

Phil Bergerson

Excerpts from Selected Reviews and Writing

Phil Bergerson's fascination with the ironic detritus of North American culture as revealed in the publicly displayed detail is longstanding. First finding expression in the "Interior Displays" grids of 1979-80, his work as an archaeologist of popular culture has reached a remarkable resolution in his new book, *Shards of America* to be published by the New York Publisher Quantuck Lane Press, in September 2004.

By turns absurd, humourous, painful and poignant, the book is a rich and tumbling index of cultural expression as seen in the architecture, the streets and the signage - commercial, anarchic, eccentric and imploring - of small towns across North America. Its creators include the naive and the sophisticated, and their arena - the facades, display windows, abandoned corners and outskirts of many and varied towns, is the rich multi-layered site of Phil Bergerson's passionate ten year search.

The photographic sequence opens with the tightly framed facade of a small post-war movie theatre's ticket booth, its blue neon *Welcome* sign hovering over veil-like curtains, mysteriously drawn. Above the heavy chrome curve which caps the booth, the word LIFE proclaims itself boldly and incongruously. The facade both conceals and invites our entry into the comic and tragic narrative which lays beyond the veil, and takes us, the audience, into the narrative sequence of the book.

Moving in the aesthetic terrain which drew Walker Evans and later, Lee Friedlander, Bergerson engages our desire for meaning and renders it cogently through his framing of fortuitous juxtaposition seen within the visual complexity of the landscape. In the signs, scrawled messages, notes and manifestos adorning the vernacular architecture of Main Street, he reveals larger and unintended meaning, proffers understanding and acknowledges mystery. Shop vitrines are the site of theatrical tableaux, commercial on occasion, but more often than not the staging grounds for a variety of urgent personal or community campaigns. With their curious props, recycled mannequins and hand written announcements, they demand agreement, invite membership, celebrate reunion, ask angrily and anxiously for release from abuse, or are simply incomprehensible. The passage of time is poignantly invoked by these mute, fading and collapsing performances, and, as a hedge against final despair, the benign, transcendent face of Jesus appears insistently, placed hopefully and ubiquitously throughout.

The narrative pulls the viewer through a real-world carnival ride of ambiguity and contradiction. We witness plaster Corinthian columns against cinderblock walls, a crucified tree, and dance step diagrams which force collision with a magazine rack. The book's sequence is a seamless ribbon of affecting visual telling, a series of strongly paired and well paced photographs which expand and support the project's central metaphor of cultural archaeology with startling variety.

In the remarkable distillation of purpose and exploration which *Shards of America* represents, Phil Bergerson has brought an important new work to the arena of contemporary photography. He has done so in a spirit of clear-eyed and compassionate engagement, and we are richer for it.

Peter Higdon

The show is called *Emblems and Remnants of an American Dream*, extending Bergerson's near 20-year project of road-tripping across the United States in an attempt, in his words, to document the "social landscape" of a nation in the midst of an upheaval[...]

[...]Bergerson has gone repeatedly in search of an unvarnished America, far from the bright lights, and some of the images in their predictable delivery of rote content, are trying: religious paraphernalia, roadside signage admonishing sin and demanding repentance, weirdly overstated patriotism.

But Bergerson has so much more to offer. There are gorgeous, formal pictures — flesh-toned chairs baking in the sun in front of a brick wall, or a dumpster splayed open against a rough concrete barrier, a sliver of blue sky and cloud visible above — and images so rigorously composed that they carry rote content to be seen anew. One picture, of a pair of late-'60s Oldsmobiles improbably perched on shipping containers is equal parts post-industrial decay and utterly, delightfully absurd.

Bergerson has a notable focus on storefronts long since abandoned by the shops that once occupied them. Once displaying wares, they now appear almost as inside-out storage facilities, innards on full view. Stripped of their intended function, they become odd, small-scale monuments to an economy in turmoil. They are downtrodden, inactive, mysterious and strangely funny. In one, a creepy pair of child-sized mannequins pose stiffly in a pale green vitrine, sporting cheap-looking clothing; in another, an amateur painting of a reclining nude is propped against a bamboo chair. Still another shows an array of taxidermied deer heads, bunched uncomfortably together.

This isn't nostalgia. This is mystery and it does what any good documentary picture should: captures a moment, while wondering aloud what could possibly come next.

Murray White, *The Toronto Star*

RIC'S Winter/Spring Exhibition The Ryerson Image Centre has been open for less than 16 months but has become one of the key, even essential public cultural institutions in Toronto — heck, the country. What's not to like? You have a fine building outside and in, exhibitions that have offered plenty for eye, mind and mind's eye, and free admission. Four new presentations opened this week, including two superb separate-but-related showcases of "photography as archeology" by master documentarians Robert Burley and Phil Bergerson. Burley's *The Disappearance of Darkness* chronicles the abrupt demise of the analog photography industry,

Bergerson's quasi travelogue is called *Emblem and Remnants of the American Dream*.

James Adams, *Globe and Mail*

Excerpts from selected REVIEWS pre-2014

"Some photographers come freighted-simultaneously blessed and cursed – with a tireless, omnivorous eye. Lee Friedlander is such a photographer. So were Henri Cartier-Bresson and Andre Kertesz. Toronto photographer Phil Bergerson has an eye like theirs.

Like them, Bergerson's eye is quick, endlessly engaged and, in a sense, lidless – condemned to an ongoing bedazzlement in the face of the small ironic moments that bestow a sort of indexical meaning on a world that usually comes on, for most of us, as jumbled and chaotic.

...Bergerson zeroes in on the ideological contradictions and idealistic failures everywhere inherent in the small towns of North America. Moments most of us might miss seem to spring out at the photographer and take over."

Gary Michael Dault, *The Globe and Mail*

"Bergerson's findings, as a recorder, a commentator and an archaeologist, are now compiled in a thoughtful, poetic book, *Shards of America*.

We see in *Shards* how Americans express their morals and beliefs and their bighearted affection. Sentimentality often crisscrosses both these tendencies, as do our lusts, our passions and the defiance that fired the American Revolution and our post 9/11 one-against-the-world stance.

The images do all the talking, there are no captions. We must decipher what part of the message is intended, which is accidental. A Missouri store window for example, bears the notice: "We Buy Men / Used ? 29 and Up" In Denver, large red letters painted on dark glass say something about kittens, while small bright letters below say this: "You suck all the fun out of watching you suffer by complaining too much." It's season's worth of *Seinfeld* rolled up in a tight knot of intellect and snark.... Opposites and irony are often yoked together...

None of the photos stand alone in the book's [*Shards of America*] most ambitious tack. Bergerson matched each with another, on facing pages. In seeming after –and-before shots...

Shards involved a shift from constructing meaning to discovering it."

Christopher D. Ringwald, *Photo District News (PDN)*

[Bergerson's] chosen points of reference are shop window displays and all manner of urban signage, from high-polish to homespun—the ubiquitous visual noise of our everyday, late-capitalist lives. There is gentle satire in the oddball tableaux Bergerson...selects, but the images'

excesses, the signs' wild swings between declaration and plea and the glaring juxtapositions of sacred and profane symbols feel very contemporary and true.

Canadian Art Magazine

"The photographs are wonderful, fresh and strong, a proof that the outsider's eye sees more than the long-time habitant. If I were teaching short story writing, the only textbook I would assign would be your collection of photographs. Well done Mr. Bergerson."

Annie Proulx

Shards of America is much like poetry,. You have to work to find the meaning. Each image is gripping on its own, but Bergerson also spent months agonizing over the sequence in which they would appear, and which photographs would be placed on facing pages. The photographs are carefully organized into pairs; together, they create new layers of meaning.

The longer one spends looking at the images and the way they interact with each other, the more meaning one sees.

Mary Vallis, National Post

[Bergerson's photographs] are wry, sweetly ironic perceptions of our national identity, taken with the keen eye and loving detachment of someone who is not a citizen. they're also lush, exquisite color prints; he brings a painter's sensibility to manipulating color during the printing process to achieve just the right mix of tones.

...the America that Bergerson so cannily portrays: patriotic, capitalistic, split down the middle with polarities of religion, sex, freedom of expression, and family values.

...he stirs up sensations of pride, dismay, and, ultimately, affection. It may be a terribly mixed-up place, but it's ours.

Cate McQuaid, Boston Globe

"[Bergerson] excavates the psyche of North American popular culture. Found irony and Bergerson's self-deprecating humour are brilliantly combined..."

Martha Langford, The Power of Reflection

"The artist strives to understand the way in which individuals either represent themselves, or speak through signs in order to communicate to one another. Often, as illustrated by Bergerson, "the display-maker, sign-maker or object-maker produces his presentations without knowing the ironic or ambiguous nature of what he presents." [Bergerson's] attempts to make

sense of these “mixed messages” by piecing together the shards of information he has accumulated throughout his search, first within the structure of a single image, then within the entire sequence of images. The result has produced pictures full of “metaphorical possibilities,” pictures that reflect both Bergerson’s “wonder and enthusiasm for exploration and discovery.”

Karen Kasner, Gallery Magazine

“Like stills from a road movie, Phil Bergerson’s photos construct a visual grammar that is antighamorous. They capture the most quirky emblems of the monumental American vernacular. Decaying icons, grievous anxieties, meditations on inevitability of chaos, these parched, pale and bleeding colour images are humorous, poignant, and celebratory all at once. The subject lies within the frames of the ghosts of the by-ways and the eccentricities of modern America’s lumpen-Quixotic heartland and imperial bravado set against red clay earth and sadness, silent towns in the throes of de-industrialization, dripping with emptiness and disenfranchisement.

Robert Kenter, Lola Magazine