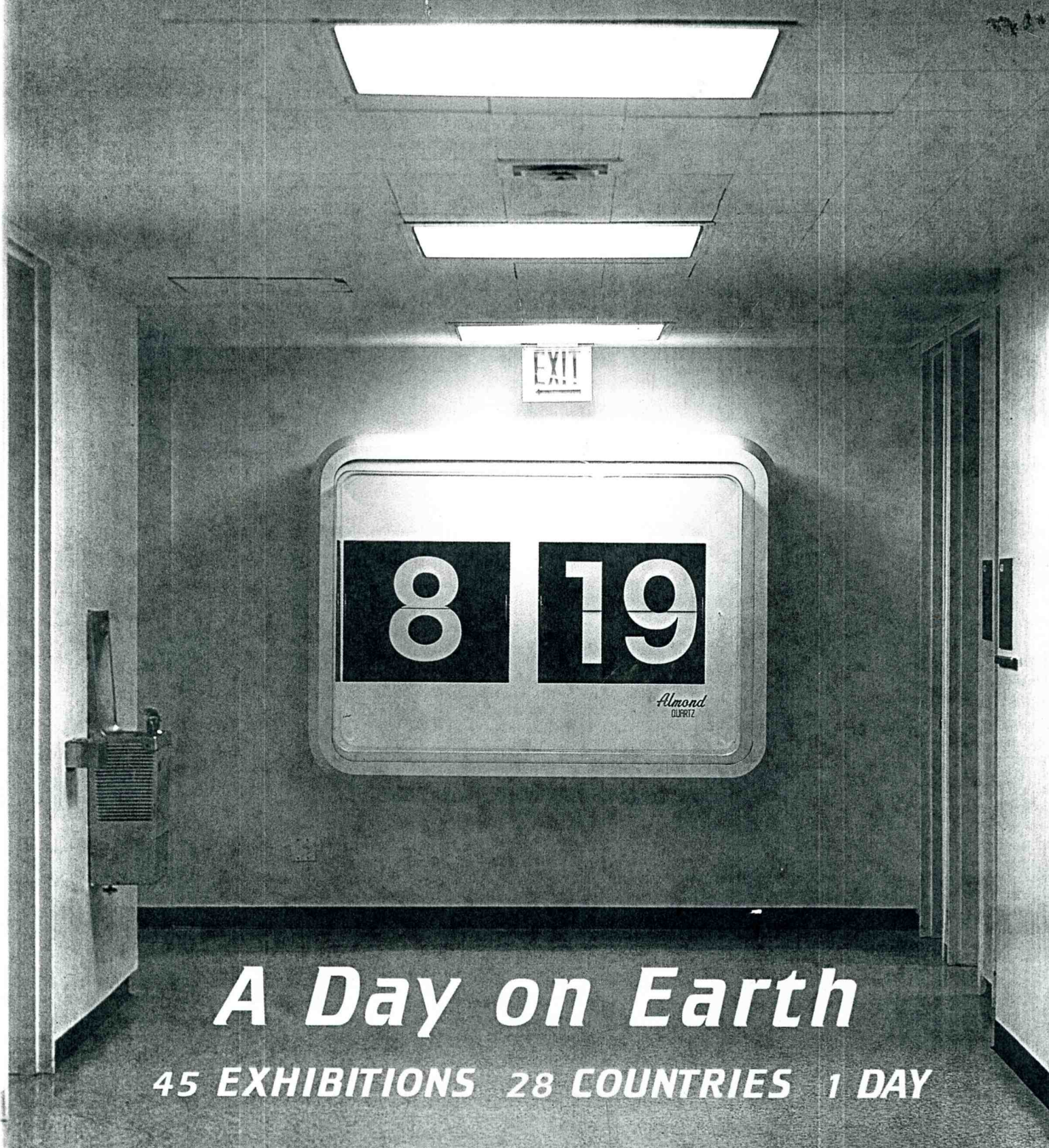


contemporary visual arts



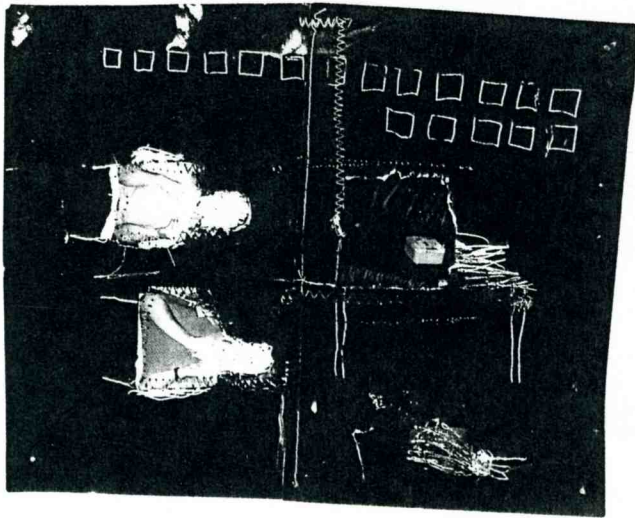
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CLINT GRIFFIN

BY CATHERINE DEAN

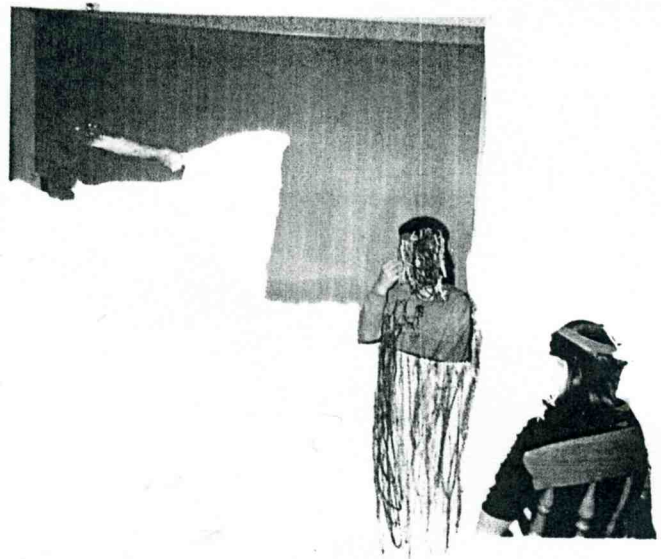
TORONTO, CANADA

Luckily for Clint Griffin, almost everyone takes snapshots, faithfully recording the events that shape their lives. Griffin makes use of the strangeness of other people's discarded pictures to create his own worlds, drawing on his vast collection of found photographs. He sees the melding of these images into his own works as unknowing collaborations, with the outcome more universal in meaning than if Griffin himself had generated all the components. He is careful to maintain this distance in his works – calling them ‘personal and impersonal documents of my existence’ – while simultaneously preserving the privacy of his collaborators by removing any identifying information.

The use of found photographs denies Griffin access to the relationship between photographer and subject, giving him no direct understanding of context or emotion. Through this, photographs are reduced to simple symbols of places and things that were deemed important enough to document – holidays, parties, vacations and so on. His works are concerned with personal and public space, how people ‘are sitting in their space’ and how they are affected by it. Although he studied painting and photography at Toronto's Ontario College of Art & Design, graduating in 1998, Griffin has not taken his own photographs for five years. Once he began to use found images, he felt there was ‘no point’ in continuing as a photographer. Moreover, other people's pictures, taken without artistic intent, are composed in ways that he could never imagine.

Since 1993 Griffin has had a steady schedule of exhibitions in artist-run spaces and alternative commercial galleries. The most recent of these is at the Anoush Gallery and consists mainly of small photographic pieces, their emulsion scraped and peeled away; fragments are sewn or stapled together, figures are liberated from their settings and tethered in their new context

only by Griffin's marks in pencil and paint. These pieces are the beginning of a spatial expansion and modification that continues in larger painted works such as *Often Being the Only Moving Thing*. Here house paint has been applied to discarded flats from a film set (found materials which were previously used, literally, to create and delineate space); the impression is one of a vast, bleak landscape. The line where the panels meet becomes legible as a border or horizon, and the surface of the piece is inhabited by tiny photographic fragments. There's a house with a Canadian flag in the window, a tree, streetcar tracks, a row of tiny figures, and a spindly pole flying an American flag: all of these elements are



joined by road-like lines and scratches, creating a vague topographical map. Through these, Griffin combines isolation and loneliness with a sense of connection and community.

Griffin's perception of space comes directly from the experience of growing up in a huge country with a small population. Canada is a nation largely made up of isolated communities and sprawling housing developments; everything is connected by lines of transportation, communication and energy. It is, however, a more universal, psychological space which Griffin explores in his installations and constructions. These are the spaces that people inhabit, tenuously related to others and to the world around them.

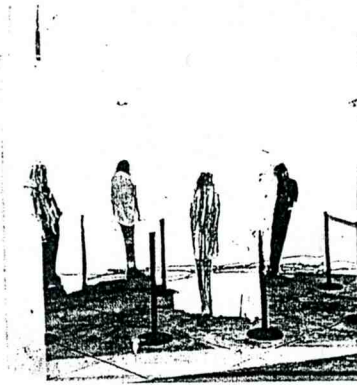
Clint Griffin was at the Anoush Gallery, Toronto, 26 February – 18 March

Catherine Dean is a Toronto-based writer and photographer

above right: CLINT GRIFFIN, *Candlelight Picture*, 1999, mixed media on photograph, 13 x 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist / Anoush Gallery, Toronto

above left: CLINT GRIFFIN, *Consummators*, 1999, mixed media on photograph, 20 x 23 cm. Courtesy: the artist / Anoush Gallery, Toronto

Clint Griffin ◀◀



LEFT: Clint Griffin
line 1999
Photo, ink 12.7 x 12.7 cm
Photo courtesy the artist

BELOW: Clint Griffin
*breathing apparatuses
or elephant trainers* 1999
Photo, thread 12.7 x 35.6 cm
Photo courtesy the artist

In the year since he graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design, Clint Griffin has popped up regularly in solo and group shows in alternate and fringe commercial galleries around Toronto. If that hand-to-mouth world could be said to have a rising star, it is probably this waif-like young man with the oddly hushed voice and self-effacing manner. His dedication is fierce, his sense of aesthetic presentation is acute, and he rarely seems to repeat himself in his works.

Griffin's ambitious twin shows in October at both locations of the BUS Gallery, a brave new seat-of-the-pants operation in the emerging gallery district on Queen Street West, offered a comprehensive look at what he is all about. The shows consisted of site-specific installations and works on paper, all based on found colour photographs which he tears, cuts, collages, paints, staples and sews into compositions of remarkable beauty, depth and complexity. At the centre of his project are the small, almost shard-like figures who appear in the photographs (often salvaged from the dumpster behind his local developing shop). Many of the photos were tourist shots of buildings or landmarks, rejected for one reason or another, the people captured only by chance.

In Griffin's existential dramas, these lone, incidental players become protagonists. He begins by peeling away the emulsion around the figures, excavating them from their context so that they float on the furry, white background of the four-by-six photograph. The backing is always retained, although he often paints and draws on it, so that the original sense of scale is maintained as the fragile paper rectangles bearing their frail human cargoes are incorporated into a larger vision.

Working right up against a wall, as he did at BUS, seems to suit Griffin. Like a climber, he has a sure-footed sense of surface and placement. In *the birds fly like skyscrapers*, he painted a ten-foot-high, soft-edged, grey square on a pale blue wall—it could be a house painter's version of a Rothko. Three of his trademark characters, stapled to the wall and isolated from one another, appear to be standing on top of the wall instead, as if on some vast promontory of land. Here, he strikes a note of romantic awe, as in landscapes of the sublime where minute figures heighten the sense of scale. At the same time, there is a vertiginous mood of alienation and anxiety, a gritty, urban texture generated in part by the uneven, marked surface of the wall itself.

In the decrepit hallway of BUS, Griffin created a tree—a tall, scrawny one made from fragments of photos that climbed high into peeling paint and crumbling plaster. A ragged, fantastical thing, it seemed to grow in and out of the wall like a live fissure. Nearby, was a simple, potent work entitled *breathing apparatuses, or hangmen*. Griffin stapled to the wall a row of a dozen or so males and females, each alone in the snowy haze of his or her photographic envelope. A rough coat of white house paint helped fuse them with the wall, so that the figures related both to their individual worlds and to a larger universe. Quavery, delicate pencil lines, which Griffin often uses to suggest paths, sight lines or interpersonal connections, emanated from their heads and pointed toward the ceiling. The figures were both liberated and hanging by threads, subject to the terrible freedom that seems to underlie Griffin's stark, poetic vision. ■

by GILLIAN MACKAY

