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Donigan Cumming: Prologue to Epilogue

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The sky was a bright pink, casting such a weird light that every color was intensified. Each weed that grew out of the gravel looked like a live green nerve. The world might have been shedding its skin.

Flannery O'Connor¹

A kind of orgiastic panic seized the city. Those bluff, complaisant avenues and piazzas were suddenly as fertile in metamorphoses as a magic forest. Whether the apparitions were shades of the dead, synthetic reconstructions of the living or in no way replicas of anything we knew, they inhabited the same dimension as the living for Dr Hoffman had enormously extended the limits of this dimension. The very stones were mouths which spoke. I myself decided the revenants were objects - perhaps personified ideas - which could think but did not exist ... This phantasmagoric redefinition of a city was constantly fluctuating for it was now the kingdom of the instantaneous.

Angela Carter²

The absurd, the grotesque, the theatre of cruelty, and the abject are all references that have been affixed to the work of Donigan Cumming. Since entering the shock and cacophony of *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), spectators have been moving from room to room. The space of this socio-artistic laboratory contracts and dilates. The backstage dynamic of Cumming's created community is unveiled in *The Stage* (1991). An extended portrait of an elderly woman, Nettie Harris, is anachronistically expanded to a sensual pas-de-deux with six men playing the part of the deceased "Harry." Harry speaks; Albert sings; Nettie tells the story of her dog, Blackie. Then, in a decade of video, come the serpentine and polyphonic tellings of the community's members: Albert's story, Pierre's, Colin's, Colleen's, Marty's, and Gerry's twist around in our minds, prompting memories and speculations about the others, those who played versions of their lives mutely and powerfully in Cumming's photographs.

Prologue and *Epilogue* (both 2005) are the latest works in Cumming's oeuvre to combine realist photographic and videographic imagery in ways that disturb our sense of order and well-being. Monumental photographic and encaustic collages, tinted, overpainted, built up, and gilded, the works are controlled imagistic explosions.

Prologue is a fantastic landscape whose features include a rocky ledge, a turbulent river, and a pollution-streaked sky. The vision is compositionally contained, though its repous-soirs are monstrous ice formations and swollen legs. The river is a human torrent composed of four thousand body parts: heads, arms, and limbs rising and falling in the waxy flow. A figure prostrate on the ledge, his noble blood oozing from his head, his military uniform and medals laid out on the ground, and a rampant Chihuahua-type mongrel are heroism's last gleamings.

Epilogue is a carnival set on the boulevard of a decaying modern city. A parade of clones relentlessly advances while, in the foreground, saints and mortals jostle each other, display their trophies, and mouth their cries. Their colourful faces are like masks, though the photo-graphic realism also reminds us of faces preserved in formaldehyde - they seem to float. The columned structure is a vertiginous house of cards, garishly decorated with graffiti and chased with grotesques. At the heart-point of the work, a tiny haloed figure of a martyr offers a pretext for the pageantry and delirium of the mob.

Cumming sets *Prologue* and *Epilogue* in the *longue durée* of Judaeo-Christian typology. The collages are loosely based on two European history paintings: Bruegel's *Suicide of Saul* and Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*. As Cumming writes, "The Bruegel reconstructs the defeat of a population and the suicide of an ambivalent warrior, while the Ensor is a carnivalesque treatment of religious martyrdom."³ The cool omniscience of Bruegel's bloodied landscape is juxtaposed with Ensor's fevered urban witnessing - the works promote very different modes of visual exploration - but their connection is also terribly clear. From *Prologue* to *Epilogue*, the glories of violence and the charisma of fanaticism are embedded in the twenty-first century imaginary.

1. Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955), 197.

2. Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972), 17–18.

3. Donigan Cumming, artist's statement, curatorial files, Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2005.