

DONIGAN

DIVERTING THE IMAGE | DÉTOURNEMENTS DE L'IMAGE

CUMMING



A DESCENT INTO THE HELL OF DONIGAN CUMMING

From his first work, the rigorously presented *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1982-86), Donigan Cumming demonstrated an uncompromising refusal to waste time with seduction. Needing to pursue the truth and strike down appearances, to unveil what is supposed to be left unseen, he recognized neither propriety nor pity and, proceeding by a series of raids, crossed with penetrating lucidity the boundaries that separate good taste from offensiveness, the pure from the impure, and the norm from abnormality. Voyage to the gates of life, dive into the other side of civilization, the project, constructed as an organized demolition, vehemently expressed his rejection of convention with a savage and sincere vision of humanity seized on a level of appearance shared with Bosch and Goya.

From quasi marginalized proletarians, to lost members of the middle class, to Elvis Presley fans who believe that their idol is still alive, madness and the excess of reality that makes what is natural or true seem unreal, characterized these unknown heroes, these self-executioners or victims of torture who act out before the lens enigmatic and vital scenes to which they alone possess the key. As actors portraying their own lives in grotesque or pitiful situations, they are graced with undeniable presence. They make up a vast den of thieves who, by exhibiting stumps and scars, present the remarkable strangeness of the never seen.

Like Bacon who deliberately used oversized brushes to paint the face and for whom the essence of the pictorial project was the hope of one day making "the best painting of the human cry", Cumming probes that which simultaneously attracts and repulses. Wanting to uncover the most secret aspects of the human being, he seeks to bring out, rather than to describe, anonymous characters who are united in physiognomic excess, reminiscent of the hysterical figures that were studied in the late nineteenth century by Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris.

Distress, despair and loneliness inspire the moving ritual of these portraits. They are a sort of exorcism without illusion, a therapy session, an instant psychoanalysis or an exhausting psychodrama with the sole purpose of drawing out the self. "The self, the terrible and constant self" is what is really at stake in these improvised happenings, these *tableaux vivants*, these voluntary crucifixions, that shriek with violent distancing the failure of an entire life. Despite the impact of these images, one cannot forget that this intensified representation of reality is based on the use of a dramatic device which permits the operator to control almost everything. Between artifice and truth, Cumming chooses his decor — a living environment or a stage set — engaging with his models, who often are paid, in a powerful and extraordinary complicity. Able to see themselves as Others, extracted from their humdrum agonies, from the monstrous day-to-day, the subjects, often raised up on pedestals (a bed, a bureau or a chair) are pure living presences.

Each tragedy is different, unique and incomparable, as shown by the giant mural fresco, mosaic or tapestry, produced between 1987 and 1990, and aptly called *The Stage*. Multiple version of the decisive moment, this detailed composition of 250 photographs, oscillating between the general and the particular, forms a vast assemblage which the author carves up and fits together, switching around or inverting, piece by piece, the distinct parts. Truly a social entity, this sequence of countless fragments, reassembling the compartmentalized lives of unclassifiable individuals, includes some of the protagonists from Cumming's theatre: Beverley, the pregnant woman; Bruce, the amputee with the articulated arm; Louis, the homosexual, the plastic surgeon; Bernard, the old man wearing the mink coat and suffering from a hernia, who, with Andre, the paralytic in a wheelchair, makes an astounding couple, literally Beckettian.

Members of a living pathological museum, these exiles or exclusions from the social fabric pose on the sets of their material existence. Protective enactment against death and the obsessive fear of nothingness, the extensive disorder of their environment exhibits the worrisome cosiness of recluses who compensate for their ostracization by accumulation. They are like people who take in any trash they can find and are threatened by its proliferation which symbolizes a part of themselves that they neither recognize nor understand.

"If it's not chaotic enough, I'm not interested," says Cumming who functions on-the-spot in their lairs (bedroom, living room, kitchen) and catalogues like an ethnologist the bizarre contents of their private hells. Made up of scattered objects and debris, the decor itself serves as a metaphor for disorder and decay. In this sense, the fridge is the mythological object *par excellence* for Cumming, just as dentists' chairs, sinks and toilets are for Bacon.

Mass-produced, neutral, surgically white, the innately functional refrigerator is subjugated to its

domestic use. As the repository for various substances (beer, provisions, medicine), the fridge is the symbolic centrepiece of the nesting ritual, obedient to the absurd need to accumulate, amass and stock up. The fixation with 'nesting' (an animal synonym for accumulation) marries the house to the shelter (grotto, refuge, burrow) where the occupant, like a squirrel, hides and cocoons his provisions. Betraying the personality of its owner, the refrigerator puts on the face of violated intimacy once it unveils the mysteries of its contents. Usually charged with guarding without revealing, the fridge that defends the product from contagion becomes obscene when open. It spills out its contents like human organs. Natural substitute for the stomach that it nourishes, the fridge figures in Cumming as an original field of operation like signs were for Walker Evans and the juke-box was for Robert Frank.

"The solid outline of the human body is horrible," said Kafka. Viewed in their disgrace, unconcerned with their appearance, showing off their whims, defects and mutilations, the characters of Donigan Cumming are as alone and unarmed as they are naked. As excruciating evidence of an ethical sensibility for human misery, most of them display deep internal injuries to their identities.

Across the anatomical image of the body, Cumming points out the corporal monstrosity of normal people. A strange body is a strange thing. Undressed, man finds himself in a despoiled state analogous to that of a primitive man, but Donigan Cumming offers no rehabilitation of the flesh. Symptom of social decay and of the decadence of civilization, the bruised, scarred, worn-out body marks the decline of the excluded. From this perspective, even the photographic act is experienced by them as a mutilating operation. Concerned with showing the unshowable, the author bluntly details the progress of decrepitude, the degeneration that hastens the inescapable reversion to scrap.

Echoing Jankelevitch who compares aging to an increasingly threadbare suit of clothes, Cumming understands that old age is the sickness of temporality. His pitiless report is brought to a fever pitch in *Pretty Ribbons*, produced with Nettie Harris who first appeared in 1982, dressed in a wrapper, standing beside her open fridge.

Like Thomas Bernhard, Beckett or Bacon, Donigan Cumming functions as a biographer in this recent work which he began in 1988. No longer dealing with the relationships of people, he has begun a devastating encounter with this widow, mother of three children, who becomes his actress fetish, endlessly examining her own life. Each image, as a reflection of precise mental states, is a raw fact, but also the synopsis of a fiction, the representation of a staged moment in which Nettie Harris faces her confinement and puts to work what Cumming has called "the repertoire of her experience, real and imagined."

With feet atrophied like the bound feet of Chinese women, naked or adorned with jewels, bathing or miming eternal rest, Nettie Harris, offering and consenting, acts as though the operator were not there. Simulating the most ordinary and intimate attitudes, she is nevertheless always conscious of his presence and poses only for him. "He is my director. I work with him," she says, recalling that this account of the passions, born of a mutual fascination, is first of all a business, a relationship of account, a clear professional understanding.

With disconcerting freshness and absolute availability, Nettie plays out her decomposition and immeasurable decline. Increasingly emaciated, her skeleton now protrudes through her skin. As La Rochefoucauld said, "Old age is women's hell." Without trying to escape the image of her own physical collapse, Nettie Harris exhibits her body without shame, as it is. The relentless accentuation of her withering flesh obscures the fact that these terrifying moments are first of all freely accepted walk-ons, the cruelty of a report adapted to fiction. All is reinvented, nothing is really natural in these plots in which Cumming adopts the viewpoint of an imaginary witness. Nettie Harris is a magnificent character who serves as her own model: it's the staging of her real life that she recounts. Truth lies in openness and Cumming is not pretending when he shows Nettie taking out her dentures (an internal prosthesis like an IUD). The final view of a disintegrating figure, in the fetal position of suffering and sacrifice, evokes the nightmare of remembering, the obligation to memory that her Jewish identity brings closer — unbearable visions of death camps, the Holocaust, the crematoria and the gas chambers — endowing this seemingly private epic with undeniable historical dimension.

Drawing on a dead friend's diary, to which the writer, Harry, had confided the difficulties of his relationships, Cumming was inspired to pair Nettie with male partners. Vacating the domestic setting, all attention is directed to the relationship of the couple, to the comedy of impossible love, to sexuality as a dream. But this desperate attempt at seduction, a sort of sentimental release, ends in free fall back into a new hell, blessed by the devil who celebrates (by damning) the union of two unhappy beings fleeing from themselves and braving the solitude they share.

As cruel and shocking as it is, to the point of using colour "to soften and make it more natural," the

extraordinary, quasi Oedipal relationship that Cumming maintains with his model (a primitive, fascinating and repulsive primeval mother — now almost blind), a relationship that he expects to perpetuate even beyond death — that relationship is clearly summarized by one image, by the text inserted in a frame and deposited at her feet: "A FRIEND IS ONE who knows the Best and the worst of us and Loves us just the same."

Driven by disobedience, built on a radical challenge to the truthfulness of documentary reporting, the strong and disturbing work of Donigan Cumming is intrinsically realist. Haunted by the pointed description of the vulnerability of the human body and by the destructive forces of time, this plunge into the heart of familiar abnormality takes on metaphysical and anthropological dimensions that say a great deal about the state of society. Adopting the experience of his models — their joys, their suffering — and in the case of Nettie Harris, living her life, Donigan Cumming shows the tragic agitation of a world reduced to a state of chaos. A sharing of unhappiness, weakness and solitude, a struggle against the annihilation of memory and individuals' stories, this implacable study of the human condition follows in the footsteps of Diane Arbus along the borders of the imaginable, to forge a link between the social document as defined in the sixties and its critique in the eighties by artists for whom documentary had become fiction. Aware that the notion of obscenity is a last bastion of morality, Donigan Cumming exceeds the limits of what appears horrifying. The dread aroused by the extravagant normality of the terrible is nothing compared to the horrors played out daily in the world. Mirroring society with staggering theatricality, reflecting the repugnance and abjection that society rejects, the admirable and raw images of Donigan Cumming remind us quite simply that pain is a means of communication, just like human warmth, indifference, hate or love.

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[original in French]

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