

# IAN MCDONALD BOYS AND BOXES

KAMLOOPS ART GALLERY

Catalogue essay for  
contemporary  
photography exhibition  
2007



Frank Craig, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (28) Frank Hyatt, Welder\* (29) Gary Herrington, Tire Repperman\* (30) Gerald Gibbons, Heavy Duty Mechanic (31) Gil Coudu, Heavy Duty Mechanic (32) Gordon Kaj, Electrician\* (33) Harvey Cooper, Automotive Mechanic\* (34) Harvey Jaswal, Welder\* (35) Henry Witting, Machinist (36) JC Racine, Welder\* (37) Jack Rennie, Automotive Mechanic\* (38) Jerome Dobmeier, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (39) Jerrad Rodman, Electrical Apprentice (40) Jerry Adams, Welder (41) Jim Gibbons, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (42) Jim Hippisley, Heavy Duty Mechanic (43) Jim Sabart, Welder\* (44) Jim Shaw, Automotive Mechanic\* (45) John Buck, Automotive Mechanic\* (46) Kaijer Thessen, Machinist (47) Keith Archibald, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (48) Ken Trithart, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (49) Mark Lund, Machinist (50) Mike Niklascher, Machinist (51) Murray Harris, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (52) Neal Rickout, Heavy Duty

Mechanic (53) Pat Lutzmann, Welder\* (54), Paul Degraats, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (55) Ray Zimbenak, Welder\* (56) Rex Rickout, Welder\* (57) Rob Oskovick, Heavy Duty Mechanic (58) Rob Woods, Machinist (59) Ron Cowan, Heavy Duty Mechanic (60) Ron Roberts, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (61) Ray Roberts, Welder\* (62) Rupert Douthwright, Heavy Duty Mechanic (63) Sandy Jaswal, Welder\* (64) Scott Brown, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (65) Stan Johnson, Welder\* (66) Stan Mitchelmann, Welder (67) Ted Barker, Steel Fabricator\* (68) Tom Broadfoot, Welder (69) Tyler Thompson, Heavy Duty Mechanic Apprentice\* (70) Vic Bugles, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (71) Vic Minnabariet, Heavy Duty Mechanic\* (72) Wayne Conn, Welder (73) Ian McDonald, Welder\*

\*Exhibited at the Kamloops Art Gallery  
October 28 to December 31, 2007.

Essay discusses the validity of traditional documentary style photography within a contemporary context. Exhibition is of the welders, electricians & heavy duty mechanics at the one of the largest copper mines in the world, and their tool boxes

# IAN MCDONALD: BOYS AND BOXES

Terryl Atkins

*That the outer man is a picture of the inner, and the face an expression and revelation of the whole character, is a presumption likely enough in itself, and therefore a safe one to go on; borne out as it is by the fact that people are always anxious to see anyone who has made himself famous. . . . Photography . . . offers the most complete satisfaction of our curiosity.<sup>1</sup>*

—Arthur Schopenhauer, 1851

Schopenhauer's sentiment, expressed in the mid-19th century, at the very beginning of photographic practice, characterizes our relationship not only to images of the famous, of course, but to those of any person presented in front of the documenter's eye. The real key to the satisfaction of this kind of curiosity at the beginning of the 21st century is whether the photograph is transparent enough to sustain our interest as a document—a window onto the world of reality as we expect—or whether the style and technical innovation of the photographer impedes our belief. Both the credibility of the documentary photographer's undertaking and the authenticity of the resulting image have come under extreme scrutiny in the past 40 years, partially because of the proliferation of photographic imagery in mass media, along with the advent of the more recent digital (often manipulated) photograph and computer generated imagery, and partially because of the Marxist and Feminist critiques waged in academic circles since the 1960s, a point when photography was taken under the university Fine Arts wing. According to contemporary Dutch art historian, curator and head of exhibitions at the Nederlands fotomuseum in Rotterdam, Frits Gierstberg, "Not only was the alleged objectivity of the photographic image being undermined, but the tradition of documenting itself was attacked, being seen as culturally determined, politically biased and principally serving the Western, colonial, male gaze."<sup>2</sup> Under a barrage of criticism, the documentary style waned in the late 1970s and the 1980s in favour of the consciously constructed and manipulated photograph—a created 'reality' rather than a found one. Surprisingly, though, this very critique led to a comeback of the documentary style by the 1990s, which has held strong ever since. What is the difference after a 15-year lapse and after 40 years of critique? In order to answer that question, we can now turn to the photographs of this exhibition, *Boys and Boxes*, and a brief history of the photographic objectivity the exhibition references.

The strength of photography has always been its veracity, its believability as an authentic record of reality, because it establishes a direct link to the tangible world through the action of reflected light. Photographic theorist Susan Sontag pointed to this strength in the early 1970s, near the beginning of the critique of documentary photography: "A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."<sup>3</sup> Because of this indexical<sup>4</sup> connection, the photograph authenticates the existence of someone or something as much as it visually represents that person or thing. As an objective mechanical device, it does not interpret what it sees but supposedly provides a value-free recording, cheating both time and the fading of memory. This assumption of authenticity and objectivity has made photography the accepted tool for documentation of everything.

The resurgence of documentary-style photography since the 1990s is borne on the back of a conscious and critical questioning of just what a photograph gives us and what it does not. The long-held notion that, somehow, the photograph has an intrinsic core of meaning embedded in the image is no longer a valid belief. The photo presents only the possibility for a meaning that is culturally determined and contextually bound, each new discourse situation generating its own set of messages. Like other art in the postmodern era, the message is not universal but relative to the time and place, and all meaning is contingent upon the ideas and beliefs that the viewer brings to it.<sup>5</sup>

Meaning in photographs is constructed in several ways, as much by the technology of the camera and the intent of the photographer or artist as by the context(s) through which the photograph is taken, presented and received. Theorist John Tagg points out that, at the very beginning of this process,

*[r]eflected light is gathered by a static monocular lens of a particular construction, set at a particular distance from the objects in its field of view. The reflected image of these objects is focused, cropped and distorted by the flat, rectangular plate of the camera which owes its structure not to the model of the eye, but to a particular theoretical conception of the problems of representing space in two dimensions.<sup>6</sup>*

As with the limitations of any technology, the mechanical rules of operation of the camera cannot be circumvented, and they also cannot be ignored as playing a significant role in the transformative molding of lived reality onto a flat rectangular surface.

In terms of photographer's or artist's intention, Ian McDonald consciously emulates one particular tradition of documentary style portraiture, adopting the

stylistic convention of early 20th century German photographer August Sander in how he positions the camera in relation to his subjects. In his series *Boys and Boxes*, McDonald approaches his subjects in what appears to us as an engaged, direct, and matter-of-fact way. In McDonald's series of photographs, the main subject of each picture, a man and his tool box, is centred in the image with just enough space around it to give a slight sense of the environment the man inhabits. His point of view is neither higher nor lower than the gaze of the person we now address in the photograph, which allows us to regard the person as though we were standing face to face. We—the subject of the photograph and the subsequent viewing audience—are on equal ground. Rarely do we realize the degree to which we interpret the characters of the people we look at through our physical point of view, but in documentary photography this point of view is often consciously used to affect the way we perceive the subject. Positioning the camera so that we have to look up at a person can create a hero, while a downward view diminishes the subject's status. The level shot that McDonald uses not only gives equality to the subjects and viewers but also allows the photos to be read more as neutral, objective, and transparent windows onto the world.

When Sander started his project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (People of the 20th Century)<sup>7</sup> during the Weimar period in Germany, he was looking for archetypes that would represent every possible class and vocation. He would centre the people he photographed in their environment in such a way as to emphasize the connection of each to his or her vocation or social position. What results is a fine balance between a conscious self-presentation by the subject, a maintained dignity, a vulnerability to the gaze of the camera, and a strong claim to individuality. Similarly, even though McDonald is not searching for archetypes, he is emphasizing the connection between each individual and the tools of his trade within a rather stark common environment of a large open-pit mine. The photographs give the appearance of a strong relationship between the photographer and the person photographed, a visible ease of response on the subject's part that indicates a silent, mutual, and collaborative agreement. These are the artist's friends and coworkers, some of whom McDonald has known for 20 years or more. One gets the sense, as did Schopenhauer, that what one sees on the outside of the man is an honest reflection of his inner character. To my eye, the one contrasting photograph is the one the artist took of himself: it is indicative of so many self-portraits—there is no feeling of engagement in response to a person who is only imagined.

Unlike many documentary photographers, McDonald did not go in search of his subjects to fulfill a requisite taxonomy, to simply point out the differences and similarities like so many beetles pinned to a board. In terms of all of the questions that could be posed by the act of photographing, such an approach starts

out with much of the answer already given, and it is just a matter of filling in the blanks. McDonald's motivation for this project emerged from his fascination with the ways that he and those around him—the welders, millwrights, mechanics, tire men, electricians, and machinists at a mine—had a very human connection to one of the common objects closest to the individual identity of each: his tool box. His approach to these men is an act of phenomenological questioning without the need or desire to explicate. In a place where almost all objects are manufactured in the tens, hundreds, or thousands, and to rigid specifications, this access to expressions of the humanity of those present—their presence—becomes all the more intriguing because of its necessity.

As with any heavy industry, mining is a man's world. According to *Facts & Figures 2006*, put out by the Mining Association of Canada, of the 21,000 people employed in metal extraction in the Canadian mining industry only 961 were women.<sup>8</sup> By the very title of this exhibition, *Boys and Boxes*, the artist acknowledges that these boxes holding the tools of these men's trade are not only an extension of their culturally developed masculinity, from the first hammer, wrench, and screwdriver of childhood forward, but are also a manifestation of what they think and believe. Many touch or lean on the tool box with familiarity. Some seem all too conscious of the tool box as a sign, exaggerating their 'worker' status by posing in front of the box, 3 lb. sledgehammer and impact wrench in hand, or pointing out its limitations by holding a jazz magazine. We may not know who the people are in the photographs stuck to the lids or doors of the tool boxes, what the little rows of different coloured stickers represent, or what, exactly, the drawings and bits of text mean, but we do understand that, like the countenances of the men, they are meaningful and, however we read their meaning, they reflect back into the expression of the man whose gesture this is, as an extension of his identity.

One aspect that helps us to understand the expressions of humanity involved in these portraits is the extraordinary nature of the men's work environment. The Highland Valley Copper mine, approximately one hour's drive southwest of Kamloops, British Columbia, where these men work, provides a significant contrast to the scale of the lives most of us lead as we routinely drive to our smallish offices in our midsize cars. This open-pit mine is one of the largest in the world and covers a vast tract of land where 34,000 hectares are now actively being mined. From the tower at the top of one of the three pits, the Valley pit, one can see what looks like tiny toy trucks driving along skinny ribbons of road that weave back and forth along the sides of the pit, bringing rock blasted out at floor level up to the crushers. Up close, each of these trucks is formidable in size, carrying two hundred and forty tons of rock in a single load and looking very much like a blocky two-storey house. This, of course, is outranked in size by the shovel used to transfer the rock to the trucks, the two sections of the arm

(boom and sticks) alone weighing over 100 tons. It is a humbling experience to come face-to-face with the magnitude of the machinery of an industry that calculates weight in tons rather than pounds and conducts its business in a rav- enous valley of its own making. It is also ennobling to witness the sheer power of the creations of man in this undertaking. Very much like the Hekatonkheires, the hundred-handed giants of Greek myth, the machines here hammer away with great might at the earth to extract its elemental metals, processing them for our consumption. Also of mythical proportions, this hammering and extraction does not stop; it continues 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Dwarfed by the entire project—the machinery, the spaces, the industry—the people become a virtually invisible element in the workings of the mine.

By his own admission, McDonald does not want to create heroes of his subjects, nor does he want to monumentalize the photographs, either to compensate for the men's invisibility in relation to the technology of the work environment or to create a spectacular art object, the latter being the case with much of con- temporary documentary photography. These are photographs that could conceivably hang in anyone's home. On the other hand, one of the aspects of contemporary documentary photography his work does reflect is an autonomy of the image. According to Gierstberg, many contemporary documentary-style photographs "may well be part of a series, but a compelling narrative cohesion, which is so essential for 'classic' documentary, is absent."<sup>9</sup> In McDonald's work, this absence of a strong narrative cohesion, which so often sums up 'the message' for us, instead allows us to experience the capacity of the photograph to reveal the sensible presence of the world, reflecting the notion that photographs cannot be summed up as an agglomeration of signs to be read. Inasmuch as all art, and all photography, is culturally determined (we do not live or act outside of culture), one's sensibility is probably the most settled of our ideological responses. Re- flecting our more intuitive responses to the world, photography is like poetry. It can only acknowledge the world, not explain it.

## NOTES

1. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 2, ch. 29, sect. 377 (1851). Republished as *Religion*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders, ebooks Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library, <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/religion/chapter4.html> (accessed June 14, 2007).
2. Frits Gierstberg, "From Realism to Reality? Documentary Photography in the Age of 'Post-Media'", in *Documentary Now! Contemporary strategies in photography, film and the visual arts*, Eds. Frits Gierstberg, Martijn Verhoeven, Maartje van den Heuvel, and Hans Scholten, 125 (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006).

3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), 135.
4. The word 'indexical' comes from the field of semiotics, a system of analysis that was first developed as an analytical tool for literary works. It was soon adopted for reading visual imagery as a system of signs, wherein the photograph's physical or causal connection to the world of objects gives it a realism that is not possible, or rarely so, in any other art form, which, no matter how realistic, is always an interpretation by the artist. See: Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991).
5. For example, photographs of unknown dead relatives that may have held loving meaning for someone eventually become handed-down curiosities stripped of all meaningful story. For more critique on this aspect of photographs see: Alan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, Ed. Victor Burgin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982).
6. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3.
7. This is my translation. Often *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* is translated as 'Men of the 20th Century.' Since Sanders' photographs included women and the word 'Menschen' also means people, it makes more sense to translate it as 'people.'
8. Mining Association of Canada, "Facts & Figures 2006," [www.mining.ca/www/media\\_lib/MAC\\_Documents/Publications/English/2006\\_FF\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mining.ca/www/media_lib/MAC_Documents/Publications/English/2006_FF_Eng.pdf), p. 26 (accessed June 25, 2007).
9. Gierstberg, 127.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland.** *Elements of Semiology*. Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang, 1991.
- Chevrier, Jean-François, Johan de Vos and Thomas Weski.** *Click Doubleclick: The Documentary Factor*, Ed. Thomas Weski. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006.
- Gierstberg, Frits.** "From Realism to Reality? Documentary Photography in the Age of 'Post Media'". *Documentary Now! Contemporary strategies in photography, film and the visual art*, Eds. Frits Gierstberg, Martijn Verhoeven, Maartje van den Heuvel, and Hans Scholten, 124-145. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006.
- Mining Association of Canada.** "Facts & Figures 2006," [www.mining.ca/www/media\\_lib/MAC\\_Documents/Publications/English/2006\\_FF\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mining.ca/www/media_lib/MAC_Documents/Publications/English/2006_FF_Eng.pdf)
- Schopenhauer, Arthur.** *Parerga and Paralipomena*, republished as *Religion*, Trans. T. Bailey Saunders. ebooks Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library, <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/religion/chapter4.html>
- Sekula, Alan.** "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Thinking Photography*. Ed. Victor Burgin, 84-109. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1982.
- Sontag, Susan.** *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977.
- Tagg, John.** *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.