

2014

The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971 (Book Review)

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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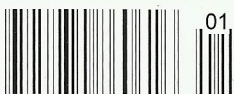
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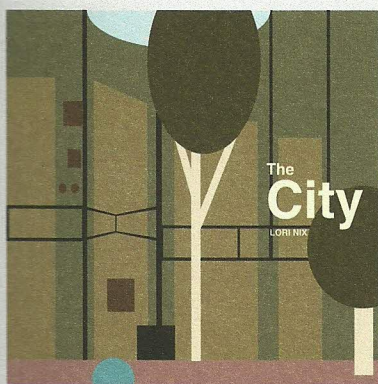
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The City

By Lori Nix

At first glance, Lori Nix's constructed images of post-human urban decay could be mistaken for contemporary photographs of post-industrial ruins. However, on closer examination, these photographs reveal themselves to be images of meticulously built dioramas of humanity's end – a future both past and yet to come.

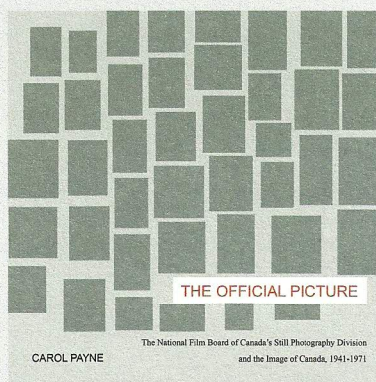
Nix's deserted city, comprising public spaces both grand – museums, libraries, theatres – and intimate – laundromats, beauty parlours, classrooms – could be any wealthy, Western urban centre. Set in a distant yet familiar pre-digital age – the hopeful decades of the twentieth century, when societies undertook great civic projects and techno-utopianism seemed to assure the continued flourishing of humanity – Nix's crumbling worlds ironize the faith in technological salvation and draw a parallel between the demise of the public sphere and that of humans.

Redeeming this vision from total despair is Nix's obsessive craft in constructing these hyper-realistic scenes, each of which takes an average of seven months to conceive and build. Forgoing digital processes, Nix uses an 8 x 10 camera to capture the rich detail and scope of her dioramas. Manipulating light, scale and perspective, she devises uncanny images that both seduce and distance, producing scenes that occupy the interstitial space between reality and fiction. In constructing rather than documenting realities, these photographs psychologize our shared images of and anxieties about disaster.

By confronting the viewer with a post-human world reclaimed by nature, Nix implicitly addresses the destructive relationship between humanity and the environment, a relationship that will likely ensure our disappearance. The sublime awe aroused by these images arises from their erasure of our narcissistic domination of the world, yet Nix cloaks any didactic impulse in humour and a refined aesthetic sensibility.

Like the dream factory that produced the Hollywood disaster films of her childhood, Nix chooses the spectacle of plausible fictions to mediate an encounter with our existential end. What can be imagined is often more terrifying than what we can see. – Shaun Pett

Decode Books, 76 pages, 37 colour illustrations, hardcover, \$60.00 CA, August 2013



The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971

By Carol Payne

In 1941, the National Film Board of Canada established the Still Photography Division in order to develop a greater sense of national identity. During the forty-plus years of its existence, this division generated approximately 250,000 photographs of Canadians and Canadiana – from images of people at work and play, to urban architecture and rural landscapes. Carol Payne's *The Official Picture* examines how the federal government of Canada, in an effort to define Canadian identity, circulated these photographs as part of its nation-building project.

Payne approaches the division's imagery through the critical framework of "banal nationalism," a term borrowed from British social psychologist Michael Billig to describe how national identity is produced through prosaic rather than spectacular photographic images. Many of the division's photographs feature common themes, which were often repeated in mainstream media in order to inspire nationalist sentiments. Though Payne references the theories of Michel Foucault to illustrate how the division operated as an institutional apparatus in the interest of the federal government, it is her analysis of Allan Sekula's work on the archive that explains just how photography operated within this matrix.

The Official Picture covers the gamut of documentary photographic practices. One of the book's strongest chapters, which deals with the division's photographic representation of the Inuit, challenges the tendency of the archive to universalize. In her treatment of the representational damage inflicted on the Inuit by the Still Photography Division's "Photographic Archive from the North," Payne shows how photographs once used to justify the federal government's agenda of resettlement and assimilation are now being used in initiatives, such as Project Naming, intended to strengthen and empower Inuit communities.

Strongly recommended for scholars interested in photography's close relationship with nation-building in Canada, *The Official Picture* constitutes a significant contribution to the study of Canadian photographic history.

– Matthew Ryan Smith

McGill-Queens University Press, 264 pages, 124 b+w illustrations, hardcover, \$50.00 CA, July 2013