

Canadian Art

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Abracadabra: Arnaud Maggs makes portrait magic



Arnaud Maggs in his Toronto studio, June 2010 / photo Michael Mitchell

by Michael Mitchell

Island D, Georgian Bay—Arnaud Maggs sits at the end of a long oak table, carefully lettering with a Sharpie. He signs and dates the bright sheet of notepaper before sending it down the table. “I COULDN’T CARE LESS IF I NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PHOTOGRAPH. A.M. 09/’09.”

One month later we are together again on another island—this one in the Ottawa River. He letters by lamplight. “I COULDN’T CARE LESS IF I NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PHOTOGRAPH. A.M. 10/’09.”

Nearly a year has passed. He has kept his word.

Now 84, Arnaud Maggs has been a graphic designer, an illustrator, a commercial photographer and an artist, and has excelled at all these pursuits. But despite having created such illustrious works as the original cover art for the legendary album *Jazz at Massey Hall* (featuring Gillespie, Roach, Parker, Powell and Mingus) and the audacious cover of the Art Directors Club of Toronto’s 1961 annual publication (a giant black 13 against a stark white background), it’s for his work as a fine-art photographer that he is now best known.

Maggs and I first met in the late 1970s, when we were both doing editorial photography for magazines like *Weekend* and *Saturday Night*. Photographers use many words to explain what they do. They *look for* photographs, *make* them and they *create* them, but the word that most accurately and honestly describes the process is *take*. Photographers are hostages of reality. They make sense of reality by editing it. When a photographer frames a portion of the teeming universe that surrounds us, he is ascribing significance by indicating. He copies what he wants to describe and ascribe meaning to. It’s a form of appropriation. It’s taking.

Maggs has used the medium of photography to make us pay attention to many things. He began with the shape of human heads in *64 Portrait Studies*, from 1976–78. After recording the heads and faces of the famous (such as Kertész and Joseph Beuys) and of friends in subsequent works, he moved on to the elegance of numerals (*The Complete Prestige 12” Jazz Catalogue*), the pathos of child labour and death announcements (*Travail des enfants dans l’industrie* and *Notification*), the tales an address book has to tell (*Répertoire*), Parisian signs (*HOTEL*) and the sad beauty of stains and mould (*Contamination*). Over the past two decades, he has rarely pointed his camera at a living subject. Instead, it’s become a tool to record two-dimensional subjects that hark back to his early career—type, signs and the pages of books. He’s become a *flâneur* who frequents flea markets,

especially in France, and a celebrator, archivist and explorer of the deeper meanings of life's ephemera.

As with all photography, his work involves appropriating or taking. Maggs's partner, the artist Spring Hurlbut, also loves the objects that spill from the *vides-greniers*, the attics that feed the flea markets of France. Over the years she has come to understand what objects will excite Maggs and inspire him to the next stage of his creative life. Just as it was Hurlbut who initially encountered the book *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, which was the source material for a 2005 series by Maggs, it was she who first stumbled upon the diagrammatic mid-19th-century carpenters' guidebooks that have become the basis for Maggs's most recent work.

When she drew his attention to them in a French flea market he was initially very excited: the books' little exploded drawings of various architectural details were extraordinary and very beautiful. But his excitement soon turned to dismay. The drawings were perfect in themselves. Whatever could he do to legitimately claim authorship?

In the past he had played with scale and reorganized and recycled images using another medium (photography) to make found material his own. But this was different. He put the books down and went off to have coffee and think. The appropriation issue suddenly seemed overwhelming to Maggs. When he went back to the vendor's stall for another look, he had an epiphany. Plate 49 in the first volume made him think of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Plate 50 exhibited all the elegant complexities of a Picabia. Plate 35 made him think of Max Ernst. In fact it *was* Max Ernst, or at least an outline of his face. At that moment Maggs re-envisioned the whole series of drawings. He suddenly saw them all as portraits—crazy portraits—Dada ones! He excitedly bought the books.

As he began working with them he saw portrait after portrait within the architectural renderings. He began to realize that all the "male" drawings (Christian Schad and Gerhard Preisz, for example) were profiles, while all the "female" ones were frontal. The women of Dada—Emmy Hennings, Angelika Hoerle, Hannah Höch, Suzanne Duchamp, Sonia Delaunay and so on—all wore hats or dresses and shawls. Some were even dancing. He decided to scale up these little drawings and reframe them as portraits. Through the act of naming he would take possession.

The world of Dada practice—anarchistic exuberance and extravagant theatricality in the service of reaction to the horrors of war and mechanization—would seem to be very far from the control,

discipline and cool formality that characterize Maggs's body of work. In 1916, Dada was very politicized, even revolutionary. Europe was a living house of horrors, the maimed and dead were everywhere, economies were ruined and the Nazis were not far from emerging. Many of the original Dadaists, especially in Berlin, were tough, militant people. They were known to hijack ships, fire guns onstage and generally raise hell. In the early Dada years, before some of the movement's principal figures married heiresses and made curious things to hang on a wall, they were very serious about changing public consciousness and remaking society. It wasn't about pretty.

Dada artists were also militant critics of their era's new media culture: the mass press, popular movies and broadcasting. At the same time, they embraced it, playing with the commercial print forms—ads and editorial layouts—that Maggs would find so alluring in the 1950s and 1960s. In those postwar years, Maggs spent many long, bitter winter nights in Montreal practising hand-lettering, even taking typography courses with the famed Carl Dair to improve his skills and knowledge.

As part of their reaction to the popular media, the Dadaists did astonishing things with type. An early Hugo Ball poem contained 18 different typefaces in as many lines and a 1918 optophonetic poem by Raoul Hausmann changed typefaces mid-word. Dada manifestos, posters, periodicals and proclamations were brilliant explorations of typographic play. They still look fresh today, and in many ways have never been equalled or surpassed. Little wonder that Maggs was seduced.

And what about the Dada ready-made? Borrowing, appropriating and recycling were at the very heart of Dada practice. Heartfield, Schwitters, Höch, Ernst, Baader, Hausmann, Grosz and many others cut elements out of the popular press and collaged them into new works. Most of the three-dimensional assemblages made by these artists utilized machine-made objects. The strategy behind Duchamp's bottle rack, bicycle wheel, snow shovel and urinal is seamlessly echoed in Maggs's Dada portraits. They *are* ready-mades

And the taker's medium? For almost four decades, Maggs's primary medium has been photography. Whether shooting commercial photographs, providing editorial and fashion illustrations for magazines or exploring his formal interests and making art, the camera has been his primary tool. And it was probably the artists of Dada who first understood photography's centrality to art-making in the modern era. They were the first new-media artists, and well understood the critical role

photography was to play in the formation of modern culture: it has been Western culture's foundational medium for more than a century.

But Maggs is no Dada artist. He has always been as interested in form and beauty as in social and cultural ideas or politics. However, Maggs's unique sensibility has given him a perspective beyond any of these concerns. He has always retained a certain amazement with the simple fact of existence, and has coupled that with a deep appreciation for the appearances of things. He can stare at the shape of heads or numerals and sense the strangeness and beauty of all manner of quotidian things with a child's gobsmacked wonder. To that end he has built collections of objects—letterforms, enamelware funnels and water jugs—just to compare and appreciate the range of forms that they can take. Such typologies lead naturally to grids, the best systematic form for organizing material and making comparisons.

Maggs has long been famous for his grids; it is a formal device that he feels was in many ways forced upon him. How else could he organize and display his subject matter? Being a photographer, Maggs has always been introduced to his latest imagery via the grid of the medium-format contact sheet. He came to accept this form, as generated by his medium, as a part of his message. It was tidy, systematic and controllable. Like all designers, he is very interested in order. Grids are fundamental to graphic-design layout and to the setting of type. They were everywhere as underpinnings; he just made them visible.

Maggs has maintained a series of studios in industrial spaces in Toronto. They have always had a cool, orderly, Quaker kind of austerity about them. Their big blank spaces are typically lit by large mullioned windows—more grids. His art-making has in part been a response to these sorts of spaces: his studios and his galleries. The large white north wall of Susan Hobbs Gallery, where Maggs has shown his work for many years, has encouraged him to employ grids and to work big. His designer's heart loves that part of the process—installing a show that responds to and recognizes the space it occupies. For him that has meant the large-scale, the serial and the flat—never messy Merzbau.

In the mid-1970s there were only a couple of small galleries in Toronto that were really interested in showing photography, and their focus was narrow—vintage images or documentary ones. It was all quite quiet and conservative, and there was little photography at the big public institutions. Several of us decided that if nobody was going to pay attention to us, we could at least start to pay attention to ourselves. Gradually, a critical mass of photographers came together and for several years met

monthly in my studio, sharing and discussing ongoing projects and staging exhibitions. By the early 1980s we had grown and evolved into what is now the Toronto Photographers Workshop (TPW).

I remember Maggs coming to an early meeting and standing quietly in a corner while the rest of us argued vigorously about various projects that participants had underway. At the evening's conclusion, he turned to me and said, "Well, this is all very interesting, but I'm quite happy with what I'm doing and will just keep to myself and keep working." I remember being somewhat irritated, intent as I was on trying to build community. Yet over the years I've come to greatly admire his single-minded devotion to his practice. Each step he has taken makes complete sense in terms of the previous one, but at the same time has always brought an element of surprise and revelation. It has resulted in an amazing body of work, some of which, like the deeply affecting but underappreciated series *Lessons for Children*, based on a vintage children's poetry book, is still awaiting discovery.

See, you have inked
your frock.

Ink is black and pa-
Pa's shoes are black.

Paper is white, and
Charles's frock is
white.

Grass is green.

—From *Lessons for Children*

Speaking of his Dada portraits, Maggs states that "this new work is the most exciting thing I've done in a long time, because I'm not just documenting. It's something else." That "something else" has freed him from the tyranny of the grid. It's also freed him from photography, even typologies. His mind has been liberated to reimagine things. He's inverted the Francis Bacon dictum so beloved by documentarians: "The contemplation of things as they are, without error or confusion...is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention." Maggs has made things into what they aren't. It's a whole harvest of invention.

<https://canadianart.ca/features/abracadabra-arnaud-maggs/>