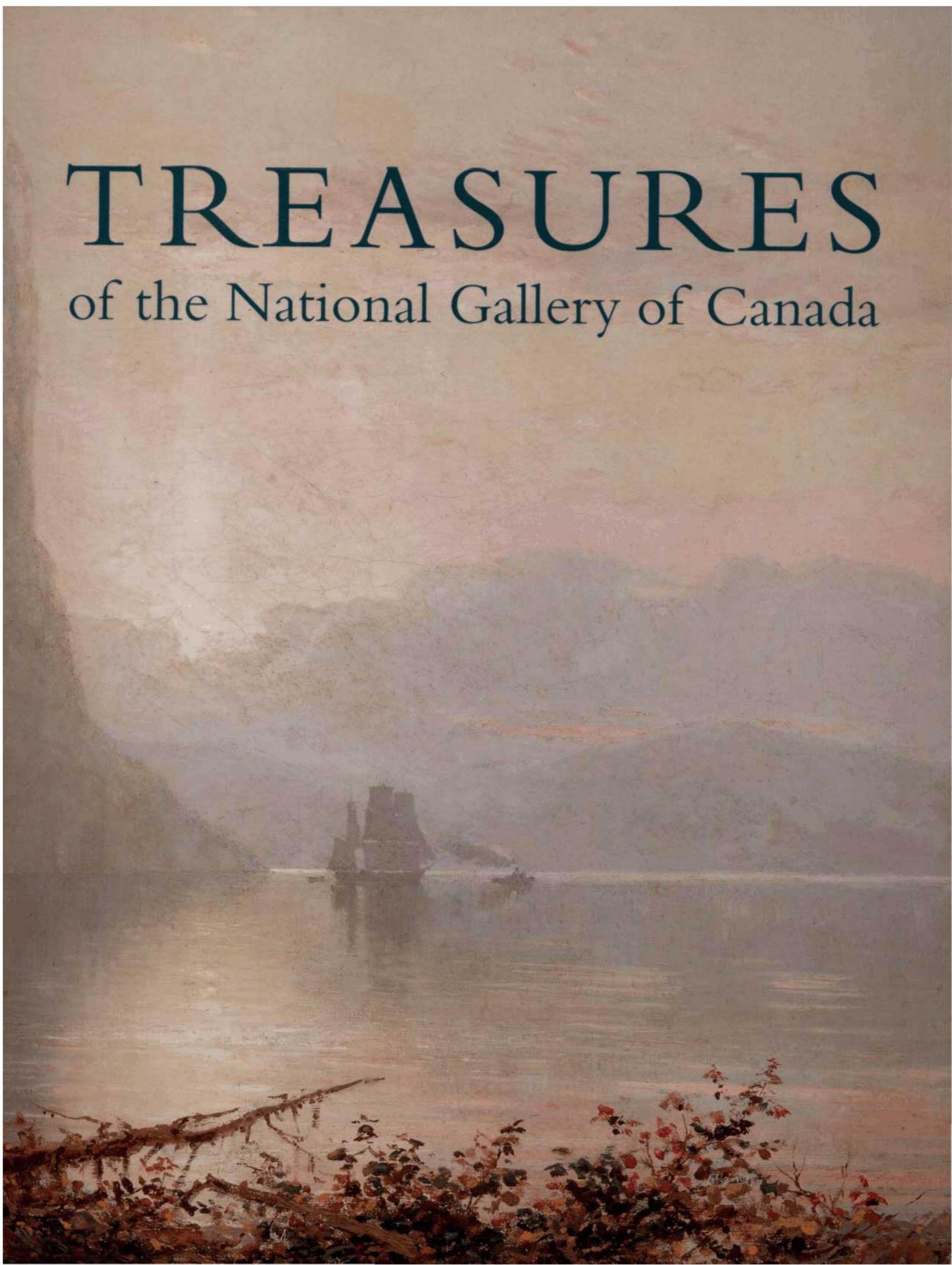


TREASURES

of the National Gallery of Canada



DesSureault, Pierre. *Treasures of the National Gallery of Canada*, David Franklin, ed. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada and New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003) pp. 282-3.

Donigan Cumming

Canadian, born United States 1947

Untitled, June 4, 1985

From the series "Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography: Part 2"

1985

Gelatin silver print, 50.4 X 40.4 cm

Gift of the artist, Montreal, 1986

The launch in 1986 of Donigan Cumming's three-part exhibition *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* sent Shockwaves through the photographic community. Much of the reaction was hostile: the artist was found guilty of parody, contempt, and abuse of power. The subjects of the 131 photographs - the poor, the young, the old, the handicapped, the marginal, the middle-class — clearly belong to the documentary tradition. And they are all presented in their own everyday surroundings: the living rooms of suburban bungalows, boarding-house rooms, cluttered kitchens, apartments in chaotic disarray.

The unsettling thing about this theatre of excess, where the characters either give full rein to their obsessions or display the scars from the blows life has dealt them, is Cumming's dismantling of the old illusion that photographic representation is transparent and of the myth about the purity of the photographer's intentions. Without any qualms, and with no false modesty, these anti-heroes of an endlessly humdrum world embody and even help stage projections of themselves and their desires, submitting to the merciless glare of the camera's flash, which tends to exaggerate features and draw out stereotypes. Although these images appear to be genuine examples of documentary representation, each is actually a *mise en scène* that undermines and challenges the sacrosanct notion of "naturalness" and its inevitable corollary, "truth." In the mass of discordant elements and confused styles that go far beyond the comfortable boundaries of good taste, it is quite impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction. The mask cannot be removed from the face, clothing cannot be differentiated from costume, home cannot be singled out from decor. Normality and abnormality are here simply the two faces of existence.

Cumming recruited over two hundred individuals for the creation of his portrait gallery. One of them, seen here, was Nettie Harris (1912—1993), a journalist, actress, and model who worked with him from 1983 until her death. After serving as a bit player in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* and *The Mirror, the Hammer, and the Stage*, she took on the leading role in *Pretty Ribbons*. In this last project, Cumming used Nettie's expressively withered flesh to offer a graphic picture of the struggle against aging, the decline of vitality, and the ultimate confrontation with death. Nettie comes across not just as a model or an actress, but as an intelligent woman who, unreservedly and with the evident encouragement of the photographer, undermines the spectator's own taboos. Photography, stripped by Cumming of its traditional function as a conscience-assuaging window on the world, becomes here a mirror, one that unceremoniously presents viewers with an image of their own most shameful prejudices, deeply buried fears, and secret fantasies.

Pierre Dessureault

