Ed Pien: The Borders of Empathy
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Toronto-based artist Ed Pien travelled to several countries including Cuba, China, and Chile to research the ways that monuments and memorials dedicated to critical historical events register feelings of empathy. During his travels, Pien sought to understand how that different people of different generations of different realities are made to feel vulnerable when encountering the suffering of others. In discussing with elders of the Cuban Revolution, as well as mulling through heaps of archival documents, photographs, films, and artifacts at the Nanjing Massacre Museum, the Memorial Museum in Santiago de Chile, and elsewhere, he also unmasked an inveterate sense of collective guilt among those who had an opportunity to speak out and affect the course of history but failed to do so. Returning home forever moved by what he bore witness to, Pien sought to interpret the memorializing strategies of others and apply them to his own life and artistic practice. The result is “Shadowed Land.”

In effect, his recent body of work draws together historical narratives with personal hermeneutics, deconstructing lived and learned experiences through the stuff of aesthetics. Yet the exhibition’s premise is also informed by the tragic occurrences of missing and murdered aboriginal woman and girls in Canada. The belief that by simply living in Canada means that “we are all implicated” in the unwavering agent of ruin that is settler colonialism rings true. Likewise, the perpetuated myth that indigenous issues can be separated from vicissitudes of settler-colonialism is both fallacious and negligent. Pien’s recent body of work engages indigenous social issues while stressing that the burden of colonialism not only exists in Canada but that it is still very much unfolding. As such, he is presumably caught in a liminal state somewhere between two central questions: how can one speak to another’s suffering beyond one’s own social reality, and how can one not speak about another’s suffering when one is deeply associated with the conditions introduced by settler-colonialism that affect their treatment? This much seems clear: it’s contentious for a Taiwanese-born, gay male artist living in Canada to publicly speak about (and represent) murdered and missing aboriginal women and girls through visual art; it’s contentious to speak of a suffering that exists outside of oneself.

In her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett proposes a theory of affect that strongly considers the relationship between viewer and trauma-related artwork. For Bennett, empathy is a “mode of seeing” where responsible viewers feel for those whose experience and history is often singular, different, and inaccessible. Bennett’s dynamic analysis of the ethical modes of spectatorship emphasizes that political vectors remain inseparable from trauma-related art. “Shadowed Land” proceeds from this critical interstice by attempting to construct modes of empathic viewing for audiences. Here the object or image is no longer autonomous, it is relational, and impresses its affects upon those who bear it witness.

During his only visit to Santiago, Chile, Pien experienced artist Alfredo Jaar’s *Geometry of Conscience* (2010) in the Museum of Memory and Human Rights. There, viewers proceed down a flight of stairs, enter into a small unlit space for a full minute before a white light slowly illuminates thousands of facial silhouettes reflecting off surrounding mirrors before falling into darkness for a final thirty seconds. The viewer’s eye essentially becomes bleached by the
intensity of light, where all that remains when one closes their eyes is the impression of small silhouettes; it’s a visual haunting that continues well after audiences leave the exhibit and even when they close their eyes. Jaar’s disarming vigil to murdered or disappeared under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet gripped Pien so much so that it stood to inspire his large-scale photographic installation *Our Beloved* (2016). The work features 144 close-up photographs of real and artificial flowers shot during visits to Chile’s mass grave Patio 29, the largest burial site of Pinochet’s murdered and disappeared, and Villa Grimaldi, the interrogation and torture complex for the dictator’s secret police. Here, in Pien’s photographs of flowers gifted to the graves of the dead by survivors, family members, and others, the flower proceeds as a celebration of life and a universal signifier of death. In the photographs, the flowers are intensely detailed in specific areas while other areas quickly recede into the blurriness of the background; often their gridded surfaces reveal the plasticity of their artificiality; tiny insects are visible on stems, leaves, and petals; their dew, their dirt, their decay is symbolic of the entropy itself. On the one hand, the works question the ethical conundrum of a visitor in a foreign country photographing mass grave sites for an exhibition project; while, on the other hand, they suggest that there are indispensable lessons to be gained from how other cultures confront and cope with their murdered, missing, and dead.

In his transmedial companion piece to *Our Beloved*, *Presente* (2016), Pien makes direct indexical reference to murdered and missing aboriginal women and girls from Canada. Here, Pien interjects one-frame photograph interruptions of a continually expanding list of (currently) 285 women and girls sourced from a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) web article into a selection of Patio 29 (and surrounding graves) flower photographs. As the image of the graveyard flowers shift every few seconds, a glitch image of a murdered or missing aboriginal woman or girl appears and retreats so quickly that it borders on the subliminal. Brian Massumi describes this experience as a “shock to thought,” an affective jolt that does not simply reveal a truth but involuntarily encourages critical reflection. These recurring formal disruptions serve to deaestheticize the inherent beauty of the flower photographs but also disavow any sense of passive, distanced spectatorship. Ontologically speaking, it distances itself from video and shifts into the matrix of the memorial. The immediate appearance and disappearance of the woman and girls on-screen functions as a visual metaphor to their prominence at the top of newspaper headlines but also as a failure of collective memory in Canada among non-aboriginal communities to take tangible action, and the ease in which the women and girls continue to fall into a cold cabinet of statistics. For this reason, audiences are reminded not only of individual victims, but also of the social conditions established by settler-colonialism that perpetuate the social marginalization and cycles of violence affecting aboriginal women and girls. Presented here are the photographs of women and girls always-already made invisible through the conditions of settler colonialism and the legacy of the “Indian Act” (1876) long before they actually disappeared.

Pien’s commitment to enacting sites of remembrance for murdered and missing aboriginal women and girls in Canada is motivated by an empathic urge to initiate such conversations as social praxis rather than abandon then out of detachment or political correctness. For non-aboriginal artists living and working in Canada, the visual language surrounding aboriginal issues is stuck. The crucial question for Pien and other artists is whether
it should become unstuck at all, and if so, how? What would this look like? Who is equipped to
deconstruct this subject matter? By refusing to bear witness to the systemic and structural cycle
of violence toward aboriginal women and girls, Pien strongly believes that non-aboriginal people
living in Canada are made complicit in its happening. With so many turning a blind eye, it’s a
wonder we can see at all.

Endnotes
1 Pien credits a conversation with professor and curator Matthew Brower who reminded him that non-
native people in Canada are all deeply implicated in the history of colonization in Canada.

2 In April, 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke of Canada’s support of UN peacekeeping missions
which proceed "without some of the baggage that so many other Western countries have — either colonial
pasts or perceptions of American imperialism," alluding to Canada’s lack of colonial “baggage.” See:
Tim Fontaine, “What did Justin Trudeau say about Canada’s history of colonialism?” Canadian
Broadcasting Corporation (22 April, 2016), http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/trudeau-colonialism-
comments-1.3549405 (Accessed 15 September, 2016).

3 Jill Bennett, Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art (Stanford: Stanford University
Press, 2005), 41, 10.

4 Photographs of flowers were also taken from nearby graves of individuals not directly affected
by disappearances.

5 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Missing and Murdered: The Unsolved Cases of Indigenous

6 Brian Massumi quoted in Bennett, Empathic Vision, 11.

7 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 76.

8 See Lauzon, “What the Body Remembers: Rebecca Belmore’s Memorial to Missing Women,”
Oliver Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens Press,
2008), 157.