

# Artichoke

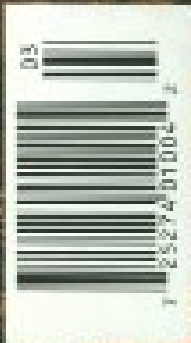
WINTER 2003

Volume 15

Number 3

\$8.95

## Civic Pride or Social Pathos? Public art and Memorials





Through a plastic lens, darkly:  
**Bob Preston**



ROGUE GALLERY, VICTORIA BC  
 MAY 16 – JUNE 1, 2003

by Nancy Yakimoski

A fascinating visual tension is created when the realism of the photographic medium meets the aesthetics produced by pinhole cameras and cameras with plastic lenses. This results in recognizable photographs that refer to our present reality (time, geography) while simultaneously belonging to another realm (timelessness, placelessness). In addition to producing soft, blurry imagery, this meeting point between realism and aesthetics positions the viewer to relate to, and interact with, the photographs in a personal and imaginative way. This is much different than an audience's usual involvement with other photographic styles and approaches such as reading documentary photographs for factual information. Using hand-made cameras that represent photographic technology at its simplest, Victoria, BC, photographer Bob Preston's *Full Circle* exhibition at Rogue Gallery illustrated the creative possibilities of photography's non-technical side.

Initially intrigued by the aesthetic and process of pinhole photography, Preston began building different types of pinhole cameras in 1999. However, he was dissatisfied with both the overall softness of the image as well as the working method that pinhole photography

imposes, specifically, the long exposure times and being able to only take one image at a time while in the field. To correct what was lacking in the aesthetic and to improve his working method, Preston created a camera body from door skin (1/8th inch plywood), glued and taped together and fitted with a simple plastic lens and shutter mechanism from an old Kodak camera. With a shutter speed of 1/60th of a second, one aperture (F5.6), and a fixed focus, this lightweight, plastic-lensed camera could be hand-held. Without the aid of a viewfinder to carefully frame his subject matter, he felt free to "let go," explore, and experiment in ways that he was unable to do with professional cameras. As well, Preston designed his camera to accept 4 x 5 inch film holders used in view cameras. This gave him the high quality negative he desired and also improved his photographing process by allowing him to shoot as many pieces of film as he could load in the cartridges.

One of the underlying motivations for Preston's camera making and picture taking is to investigate the ocular nature of the human eye, and to photographically replicate how we see — or, more precisely, the way we see when one eye is closed, otherwise

the ocular, the banal, and the spectator  
**Full Circle**



Through a Plastic Lens Darkly (installation views), Bob Preston, 2003

Preston would be investigating stereoscopic photography. Generally speaking, the technology for how the eye sees finds its photographic equivalent in the basic principles of pinhole photography: light passes through an aperture (pupil) and is projected upside down and reversed left to right onto the exposed film surface (retina). To more closely simulate human vision, Preston adds a plastic lens to his pinhole camera which, like the eye's cornea and lens, bends the light rays as it passes through the curvatures thereby focusing the image onto the light-sensitive material. Due to the optical properties of the lens, his subject matter is reproduced in a circular format. This is reminiscent of early amateur photographs produced by George Eastman's first mass-produced camera, the Brownie (No. 1), which was released in 1888. However, Eastman considered the image's blurry edges as undesirable. As Christopher Phillips explains in relation to the exhibition *The First Snapshots: At Home and Abroad* (2001), to rectify the problem of fallout produced by an inexpensive lens, a mask was placed in front of the film plate producing circular images with crisp edges. Preston, however, does not cover up or crop his photographs; rather, he

includes the transitional areas between image and non-image so that the photographs seem to emerge from (or recede into) rectangles of blackness, heightening the visual appeal.

This vignetting, produced by the exposure area exceeding the projecting circumference of the aperture, becomes an integral part of the images and the series in two ways: the circular form illustrates the ocular nature of the lens and the eye, and it creates a different spectator experience in comparison to viewing rectangular and square-shaped photographs. Preston explains that the circular form of the image resists being scanned left to right as a panorama; instead, the eye tends to begin at the center of the image where details are rendered most sharply, with the reading pattern spirally outwards as directed by the curvature. Perhaps it is less of a moving away from the centre and more of a meditative wandering around and amidst the details, since the large size of Preston's photographs (30 x 40 inches) encourages close observation. His camera pictures the world in its entirety, which is not unlike the way the human eye sees, assuming no ocular defects. That is not to say that all parts of the photographs are perfectly in



*Walking*, fibre base silver gelatin print, 30 x 40 inches, Bob Preston, 2003



*Roadway*, fibre base silver gelatin print, 30 x 40 inches, Bob Preston, 2003

focus since the design of the camera and lens ultimately determine the degree of image sharpness. For instance, in *Walking* the minutiae of the landscape is evident from extreme foreground to the furthest point in the distance (in *Roadway*, which was produced with a different camera, the entire image is evenly blurred).

As for Preston's subject matter and recurring themes, he is interested in the way that urban grids are imposed upon both humans and the landscape. His photos show the sites cluttered with the results and instruments of order-making and order-maintaining; roads and sidewalks direct vehicular and pedestrian routes, signs give commands, and traffic lights regulate the flow. The images also show the evidence of urban necessities; office buildings, telephone poles, and street lights. Additionally, these images of the banal are taken from a traveller's perspective, whether walking within the urban landscape or riding through it, observing from the upper level of a double-decker bus or peering out through a car window. The blending of common sights culled from the urban landscape, and taken from a traveler's perspective, combined with the aesthetic produced by the plastic lens, creates spectator positions that encourage an active engagement with the photographs by appealing to the viewer's imagination. It is as if one is looking through a peephole or perhaps even through binoculars, which implies a voyeuristic gaze; nevertheless, it does not seem likely that this gaze will

be satisfied by the subject matter. Instead, the photographs may be more appropriately described as memory triggers, as springboards to the unconscious, or as entry points to the dream world. The form of the image and the photograph's ambiguity in relation to time and place function much like ink-blot tests; viewers see and experience the work in a personal way. They use their imaginations to create their own narratives, drawn from personal experiences, their own histories, and memories, and project this onto the photographs. Viewers have told Preston that they think they have been at that particular spot where he has photographed because it seems so familiar. They say it reminds them of another place and time; in brief, his photographs give visual form to elusive memories.

As Preston's current photographic series demonstrates, the urban environment, as projected and recorded through a plastic lens, is transformed into something beyond a simple mechanical recording of the world. The combination of the subject matter reproduced with unrealistic realism and the ocular-shaped images work together to encourage a dynamic and interactive spectatorship.♦

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# "Simple" Cameras

There are two general camps of non-technical or "simple" photography; those that use cameras with plastic lenses, and lens-less photography. The most popular form of lens-less photography is the pinhole camera, which exemplifies the basic elements common to all cameras. To make the light-tight camera body, a sturdy shoebox or a cylindrical container (such as a cocoa can) is used. The aperture is constructed from a piece of aluminum, often a pie plate, with a tiny pin-pricked hole in it; the plate is then inserted into a cut-out space across from where the light-sensitive material (film or photographic paper) will be placed. The shutter, which allows light into the camera, can be a piece of electrician's tape that is removed and replaced to begin and end the picture taking. Exposure times can range from seconds to minutes to hours, depending upon a variety of factors including the light sensitive material used, the subject matter, lighting, focal length (distance from the aperture to the film or paper), and aperture size. Because the cameras are usually lightweight, they must be secured in place. I use a piece of brick on my camera when photographing outside since even a light breeze can substantially move the camera and interfere with the exposure.

Without the aid of a viewfinder to carefully frame and compose the image, the photographer works intuitively, positioning his or her camera but not really knowing what the image will look like until it is processed. Part of the fascination with this way of making images is the picture-making process, which usually involves making one's camera, and the thrill of working with it in a way that is unpredictable. Another alluring factor is the visual effect produced. While a pinhole image is recognizable (it looks romantic, mysterious, ethereal, mystical, and/or dream-like), there are subtle differences because each camera is unique. This range in pinhole effects, in conjunction with one's subject matter, makes for intriguing photographic explorations.

While pinhole photography's usefulness may only be perceived in didactic terms — as a tool for teaching basic camera principles to grade school children and inexperienced photographers — many artists still use it for their creative endeavours. For instance, American pinhole camera guru, Eric Renner collaborates with Nancy Spencer to create assemblages from two- and three-dimensional objects. They aim their pinhole camera at specific areas of the art work, taking pinhole details. As for Canadian artists, three immediately come to mind. Donald Lawrence, through a system of pulleys and ropes, lowers waterproof metal pinhole cameras over the edge of his kayak to take photographs of the sea bed (*The Underwater Pinhole Project*). His kayak is also outfitted with a mobile darkroom, allowing Lawrence to process the images on site. The subject matter of Dianne Bos's pinholes range from famous tourist sites around the world to jet wings, room interiors, gardens,

and even constructions of spiral galaxies. Tamsin Clark's series, *The Dreadful Lemon Sky*, explores the psychological potential of the pinhole aesthetics; the low viewpoint and somewhat askew tilt of her photographs presents the last gaze of a person who was the victim of a violent crime.

The other branch of non-technical photography includes plastic-lens cameras. They physically resemble a standard camera and have the same features; a viewfinder, a film advance lever, shutter release button, a lens, and take roll film. Before the advent of disposable cameras, they were generally found in the toy section of stores. They were not cameras used by "serious" photographers. When the use of "simple" photography increased in popularity with the rise of artistic pluralism in the late 1960s and early 1970s the most popular of the toy cameras was the Diana. It was manufactured by The Great Wall Plastic Factory of Hong Kong and widely distributed in North America until the 1970s when the company ceased production. Many Dianias were won as novelty items at carnivals. This camera took 16 frames with 120 roll film, had three aperture settings (possibly f16, f11, and f8) and had a shutter speed around 1/45th of a second. Among the most well-known Diana practitioners were Emmet Gowin, who photographed his wife, children, and extended family, and Nancy Rexroth whose six year project *Iowa* captured what she describes as the Midwestern atmosphere of her childhood. While the Diana is no longer in production, a more recent incarnation is the Holga, which can be ordered online. Like its predecessor, it has a plastic body and lens and uses 120 roll film. The Holga has a fixed shutter speed of 1/100th of a second (as well as a Bulb setting for long exposures) and a fixed aperture of about f5.6. Because of the tendency for light leaks with this camera, it is usually taped shut or elastic bands are used to secure the door in place.

Another toy camera popular among artists was the pocket camera, which took 110 cartridge film and had a fixed aperture and shutter speed. Some of these micro cameras were designed as key chains; others functioned as a purse of sorts, holding coins when not used as a camera. The allure of these various toy cameras is their non-technical nature, their unpredictability, and their aesthetic: the individual defects in the plastic lenses which produce unique distortions and lens flares. While photography purists would see these aberrations as flaws, a creative eye recognizes and takes advantage of such artistic opportunities.

Nancy Yakimoski