

ISSUE NO. 94 \$9.95

BORDERCROSSINGS

A MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS

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Donigan Cumming



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PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO



Endgames: Donigan Cumming's Subverted Narratives, Interview by Robert Enright
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In *A Prayer for Nettie*, Joyce Donnison is delivering one of the many eulogies and appreciations that comprise a good portion of the videos content. With just the right amount of solemnity she says, "Let's pray that Nettie has found her place in peace and hostility." Her unintended malapropism is a perfect description of the range of Donigan Cumming's astonishing videos —they move seamlessly from episodes of calm to those of hostility.

While these shifts are occasionally serendipitous, more often than not they are the result of Cumming's direct interventions in the shape and direction of the videos as they are being shot. His presence guarantees that the story he is telling will get dismantled and interrupted, and that our tendency to draw conclusions will be frustrated, time and time again, by what we're seeing and listening to. Cumming is a saboteur inside his own world: the only reliable thing about his narratives is that they are unreliable.

On the surface, *A Prayer for Nettie*, which was the first video Cumming made in 1995 after a successful career as a photographer, is a tribute film to Nettie Harris, an elderly Montreal actress and journalist who was one of the main figures in a community of dispossessed characters with which Cumming has been working for the last 20 years. He began photographing her in 1982 and their collaboration culminated in an exhibition and book called *Pretty Ribbons*. The video followed after her death in 1993, and it is both more and less than it seems. The first testimonial from Raymond Beaudoin sets the subversive tone for what follows; his responses to the circumstances of her death are distracted and desultory. He pays more attention to lighting a cigarette than to her passing, until finally he says to Cumming, who has been feeding him off-camera information from the beginning, "But I didn't know her very well, did I?" It's the most honest and engaged thing he has said in the entire interview. Then the video cuts to a naked man, speaking into a microphone and taking instructions from Cumming. "There's something you gotta know, Nettie," Albert Ross Smith says. "God is re-moulding you. He's making you a good-looking creature up there. You're going to be a good-looking angel." Throughout the video it's difficult to get your emotional bearings because you can't be sure if the situation you're watching is authentic or performed.

But even within a world of relational uncertainties, the sequence that comes next is utterly startling. The frame is filled by a wrinkled stomach, and the camera begins a slow move down the body, revealing first the pudenda and then the stick-thin thighs of an old woman. Nettie, the still terrestrial angel-in-waiting. As the shot widens, you see a pair of sandalled feet on either side of her age-wracked body, and you realize they belong to the cameraman, who is standing above her in a disconcerting parody of *Blow-Up*, where David Hemmings and Veruschka play out the erotic dance of model and photographer that has become a staple of fashion and advertising fantasies.

When you finally understand what you've seen, you are stunned. I can't explain why this situation seems so transgressive. It is only a single moment in a single video (and there are many more, in many more of his videos) that forces us to see something we're not used to seeing, or that we've never seen before. It is hard to decide whether this is a liberation or a sentence.

There is nothing clandestine or coy about Donigan Cumming's ways of seeing. As he says, "my photographs stare," a characteristic shared equally by his still and video images. Cumming himself is in on the visual take. In his overlapping role as director, scriptwriter, cameraman, performer and editor, he is thoroughly implicated in all aspects of the videos production. When he says he works alone, he is describing both a methodology and an aesthetic uniqueness: Cumming's work is unprecedented in contemporary art. There are times when it is almost unwatchably abject. What retrieves it (and offers us as viewers a reprieve) is its humour, as dark as it is. He calls it his "affection for absurd comedy."

Cumming's most recent project has resulted in a pair of mural-sized, encaustic collages (they are 2.5 by 4.5 metres) comprised of thousands of black and white and colour photographic elements taken from his own substantial archive. These collages are like coral islands in the sea of his accomplishment: accretions of images, layered and arranged in compositions of bewildering density He has taken as his point of departure two European masterpieces, Breughel's *The Suicide of Saul* and James Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, and then incorporated his own imagery into their borrowed forms. Called *Prologue* and *Epilogue*, these dense collages are "a collective portrait of the community that I have been working with for 20 years." They are tributes, then, to the men and women who have been his collaborators, to the work he has made with them, and to art making itself.

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Donigan Cumming was interviewed by phone from Montreal on April 2, 2005. "Moving Pictures," his exhibition of videos and encaustic murals, was curated by Peggy Gale and is on exhibition at MOCCA (the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art) from April 9 to May 22, 2005.

BORDER CROSSINGS: Was your intention in making the encaustic works to have them function as backdrops for your videos?

DONIGAN CUMMING: Yes. It was a very simple idea, which is where so many things start for me. When I began working on these backdrops, I was having some problems with glue. I knew I wanted to make a collage out of things that had accumulated in my studio over the years, and I wanted to glue it to two of the walls in my studio. I realized it was going to take a long time and that it was foolish to make something that was going to be on the wall of my studio forever and that I couldn't take down and couldn't use anywhere else. This simple idea got complicated quite quickly, so I was faced with changing how I wanted to put it down. Also, I didn't quite know how I would make these images stick together. I wanted it to be big.

BC: The pieces are 8 feet high and 30 feet wide. Was that scale initially determined by the space you had available in your studio?

DC: Yes. I made it as big as I could without knocking a wall down and renting a crane. I would have made it even bigger. But the glue led me to wax and that was my introduction to encaustic. I had some colleagues who work with this medium and they helped me learn about it and get used to it. I didn't know what to do for a long time because if you keep the heat on, it turns into a green sludge. Eventually, I figured it all out. Beeswax is very exciting stuff and it opens up all kinds of other directions. The first one that I stumbled into was topography. I found I could build up the figures that I put down, build up their faces, their mouths, their eyes. I could also cut down into the wax and bring it up over the figure in an explosive way.

BC: Encaustic also gives you an astonishing layering.

DC: That's right. It was very exciting. So it's not a totally flat work; it has hills, fields and valleys and an intense texture that you couldn't get with anything other than wax.

BC: When did the paintings by Breughel and Ensor come into the mix? At what point did you realize that another kind of layering could be art historical?

DC: Right from the beginning. I needed something to pin my simple idea to. I realized I was taking on something big and I needed guides. I'd always liked these two paintings. At one point I toyed with the Picasso, which was an obvious choice, but *Guernica* didn't fit my images. The Ensor and the Breughel were perfect; they fitted my sensibility and they also fitted the kind of pictures I'd been taking for the last 20 years. I broke loose from the source paintings quite quickly, but I've approached this like a nine-year-old child with no training in perspective or anything else. I would get confused—trapped, is more like it—and I found that I could shift from one to the other, and I also found that I could refer back to these two paintings and that they could help me, they could give me advice.

BC: You put gold-leaf halos around the heads of some of the portraits in these pieces.

DC: On one level I think of all people I work with as national treasures. So why not deify them? That was a simple transition for me.

BC: Have you come to love this motley crew of individuals who have become the substance of your work?

DC: Love is polyphonic. You could say in a simple way if you weren't trying to look at two dozen different kinds of snow.

BC: In one section of the composition, you'd place a cluster of heads and then, in another, the encaustic takes on a topographical aspect. How were you making those kinds of compositional and textural decisions?

DC: Intuitively based on my reaction to the two underlying works. It's just a manner of working: you pick it up; you approach the surface; you put it down; then you step back and think about it. I started with Saul's suicide on the left-hand side of the Breughel. Saul is about to commit suicide in Breughel's small painting—I think it's

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12 by 18 inches. His valet is beside him, looking hysterical because next he has to fall on his sword. He's not very pleased with the turn of events. It just seemed appropriate to start with this figure. I put it down and then I thought of the dog, who is cut out entirely from another image. He's a dog doing a trick on a tabletop in a whole other environment. I liked the energy between the two figures; one of them still alive and the other apparently dead. I also liked the tension between a biped and a quadruped. They just seemed to knit together and I felt it was an energetic place to begin trying to deal with the map of the rest of this area. It was. I began to work on the army of heads, legs and body parts on the right-hand side that flows into the centre, and I put in one other image at the top right-hand corner—the underwear and the medal—which were related in my mind with the figure who was playing Saul. Those are the same medals that are on the suit and they're from another photograph I took years ago in his bathroom. I put in the underwear, the medals and a few toiletries, and then began to make this flowing curve of body parts and heads. Then I put in the feet. I wanted God in there and I figured the feet were a good stand-in.

BC: No fingers touching in your version of the Sistine Chapel. You wanted something more pedestrian than that?

DC: Very pedestrian. Then I got stuck and went over and began work on the Ensor. The first figure I put in was the man in the upper right-hand corner with his fist below his chin. I spent some time up there with the man and the microphone turned upside-down.

BC: So, in a composition of that scale, you felt you couldn't just piecemeal it together, you had to create a sense of rhythm?

DC: I did and that's why I'd get stuck sometimes. I had a scale model of all the pieces so that I could shuffle things around and then I would stick stuff up temporarily to see how it felt and then put it all down. For a long time, I didn't even think I would use colour, I thought I'd stick to black and white. The material I had available to me was in black and white mostly. You see, I was working on a book of video grabs at the same time and that's when I began to think of a field of colour heads taken from those grabs.

BC: Did you go back into your video and look at it all again as a way of choosing the images for Lying Quiet?

DC: I concocted a very simple strategy—a strict rule, actually—that I began to break almost immediately. I needed 500 images to make this book and I knew that I'd have to edit it down to 200 images. I thought 500 would give me enough elasticity. Then I added up how many hours of video I'd shot—there was somewhere around 150 hours of tape—and I divided 500 into that figure and came up with 17 minutes and 7 seconds. So I began to go through the tapes and after 17 minutes and 7 seconds I would stop. There are 30 frames a second and I gave myself 30 frames on either side of the stop point to choose an image.

BC: One of the obvious things about your video work is the way you intervene. Why have you chosen to make yourself so thoroughly apart of what you're doing?

DC: That's a good question and I almost feel unable to answer it. I think that in the beginning—the late 70s and early '80s—the critical thinking I got involved with wasn't really directed at documentary photography and filmmaking per se, but more at the way it was used to perpetuate myths of propaganda and sentimentality. All these things bugged me. I thought my intervention was a good way to remain properly engaged with the traditions that I had things to say about. It seemed one of the most obvious ways to undermine these traditions because they quickly take on a kind of expert status, as if they're purveyors of some sort of absolute truth. I thought the most direct way of dealing with that problem was to implicate myself and I found video very useful in that regard. I could put myself into it in a way that I couldn't with photography, which is stuck in a profound way in its two-dimensionality. It's implacable—mute, I would say—more often than I'd like it to be. For that reason, I really liked the energy of video.

BC: In A Prayer for Nettie there's a move going from Colin, who says, "Nettie's gotta be a good-looking angel now," to a close-up shot of her naked body, and as the camera pulls back the viewer sees what have to be your sandalled feet standing above her. I'm not sure why it's such a shocking moment, but it most assuredly is. I suppose it has to do with the sudden and profound recognition of your implication in the video. Were you aware in editing how powerful a moment that was in the ongoing dialogue between your subjective involvement in the videos and your sense of distance from them?

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DC: Yes, I was. That has happened to me several times across the field of these videos but that was the first time. It occurred in *My Dinner with Weegee* too, when Marty's trying to pick up the beer bottle and I'm teasing him. I could be doing a lot of things to this alcoholic. Getting back to Nettie: it was audacious, it's radical and it doesn't fit in any simple category. But that's the kind of thing I like to do. I think it's necessary in art.

BC: *And you're prepared to push things in that direction. In My Dinner with Weegee, there's a moment where you keep delaying getting him beer that he so desperately wants. It seems almost cruel.*

DC: Yes, it does, and it's amplified by the violence of the movement of the small cam as it flicks back and forth over the two of us. I wanted to drive it home. It's a complicated piece of chemistry dealing with an addict, no matter what they're addicted to.

BC: *But the story you're telling him at that point, that he's doing so well because he's only drinking three or four bottles a day, is belied by the fact that he's in such terrible shape. You can't really believe what you're telling him. It's clear that he's dying.*

DC: Yes, it is clear. And he was lying to me, of course, the way people do in those circumstances. You have to decide whether you're going to believe him or not. He's very sympathetic as a character and you want to give him what he wants. Those kind of situations are especially intriguing, they're complex, they're thick. And that kind of interrogation is wonderful. I do it all the time.

BC: *It is an interrogation. In Erratic Angel, when you ask Colin whether his parents still care for him, it really pisses him off, and suddenly the tone of the banter between you shifts quite drastically.*

DC: He takes control of the video for a moment and I like it when that happens. It occurs at the end of *A Prayer for Nettie* when Albert and I do our little play. The subtext is that he begins to interrogate me. He's irritated because he's never seen a damn thing we've photographed in all the years we've worked together, and at the same time we're caught up in this delightfully foolish drama. We loved playing with each other like that. And Colin and I liked playing with each other too, but it's a different field. I give Colin a lot to complain about and it focussed his intelligence to hang around someone as vacant as I am on occasion, at least in his opinion. With the people that I have really great relationships with in video, we get very used to one another. Colin, Albert, Colleen and Marty bring a sense of theatre to our everyday exchanges, which all of us have all the time anyway. There's an intense awareness of what the other person might do under a certain set of circumstances. There are a lot of balls in the air. I don't say that lightly: you have to think of a whole multitude of things, you have to control your equipment and you have to keep control of the situation. Sometimes I can't believe I got through it. In retrospect, I feel it's been luck or grace—call it what you like. At the same time, I'm aware that you can increase the odds of this kind of thing happening. First of all, you have to train yourself like an athlete. You have to learn how to do things, you have to learn how to flow with the situation, how to catch its rhythm and not let go. That's very intuitive.

BC: *Obviously the technology has helped you. A camera that you can place in the palm of your hand is considerably easier to use than an old camcorder.*

DC: This stuff was made for me. But I started with equipment that was quite large compared to what I use now. In 1993, when I began shooting with Nettie, I was using high 8. This was just before she died. We liked working together and it gave her so much pleasure. She was in a home for the elderly at that time and everybody else was comatose in front of the television set and Nettie was still very much alive. She wanted to work.

BC: *It occurs to me that there are many Donigan Cummings in the videos. Your most prominent persona is this impatient character whose sincerity you're inclined to question on occasion. There seems to be a series of variations on that character. Do you go into specific videos with a sense that a particular Donigan will be involved with, say, Albert and a different one with Colleen, and so on?*

DC: It's much more organic than that. Your observation is right but I don't give it a lot of thought.

BC: *But the Jameson segment in A Prayer for Nettie must have been rehearsed?*

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DC: Yes, but that was our first take. With Albert, it was always the first take. It was a riot.

BC: *Do you think of the videos as humorous? In Erratic Angel, these three guys are having a conversation in bed, fully clothed, and then you cut to the same guys smoking and coughing to the point where you think they're going to die. I find it a very funny scene. Is it meant to be?*

DC: I'm glad you find it funny. I think it's hysterical, but it's absurd comedy. It's Ionesco in *The Bald Soprano* and that is a great tradition.

BC: *There's something very dear about Susan's flirtation with you in Cut the Parrot. She keeps asking about your woman and whether the two of you are really married. Was all that improvised so that what we're seeing is happening in the moment?*

DC: Yes. I just kept shooting. We all shift between ways of being all the time. It seems to me that it's a fact of exchange between human beings and we're always adopting stances that can be opposed to one another and that can be quite confusing if you try to look at them together. I want that insight raised in the videos. Our characters are indeterminate, there's nothing solid, we're this way one day and that way another. It's only a conceit that we have this narrative line running through the stories of our lives. You see, I'm not a narrative person; I'm an episodic and that's quite different.

BC: *The story of your brother seems to have been an informing one in your life. It is both a real story and then one you can extrapolate into the lives of some of the characters you've also encountered.*

DC: My brother has informed all of my life and continues to. He's one of the big ones. His story has influenced the kind of people I'm attached to and want to work with.

BC: *So is there a strong autobiographical trace in much of what you do?*

DC: In a certain sense. It's a trigger in lots of things I do. I think in works like *Voice: off* and *Locke's Way*, I'm engaging in a way that is more autobiographical than it would be in other things. I'm trying to differentiate between being a trigger and being autobiographical.

BC: *So when references to the Civil War come up—since you're a boy from Virginia—in at least two of the videos, do we understand it as trigger or autobiography?*

DC: I would say it is trigger, although I was brought up in that culture by a dedicated pair of Southerners and I haven't gotten over it. Certainly, many of my relatives resent the fall of the South. There is lamentation from time to time. There certainly is a great deal of mythologizing that goes on about the lost cause and General Lee is a sort of Confederate Santa Claus. As a child, the Civil War was my first exposure to history. The books I was given to read were frequently about that war, storybooks about little drummer boys and the Underground Railroad and all these great battles. They would invariably start with a killed and wounded count in italics at the top. But these weren't anti-war books; these things were a point of pride. They were like *The Red Badge of Courage* where people discovered their inner selves, where they positioned themselves as people with character. For some reason, even though I wasn't very sophisticated, I thought this was all wrong when I was young. Maybe I've always been nine years old.

BC: *And aware that you were being duped?*

DC: Yes, and you don't know quite what to do about it. You haven't been crushed by the hormonal package just waiting up around the bend, which is going to confuse you utterly and eventually turn you into a hypocritical, myth-making adult living your life story. But I think there's a certain clear point when you're young, when you see yourself and the adults ahead of you and you see the hypocrisy for the first time. In a funny way, you're quite neutral; you're open to it, you haven't become critical exactly, but you realize they're not telling you the truth. Then later you get mad. I think of it now as disgusting and bloody and unnecessary.

BC: *And the "wreck of culture," as you describe the South, would predispose you to have considerable sympathy for the wrecked of culture, like the people you've encountered over the last 20 years.*

DC: Absolutely.

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BC: Do people approach your work and its motivation with a degree of antagonism? Do they see what you do as exploitative and cruel?

DC: Or they view it with incomprehension. This doesn't happen as much as it used to. I think that the photographs I took in the '80s and '90s upset people in a much simpler way. The videos are more complicated. My position as a possible voyeur and as a consumer of these kinds of situations certainly comes up, but you can't get away with that accusation as easily with the video. They undermine that position and that's why I think they're more effective than the photographs.

BC: Is there anything you won't photograph or videotape? There seems to be very little that you won't turn your involved gaze upon.

DC: No, I tape everything I expose myself to. Things are so difficult and violent out there that I can't touch that level of violence. I seem to have a willing connection to the abattoir that lots of artists wouldn't want to have and that most people don't even want to think about. But what's out there is so much worse than that.

BC: You don't leave any possible area of inquiry unconsidered. In Voice: off you quote a scene in what sounds like a film where a woman asks a man, "Don't you have any feelings?" and the man's response is, "I don't let my feelings get the better of my good judgement." I'm sure that viewers looking at your work would direct the woman's question to you, and its appearance in your video seems pre-emptive, a way of voicing critical objections before anyone else can raise them.

DC: That's a fair comment. But very few people notice that pair of lines. They're from a soap opera that was playing in the room where I was shooting and I just turned the cam on the TV screen when I heard it coming up.

BC: You have said that your videos are a kind of laboratory where the viewer gets to see things they've not likely seen before. Do you use the word to imply that you have a scientific disengagement from the process?

DC: I use laboratory as a word to provoke. It does evoke somebody in a white coat. In responding to art, people are encouraged to suspend their disbelief, to float and be comfortable. I would say the bait is the desire for revelation, or something along those lines, and then the switch comes when nothing happens. Nothing really happens except a kind of soft, narcissistic reconsidering. It's complacent, actually, and it reassures people. I don't want to make things like that. So "laboratory" is just a way of entering into that world. I don't want you to get out that easily. The door closes when you get in there and it should stay closed for a certain period of time. Then you're free to go.