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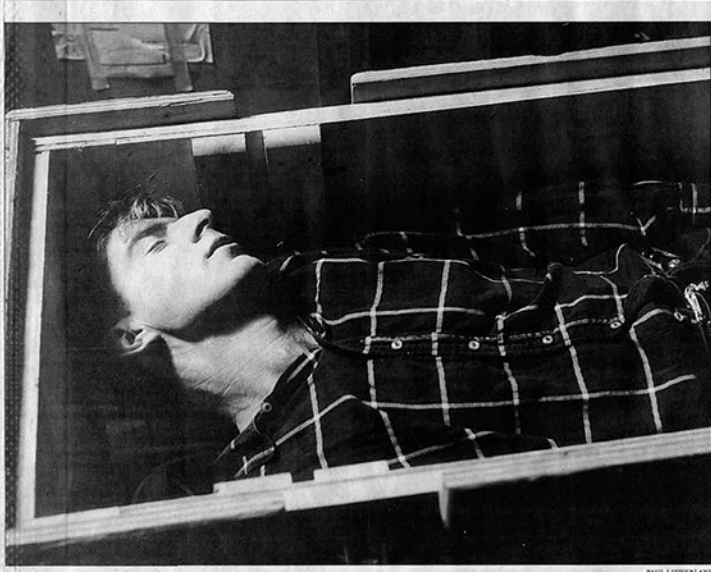


Photo from Paul Lithere's Souvenirs series (1993) and, below, from Raymond April's series Debut sur le rive (1984).

CANADIAN ARTISTS GO FOR DEATH

Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination
By Penny Cousineau-Levine
McGill-Queen's University Press
324 pp., \$49.95

By R. M. VAUGHAN

As an art critic, I am exposed (arguably over-exposed) to an enormous amount of writing about art — most of it highly jargoned academic snorefests or merely sloppy and unreadable. Sometimes I write such nonsense myself. How refreshing, then, to stumble on Penny Cousineau-Levine's wonderful *Faking Death*, a thorough and entertaining study of that least (or, until I read this book, formerly least) entertaining subject, Canadian high art photography.

Before reading *Faking Death*, I was convinced, rather bitterly and often in print, that the majority of Canadian art photography was about nothing at all. I mean that literally. How many exhibitions of wall-sized photographs of lawn chairs and discarded mattresses (almost always, curiously, originating from B.C.) have I wandered through in the last few years, screaming to myself that these expensively reproduced documents were the products of little more than an aggressively banal preoccupation with, well, banality? Hundreds, that's how many. This critic can only take so many images of dust bunnies and vacant street corners before beginning to crave content, lyricism and poetry. Even some cute animals would be a treat.

Now, however, I realize that what I've been staring at, and walking away from with contempt, is part and parcel of a national preoccupation with absence, dislocation and, ultimately, death. Who knew? A dirty mattress on a Vancouver sidewalk is, apparently, rarely just the tawdry bit of slumming and class tourism I, in my cynicism, believed it to be. That mattress is a window to another

world, and a peculiarly Canadian one at that.

If I sound sarcastic, it's actually the wound-licking whining of a chastised critic you are hearing, because this book has caused me to completely rethink my dismissal of the majority of our nation's contemporary photography. In a handful of lucid, cleanly written chapters, each dappled with enough well-researched and perfectly placed examples and samples to choke a national museum, Cousineau-Levine convincingly charts a cohesive strategy for reading Canadian art photography as both a peculiar, indeed delicious cultural phenomenon and an exciting, internationally valuable achievement. Cousineau-Levine's enthusiasm for her subject is infectious, and it is hardly accidental that she frequently quotes Margaret Atwood's seminal CanLit study *Survival*, because *Faking Death* is as groundbreaking, buoyantly nationalistic and, perhaps most important, as accessible to a general readership as Atwood's legendary exposé.

Faking Death is so full of ideas that any review must be mercilessly reductive — so here are the basics. Cousineau-Levine argues that Canadian photography, for a variety of reasons, including our colonial hangover, is obsessed with death — the thinking being that occupied cultures react to their occupation by seeking tran-



FAKING DEATH
Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination
Penny Cousineau-Levine



RAYMOND APRIL

scendence and separation. And what could be more severing than death? From this core obsession — not to be confused with a self-destructive death wish — a number of themes emerge in the varied works our photographers have produced in the last half-century, including a recurring motif of windows and portals in the imagery (places of exit that mark a distinction between "here" and "there"); images of entrapment and bondage, especially involving caged or stuffed ani-

THIS BOOK IS AS GROUNDBREAKING AS ATWOOD'S SURVIVAL

mals (more death, or at least death-in-life); a relentless aestheticism, the need to create falsified landscapes and obviously staged tableaux (imitations of life, topographical taxidermy?); and an overall insecurity, even distrust, of the photograph as a representative, true-to-life document (photographs as ghosts).

At the heart of the book is a fascinating examination of the connections between Canadian art photography and psychological states inhabited by women suffering from anorexia nervosa. What sounds at first like a bit of a stretch, a very long stretch, becomes more and more convincing as Cousineau-Levine draws a series of compelling parallels between the world views of self-starvers and the aesthetic practices of artists working under a national preoccupation with absence someone else, someplace else.

Anorexics, Cousineau-Levine posits (again, forgive the reductive tone), feel they are invisible and thus deserve no attention, and therefore make their bodies match their sense of self. Anorex-

ics frequently describe their lives as being lived in two worlds — the immediate, tangible one, which haunts them, and the spectral one of their imagination, which also haunts them, but with its perfection.

Transpose these dilemmas to the cultural production in a country that has difficulty defining itself, that perpetually sees itself in terms of what it is not, and the seemingly disparate psychologies quickly match up. Canadian photographers "fake death" as a method of expressing their transitory, often unsatisfying Canadian-ness.

And then, Cousineau-Levine frequently reminds us, there's the pesky legacy of the great killjoy Marshall McLuhan — who, like character actor Ward Bond in a John Ford horse opera, always seems to turn up at the gallery's saloon door, warning us villagers to watch out for that tall, good-looking image what's come a' sauntering into town.

No wonder Canadian photographers are so morbid — that dirty mattress is beginning to look more and more like a magic carpet with each bout of self-loathing.

My only criticism of *Faking Death*, and it's a minor one, as the book is meant to be something of a history is that it focuses almost exclusively on artists who came into prominence in the '70s and '80s. Cousineau-Levine's arguments could only have been fortified by the inclusion of works by younger artists such as Toronto's Scott and Clint Griffin or

Katherine Mulherin, Berlin-based Karma-Clarke Davis or the New Brunswick musician/photographer Julie Doiron.

Then again, I can always hope for a sequel.

R.M. Vaughan's second novel, *Spells*, will be published this fall by ECW Press.

National Post

A powerful look at Good versus Evil

River of the Brokenhearted
By David Adams Richards
Doubleday Canada
400 pp., \$37.00

By IAN MCGILLIS

David Adams Richards and P.G. Wodehouse are two names not often found in close proximity. While reading *River of the Brokenhearted*, though, a line from the king of comic writers came to mind, about an invented conversation between Greek tragedians: "Aeschylus once said to Euripides: 'You can't beat inevitability,' and Euripides said he often thought so, too."

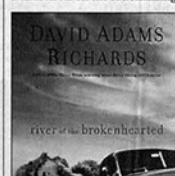
Inevitability is a word we can fairly associate with Richards, and not just because he's preoccupied with tragedy. Long-time readers, indeed anyone who's read more than a couple of his earlier novels, will know certain things going into this new one: It will be set in the author's native Miramichi Valley. The overriding theme will be that unfashionable but tenacious warhorse, good versus evil. The voice will be a variant on the author's customary one, laden with moral authority and calling to mind models as far-ranging as Dostoyevsky, Thomas Hardy, Hemingway, Faulkner and the King James Bible. That Richards manages to keep us reading regardless — to keep surprising us even — is down to the simple fact that he just keeps getting better at what he does.

(Much will probably be made of the fact that there are certain parallels here with the author's real life. Richards' family ran a New Brunswick movie theatre, for example. While future biographers will no doubt make hay with this, it's not particularly relevant for the fringe reader, who will sense anyway that Richards is writing about a world he knows inside out.)

In the middle of a harsh New Brunswick winter in the 1920s, two men, nearly simultaneously, conceive the idea of bringing movies to their town. But there's only one projector available and one man, George King, gets to it a mere 10 minutes before the other, Joey Elias. "So," says the narrator, "in one instant, two centuries of divisions were firmly entrenched, trenches fashioned for a century more." You see, from the earliest days of the community, there has been a rivalry between the Kings and a family called the Drukenes; the embittered Elias is drawn to two Druken daughters, Rebecca and Patsy. When George King dies, leaving the now-successful theatre to his widow, Janie, Elias enlists the two younger women in a long-running plot of Machiavellian complexity to wrest the theatre from Janie's control. Reasons Elias: "The world was against them from the start. Why worry if they attained some degree of comfort by doing something against the world?"

Rebecca proves an especially malevolent force, insinuating herself into the King household and eventually carrying the vendetta down two generations.

The narrator mentioned above is Wendell King, grandson of Janie and George, son of Miles. Miles and Wendell are alcoholics, and Richards, as always, is masterful on the rationalizing



river of the brokenhearted

mindset of the hardcore drinker. Wendell also represents the end of the line for the family business. It's his need "to see how I was damned" that powers the narrative. His tone, carried off flawlessly by Richards, is a delicate balance of ruefulness at his own (and his father's) shortcomings, and clear-eyed insights into the motives underlying human behaviour, especially the dishonourable kind. All of this is underpinned by serious reading: "My great-grandfather had the reputation that D.H. Lawrence's father must have had — that is, when Lawrence and his wife were forced to leave their house, who was at the gate scorning them but his own father?"

The real heroine of the story is Janie King, determined against all odds to hang on, to make a success of the theatre, "for no better reason than to spare her daughter and her son the poverty she herself has seen, the misery of the slop pail and the cold-water bath." Joey Elias is able to enlist the weak and envious — among whom, incredibly, is Janie's own father — in his cause against her. "In money can morality be seen — wathes and

THE REAL HEROINE OF THE STORY IS JANIE KING, DETERMINED AGAINST ALL ODDS

jewellery and better clothes signalled to many of them a respectable life," says Wendell. What he doesn't reckon on is Janie's relentlessness, driven as it is by the firm knowledge that she is in the right.

Nor can he guess at the role played by Max Atkin, better known as Lord Beaverbrook, who makes a startling appearance to save Janie at a time of great need.

For all the primal, light-struggling-to-hold-off-the-dark character of the characters do possess their own contradictions. Janie has shortcomings as a mother, failing to nurture son Miles's artistic inclinations as she could have, and even the horrid Joey, after a life dedicated to manipulation and self-deception, feels the need for some sort of self-reckoning before he and Rebecca Druken, on the other hand, appears beyond redemption, almost a study in pure evil; coming to grips with her is a challenge to Wendell and will be a challenge to readers, but it's an indulgence this author has earned.

It shouldn't go without mentioning, too, that this book possesses something that runs through all of Richards's work, even if it's seldom mentioned: a sense of humour. Laughter pops up at intervals just frequent enough to make the darkness feel all the more real. Here's Wendell on the launching of the family business:

"My grandparents' first movie was a Tom Mix, and when he fired his gun, fellows from the woods who had come out to watch this display in a rather tacturn fury fell over backwards, shouting 'Me Christ, he shootin' at me!' and scrambling over each other to find the exit. When they came back to the theatre the next night, one brought his own revolver, to 'pay Tommy back,' and was talked out of it by my grandfather, who said he would only be 'killing the air — and Tom would remain Tom.'"

River of the Brokenhearted is a distinguished addition to a body of work that has to be considered the equal of any other in Canadian literature.

Inevitable, really.

■ Ian McGillis is a Montreal writer.

CanWest News Service (Montreal Gazette)



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Canadian artists go for death

R. M. Vaughan

National Post

Saturday, August 23, 2003

FAKING DEATH: CANADIAN ART PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE CANADIAN IMAGINATION

By Penny Cousineau-Levine McGill-Queen's University Press 324 pp., \$49.95



CREDIT: Paul Litherland

Photo from Paul Litherland's *Souvenirs* series (1993) and,...

As an art critic, I am exposed (arguably over-exposed) to an enormous amount of writing about art -- most of it highly jargoned academic snorefests or merely sloppy and unreadable. Sometimes I write such nonsense myself. How refreshing, then, to stumble on Penny Cousineau-Levine's wonderful *Faking Death*, a thorough and entertaining study of that least (or, until I read this book,

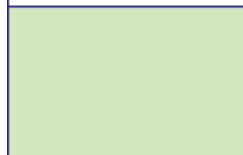


CREDIT: Raymonde April

...from Raymonde April's series *Debout sur le rivage* (1984).



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formerly least) entertaining subject, Canadian high art photography.

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(Book cover of Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination.)

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R.M. Vaughan's second novel, Spells, will be published this fall by ECW Press.

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