

## Arnaud Maggs – Essay

*I use systems of identification as an underlying spine in all my work. Imposing this structure frees me to explore territories I would never have imagined.*

by Karen Love

Arnaud Maggs describes his first art experience as an encounter at the age of four with an outdoor salesman who conveyed his wares in his motorcycle side car: bags of popcorn laid out in orderly rows and displaying what must have been a seductive graphic appearance. It seems this was his first collecting experience as well, since Maggs did not open the bags but kept them in his room to look at.

As an adult, Maggs took up the profession of graphic designer followed by fashion photographer. This held his attention quite successfully until, at the age of 47, he decided to become an artist. Maggs took life drawing classes and developed an interest in the proportions of the human head. With a used Rollifex camera he soon began his first photographic project, portraying 16 men and 16 women in *64 Portrait Studies* (1976-78). Wishing to make visible the geometric phenomena that he was observing, he deliberately chose an analytical mode of presentation: straightforward images of the frontal and profile views of his subjects, displayed in a large grid of images. Maggs refers to the words of the American photographer Walker Evans, for whom he has enormous regard: "If a thing is there, well, there it is." The challenge was to present matter-of-fact information uninfluenced by emotional bias or overarching stylistic methods, to encourage attentive observation and comparison.

Maggs spent approximately a decade in the production of large portrait projects, many of which are considered keystone works in the history of contemporary Canadian art. One project which has received international acclaim is *Joseph Beuys: 100 Frontal Views*, and *100 Profile Views*, taken in Dusseldorf at the home of the famous German conceptual artist in 1980. As subject, Beuys attempted complete stillness. Although at first glance the portraits may seem identical, inevitably they are not. Miniscule shifts of the head, a shoulder, an eye, reveal what must have been an exhausting endurance test. This portrait of the precise duration of the photo shoot — one frame after another without edit — synchronizes the passage of photographic time with real time, and leaves us with a glimpse of the man's interior self, an intensity transcending any accumulation of empirical fact.

The *48 Views* series (1981-83) is a massive endeavour that is stunning to behold in its entirety. It consists of almost 8,000 images in 162 contact sheets of photographic paper, each of these recording the full 48 frames from four rolls of film and documenting an individual from the Canadian cultural world: artists, writers, musicians and others change positions, front to side, side to front, for each photo. Mounted in an enormous formal grid, *48 Views* offers a population of voices, a multiplicity so massive no viewer succeeds in taking in every single portrait.

Baden

Beauchemin

Frenkel

Gale

Lochhead

Maggs

Bio  
Essay  
Gallery

Wintonick

Arnaud Maggs has been referred to as a kind of photo-anthropologist, using his camera to capture and re-present the past's forgotten ephemera. About 1988, he began to seek out materials that indicate systems of categorizing/classifying human endeavour. Perhaps his most elemental conceptual work, a classic of contemporary minimalism, is *The Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue* (1988), which represents a complete system of classification in a large grid: each number refers to a specific jazz recording in the renowned American record series (7241, 7242, etc). The numbers in themselves mean nothing beyond their identification function, and perhaps this work points to the chasm between the representation of a thing and the thing itself. Still, with imagination, the numbers can stand for the possibility of iconic musical sound, of profound experience beyond language and the visual, in a way that evokes the best of human effort. For Maggs, the work of certain composers (Bach, Mozart, Ellington) and musicians (Gould, Kuerti) has been important, and the source of inspiration for several works.

Maggs has an acute sensitivity for tangible, quiet objects that, with time, exude what is most potent about the human narrative. For *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie* (1994), the artist photographed a large collection of tags from the early 1920s that record child labour in the textile industry. *Notification* (1996) presents the reverse sides of French death notice envelopes, each marked with a black X of varying appearance. Although the objects are almost without specificity regarding the person to whom they refer, we are humbled by the rituals of communication that these 384 photographs represent. Simultaneously, the sheer graphic beauty of the work's large installation format is undeniable. Maggs' great admiration for the French photographer Eugène Atget (1857-1927) and his assiduous, systematic project to document the disappearing vernacular appearance of Paris resulted in *Répertoire* (1997), which reproduces the pages of Atget's client address book, replete with crossed off listings that evidence years of accumulated activity. These simple documents are testaments to lives lived, to the labour endured in a life, and to the inevitable passage of time that ends in death.

Two recent works delight in vastly divergent modes of analyzing colour. *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* (2005) presents photographs of all the delicately painted pages from a book published by flower painter Patrick Syme in 1816. In his book Syme augmented the system of colour charts created by naturalist Abraham Werner (1750-1817) in such a way "as to render it highly useful to the arts and sciences." Praised and used by Charles Darwin, the book compares colour swatches to equivalent examples observed in the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. Tile Red, then, echoes a colour in the breast of the Cock Bullfinch, the Shrubby Pimpernel and porcelain jasper. A lyrical exploration of methods of description and classification, Maggs' work contributes to the still essential dialogue about the representation of landscape and nature. *Cercles chromatiques de M.E. Chevreul* (2006) is derived from a rare document of the same name from 1861. A purely theoretical exercise, it contains eleven colour wheels, each showing the full chromatic scale and successively surprinted with an increasing amount of black. Maggs has written that *Cercles chromatiques* becomes "a metaphor for the passage from day to night, from positive to negative, from life to death."

Maggs' awareness of his own mortality may explain in part his particular interest in materials that convey so much loss and longing. One might say he is doing his very best work now if it weren't for the fact that he began his artistic career fully formed, with a focused maturity that ensured distilled content and clarity of presentation for each project undertaken. In the past thirty years Arnaud Maggs has produced an astonishing body of work that has shaken assumptions about photography's role and that will have enormous, lasting resonance and influence.

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