Clive Holden: Unfamous Faces in American Places

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
Clive Holden: Unfamous Faces in American Places
By Matthew Ryan Smith

Fame doesn’t fulfill you. It warms you a bit, but that warmth is temporary.
― Marilyn Monroe

Clive Holden’s new work UNAMERICAN UNFAMOUS, recently on display at the Ryerson Image Centre at Ryerson University in Toronto, speaks about fame as something which defines American-ness. For those unaffected (or impervious) to the baptism of celebrity, the very ‘success’ of their lives and legacy can be thrown to question as, it seems, a successful life has become dependent upon a recognizable one: life, liberty and the pursuit of fame. Holden’s work moves about in these circles. Essentially, and unrelentingly, UNAMERICAN UNFAMOUS desacralizes the cult of celebrity by appropriating non-celebrity faces as sites for meditation. His handling of media is grounded in a hyper-aesthetic network, where faces and places of the unfamous are paced and circulated at vacillating intervals, charging viewers to strain their memory and revel in apperception.

For the work’s inaugural exhibition, Holden has isolated, cropped and put on display one-hundred images from the nearly 270,000 photographs in the Ryerson Image Centre’s Black Star photo collection that do not contain a direct relationship to American fame or celebrity culture, specifically, to Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Jackie O and the other faces associated with Americana. Moreover, Holden has concerned himself with exhibiting images that have never before been exhibited, and by doing so responds to the question of whether or not it is fundamentally un-American to be unfamous. It’s a biting prospect because it cuts into the very integrity of the American way of life, and in subsequent exhibitions, Holden will draw on a variety of media archive resources in his search for visual history’s unjustly ignored.

The large data-driven media wall installation uses complex coding systems such as HTML5, JavaScript and CSS to create randomization algorithms which construct a circuitous system where the flow of images and their juxtapositions cannot occur more than once. Composed of electronically interchangeable rectangular frames, it shuffles and shifts, depending on the algorithm, from eight frames to thirty-two then sixteen and back to eight again. This volatile framing structure serves to reduce, reconstruct and increase images in a frenetic and unanticipated configuration. Much like his other works such as Countdown 8s (2013) and Wind at Lake Manitoba (2013), images intermingle with
written text such as the words “UNAMERICAN” and “UNFAMOUS,” which flicker alongside multi-coloured film leaders, drawing attention to the appearance of narrative cinema itself. Somewhere in this randomized repetition and fulguration lies a story, perhaps only half-formed, but ever-evolving. It’s a story of cultural critique and personal dissatisfaction, where other people’s lives, other famous people’s lives, are supposed to fill the gaps in our own.

Arrested in snapshots of informal time are images of people, the so-called “unfamous” themselves: young, old, black, white, Asian, women and men in all their uncelebritous glory. Many reside unaware of the camera while some match its cold, monochromatic stare. Holden’s selection of images—in addition to ten images that were community-nominated via the internet and collected from personal collections—are driven by the idea that to “know” someone may not necessarily imply that you must know them deeply, face-to-face, but to attempt to understand them, to empathize with them and their circumstances. Considering that several of the photographs chosen from the Black Star collection represent war, poverty, political unrest and so on, UNAMERICAN UNFAMOUS may also be about the pure want to understand another individual. For Holden, “among the remaining photo subjects, there were people in the throes of extreme grief, often in war zones. As compelling as these were, it seemed to me that they were mainly photos of grief itself and less about the person who was doing the grieving.”

By selecting ten community-nominated photographs as part of the one-hundred photographs through an online public participation strategy, Holden expands the limits of the work by incorporating “unfamous” photographs from private collections. Often times these photographs are submitted without the person pictured knowing and for this reason, UNAMERICAN UNFAMOUS elevates the status of the individual by consecrating them into the annals of a work of art while illustrating the media process by which celebrities have little control over their images. For subsequent exhibitions and unique iterations of this evolving work, Holden has stated his intention to expand on the same themes while using images from a wide variety of public, private, and personal archives, discarded photo resources, as well as those accessed through a greatly expanded social media-fueled community outreach. In each exhibition, local, regional or national focuses will be brought to the work’s on-going manifestation.

Endnotes


**Biography**

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., is a writer, independent curator and educator based in Toronto, Canada. His writings have been featured in several Canadian and international publications including *C Magazine, ArtUS, FUSE, Afterimage, Magenta, Visual Arts News* and *Artinfo Canada*. matthewryansmith733@gmail.com