

"A Plot Unfolding: Stephen Waddell"

by Shepherd Steiner

"Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind maybe. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us."

(Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project)1

Confronted by the work of Stephen Waddell there can be little doubt that a secret lies open to all. The studied pace of his photographic sketches and painted morceaux can only lead one to believe that an instant in the life of the world is laid bare. Even the most cursory glance at his photography and painting seems to confirm that if the former medium provides the accumulated evidence of a mystery unfolding, or a plot afoot, the latter medium closes in to offer the truth revealed. If, on the one hand, there is the rush of photographic details that assume the significance of watchwords or portents -- the man, his posture, those greasy pants, that pink shirt flapping, the vertical alignment of blue objects in one picture, the subterfuge of scattered red objects in another --, on the other hand, to counter these multiple and suspicious signs, there is the dead calm and concentrated focus of the painterly gaze. Thick with what feels like 'genuine' experience the painted versions of "A Resting Worker" disentangle the condition of "A Man Lying". With the touch of the initiate or adept these morceaux answer or "fulfill" the suspicions posed by the snapshot effect of the photographic tableau.² And in gathering up the tableau's far-flung intensities into a focussed image, painting lifts the secret from its banal existence amidst the flow of surface events to a position at center stage. Never have the secrets of the world been disclosed so readily or with such purpose.

Of course, the problem as Benjamin's dialectic of trace and aura so ably frames it, is that the secret is never ultimately recoupable. Even if near at hand, warming itself on rocks and lying open to the sun and world, the secret is fugitive. One knows a secret lies open to all, not because we as viewers are privy to its occult knowledge at one moment, or in one medium, and not in or at another, but rather because the secret strikes us, or "takes possession of us" at the very moment we "gain possession of the thing". Right at the outset the hyperbolic sense of conspiracy hanging over the Cycle of "A Resting Worker" should thus be acknowledged. It serves to highlight the interpretive problematic one faces as a reader of these images and of the event depicted. That one looks blindly on as the equivalent of a cryptic handshake or gesture is performed right under our very eyes does to the

crux of the matter. In the minutiae of custom observed the secret is born, dwells, is 'revealed', and forced deeper.



A Resting Worker Cycle, colour photograph, 99x150cm, 2000

In its most general parameters, it seems that Waddell's project is to unfold from what we might describe as fragments of contemporary urban experience, a sense of grounding or process. Far from what one considers today as the newsworthy, this sense of history unfolds from nothing more than an instant of naturalized existence in the life of the solitary individual. The ritual ease with which this homeless worker accepts, through force of habit, a parking lot for the comfort and privacy of his own bedroom opens a vista onto precisely this uneven terrain which modernity has rendered so fleeting. With the hint of dissolute habits, the posture of the idle dreamer, or strain of proletarian labor doing battle with the signs of an untimely passing, the possibility for insurrection, and the memory of the trade guild or workers org., in this one glimpses the high intrigue of the everyday. The two-foldness of the event depicted, the fact that an instant in everyday life is surrounded by a web or veil of intrigue, is fundamental. It is Waddell's way of accessing the question of allegory; of shedding light on the metaphoric



A Resting Worker, oil on canvas, 68x70cm, 1998



A Resting Worker variant, oil on canvas,
45x58cm, 1998

correspondences this rhetorical figure has the capacity to dramatize without entirely collapsing beneath seamless unity. For if one admits this "stock figure" lying beside a truck conceals nothing, one must also suspect this conspirator d'occasion of more dubious activities and more anxious circumstance. There is the possibility of a merely coincidental placement within the *mise-en-scène*, and yet one has also to admit too a far more inflated and pivotal involvement in some unknown plot or other. The point here is that at one and the same time, the viewer is confronted by a language of truth revealed and of a ritual knowledge secreted away. Such is what Benjamin described "as the flaneur's basic experience ... the *colportage* phenomenon of space";³ or if you will, the *colportage* experience of the event in the space of urban life.

What is decisive to grasp in all of this, is that only cloaked in the guise of truth does the conspiratorial plot open up. The trace as the "appearance of a nearness" lies in the strictest tension with the aura as the "appearance of a distance". The transparency held aloft by the one is always underwritten by the translucence pinning down the other. Thus, in "A Man Lying" for instance, the painterly use of genre stems the complete possession of the trace. Conversely in "A Resting Worker", the convention of the photographic close-up, something which should insure the positive identity of the trace as the "appearance of a nearness", results instead in an estranging or distancing effect. For Benjamin, mediation (what we have identified as the dramatic) always finds a way of insinuating itself into the core of what is believed to be symbolic, natural, or true. Whether the symbolic is modeled on photography or painting, or here as in Waddell's work where both mediums stand as models of the symbolic and exist side by side, does not matter. What is crucial to recognize is that each medium is shot-through with the contingency of the other; and further, that any secrets revealed furnish little more than material for the suspense of a mid-plot twist.

Obviously this kind of logic throws our initial conception of Waddell's project into serious question, for it is clear that the auratic nature of painting cannot in any way serve as the fulfillment of what the photographic trace lacks. As Waddell himself clearly puts it, "taking photographic desire for enlargement, and then painting that desire, enacts an alternate story". One thing this work negotiates the most carefully is the tempting and naïve misunderstanding of aura which served as our departure and which has more generally limited the speculative dimension that Benjamin's notion plumbs. Nonetheless, misreading is always instructive, especially when confronted by the likes of an artist who is as comfortable working in the high tradition of modernist painting as the hypertrophic conventions of reportage. As anyone bothered by such reductive notions of photography vis-à-vis painting might already have recognized, a much more complex relation exists between the so-called copy and the original. And, in fact this is precisely the kind of uncertain relation set up by the thoroughly orthodox deployment of the conventions and expectations of the two forms of medium. With photography cast in the role of the impoverished preparatory sketch, and painting perfectly performing its retrospective role of recapturing experience and memory in all its original plenitude, both poles of Waddell's practice emerge as convenient fictions used to unsettle causal relations all too often taken for granted. The entirely unstable and highly counter intuitive structure that this tension between photography and painting sets up has the capacity of substituting cause for effect, and vice versa.

Just as Benjamin's rather slack dialectic of trace and aura disguises a rather more tightly strung metaleptic relation, so the apparently generative schema of Waddell's photography and painting opens up to reveal a problematic where cause and effect become vulnerable to the most volatile reversals. Thus, in the context of his practice, photography's ability to capture the unmediated event melts in face of paintings' capacity to conjure up deep memory as its pretext. In turn, this symbolic event, recaptured, pales in light of the necessity of reportage, the photographs subsidiary role as copy does battle with paintings authenticity, etc. What does this jostling back and forth give way to? Simply put, the rule of each complementarity where the truth claims of each medium lie side by side, each the inseparable correlation of the other, and each as mutually uncomfortable in its role as a criteria for truth. Here, undoubtedly, is the essential wager of Waddell's practice. Privileging neither the avant-garde pedigree of reportage photography, nor the sublimated tradition of modernist painting, the lyric and prosaic method each levy as a purchase on experience is accorded equal right, and summarily discredited by the other through which it comes into being.

Worrying over the truth claims of photography and painting is, of course, nothing new. What it adds up to in this case is difficult to summarize without recourse to the flavor of conspiracy that permeates Waddell's work. Yet a simple answer pulled out of the generic traditions that he draws upon, and limited to the notion of rewriting the underworld thriller, the docu-drama, or urban adventure through the optic of photography and painting, would be missing the point. For one needs to recognize these narrative potentialities, or cinematic conventions one is forced to inhabit in looking, as merely convenient motors to facilitate an historical project that seeks out the surplus of repeatedly turning overturning cause and effect. In other words, the sense that our gaze inhabits that of the Law or indeed an accomplice, that our movements could be those of a hunter or a bumbling photojournalist, that any number of suspicions are themselves conjured up, intensified, and reassessed because of the vulnerability of this faceless man so unsuspecting with back arched and stomach exposed, ultimately lends substance to an otherwise fictional involvement. The terms that this engagement afford and sustain, prompt one by proxy to delve always deeper into the depthless problematic of the event.

The cinematic themes that rifle through this work on the level of subject matter, but more importantly the cinematic conventions that operate on the structural level, underwriting the strikingness of the event, holding one in a state of narrative suspense, and breaking down the organic moment into mechanical parts, are all grounded in the mining of causality. And yet, into the thick of precisely what plot these cinematic conventions ultimately lead one, remains in an important respect unanswerable. Ultimately the durational or temporal aspects of the event are not intended to simply produce a tautological string of ever more obscure theatrical engagements scripted by modernity. Rather, it seems the point is to dramatize the process that is continually blinded by this hunt for answers: a conspiratorial space or history where clandestine agreements, correspondences and secret pacts are always in the offing.

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 447.

2 See Jean-Francois Chevrier's , "Between the Fine Arts and the Media (The German example: Gerhard Richter)", in *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter, four Essays on Atlas*, (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1999) , p. 35.

3 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *ibid*, p. 418. For the relation between colportage and the secret see Benjamin's chapters "M [The

Flaneur]", pp. 416-455; and "V [Conspiracies, Compagnonnage]", pp. 603-619, both in *The Arcades Project*.

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