

Notes with a Broken Camera, No. 3

Gas Station Speculations and the recent work of Raymond Boisjoly

by J.J. Kegan McFadden



All images: Raymond Boisjoly, *Station to Station*, 2014. Lightjet prints on Dibond, 18 x 24 inches, all images courtesy the artist.

*"Surely our interest in photographs stems not only from their ability to record past 'truths' but because they also have something to say about the future of those depicted within it. A photographic tale is not solely based upon that which has already occurred. It speaks to the hereafter as well."*¹

At a recent talk, Raymond Boisjoly was introduced as an artist whose work consists of active speculation in proximity to photography. In reference to Beth Seaton's words from the anthology *Technologies of Intuition* then, what is the relationship between intuition and speculation in photography? Intuition is the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. To speculate is to form a theory or conjecture about a subject without firm evidence. Either way it is precisely what is

(purposely) left out that allows — makes room — for the formation of thought. When translated to the photographic medium, it is the fissures and missing information that breeds intuitive speculation.

With his recent exhibition, "*Station to Station*,"² Boisjoly is playing with time, literally, metaphorically, and maybe even metaphysically. The source imagery for this series of photographs is the Kent MacKenzie film, *The Exiles*.³ Viewing the film on his iPad mini, Boisjoly slowed the frame-rate of the film down to one-fifth of normal, so that he could capture images from the handheld screen using his flatbed scanner. There is rupture in this process, because common print quality for digital photographs is 300 dots per inch, while the artist's iPad mini plays at 163 pixels per inch. The scanned images presented at PLATFORM were printed at a resolution somewhere between the two, an unspecified calibration,

1. Beth Seaton, "Sensing the Here After: Photography, Memory and Intuition," *Technologies of Intuition* (YYZ Books, Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, DisplayCult: 2006) pp 181 – 188 (182)

2. Boisjoly's solo exhibition, *Station to Station*, was organized by Derek Dunlop for PLATFORM Centre for photographic + digital arts (Winnipeg, 04 April – 17 May 2014)

3. Kent Robert MacKenzie, 06 April 1930, London, England – 16 May 1980, Marin County, California. *The Exiles* chronicles one night in the lives of young Native American men and women living in the Bunker Hill district of Los Angeles. Based entirely on interviews with the participants and their friends, the film follows a group of

exiles—transplants from Southwest reservations—as they flirt, drink, party, fight, and dance. *The Exiles* did not find a distributor to release it theatrically in 1961, and so over the years it fell into obscurity, known to cinephiles but remaining largely unseen by the public. A restored version produced by the UCLA Film and Television Archive premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2008, and Milestone Films released it commercially and on DVD in summer 2008. In 2009, it was named to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for being "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant and will be preserved for all time.

and they included scratches, dust, and other opportune artifacts captured through the scanning process. Because of this translation (from black and white film, to digital remastering, to compression for the handheld screen, to capturing with flatbed scanner, to print, and finally to gallery wall) there is an immense amount of *information* in these images. By *information* I mean the visual bits and bobs, the cracks and lines, then blurring between crisp outlines, the dust. It is through this process that information erupts but also where fissures occur. It is how consumption becomes production. Boisjoly refers to this method as a way of allowing the material to communicate itself through its contingencies.

The film opens with a troubling sequence of “documentary” photographs of “stoic Indians” on the Plaines a-la-Curtis. Wrapped in blankets, next to horses, adorned in headdresses, holding pipes or maybe shotguns, these are “Indians” as told to us through too many filters, too many stories, and not enough reality. MacKenzie purportedly wanted to direct *The Exiles* in homage to the life of everyday Aboriginal people who had moved off their reservations to live in the Bunker Hill neighbourhood of Los Angeles. The quasi-documentary follows a group of friends over a twelve-hour period, including the default protagonist Homer⁴, from when they leave their day jobs to the ensuing party that night.⁵

The scene captured through Boisjoly’s process takes place at a gas station. Four of the group, two men and two women, are out

cruising in a T-Bird and have stopped to fill up. A trope in the film, an ever-present story line, Homer and his bud Tommy are broke, and after picking up their dates at the bar (and getting these women to buy the Lucky Lager), both men and one of the women step out of the car to buy cigarettes or more beer. The camera doesn’t quite focus directly on it, but there is a Pendleton⁶ blanket in the back seat. (This blanket surely plays a role in Boisjoly’s image.) The woman left in the car is hit up for the gas and reluctantly pays it. On exiting the vehicle, she does not confront the group, but instead hides in the restroom. The character is left behind the door, and the gas attendant is shown back in his office through the wide window; the remaining three clamber back into the car and speed away.

Throughout this brief and anticlimactic moment, Boisjoly is recording the images and translating the movement into stillness, but not quite so—in every scan there is the something incalculable. Each of his eleven photographs include, at varying density, the vertical lines and squiggles made through the scanning. Colour is introduced to MacKenzie’s black and white film through Boisjoly’s alchemic process, but in an unpredictable way: the nose and neck of one character is highlighted in greens, the background in another image flashes a faint yellow, a wave of blue and orange follows someone as he walks across the frame, a digital cascade of data sees the wall of the gas station melt into alternating electric greens and purples. This gas station scene takes place directly after Homer and



4. It is almost too perfect that this man’s name, in the film as in real life, is Homer forever wandering in search of a place to rest. I might easily infer the link to *Iliad* as a reality of post-siege Turtle Island, or even *Odyssey* as another poem attributed to the ancient Greek poet, Homer, concerning trying to find one’s way home, presumed dead, following a great battle. Indeed, Homer spends most of his time in *The Exiles* in an existential fog.

5. In descriptions of *The Exiles* it is referred to as a ‘49 Party’, which follows a pow wow, though no pow wow is depicted on screen.

6. In 1863 Thomas L. Kay made a transcontinental trek to the west coast and began

working in the woolen mills in Oregon. In 1909 the family moved to Pendleton in north-eastern Oregon and took over the old defunct Pendleton Woolen Mills to begin the business there. The family oversaw the production of Indian blankets and introduced new designs, colors, and patterns to their product line. They also changed the construction of the mill’s Indian blankets. Prior to 1909 the blankets had round corners, but the Bishop blankets featured square corners. The company expanded their trade from the local Indians to the Navajo, Hopi, and Zuni peoples of the American Southwest. They also copied the multicolor pattern found on Hudson’s Bay point blankets for their Glacier National Park line of historic blankets. The Pendleton blankets were not only basic wearing apparel, but were standards of trading and ceremonial use.

his buddies have left the bar. It is important to consider that gas stations have appeared before in his work.⁷

SIDE NOTE, GAS STATION 1

Roy Kiyooka⁸ created *Long Beach to Peggy's Cove* (1971), comprised of 288 black and white silverprint photographs in a structured grid that documents his road trip across Canada from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. Between the rolling horizon lines and van interiors, hidden amongst the city streets and grain elevators, Kiyooka has placed at least two, possibly three, pictures of gas stations. There is shoreline, coast, rocks, birds, vans, friends, mountains, highway, sky, restaurant meals, clouds, roads, friends, mountains, bridges, windows, mirrors, hydro-electric wires, a couple in a canoe, grain elevators, grass, more mirrors (he loved photographing mirrors), and I think I spot a road sign that states the distance to Winnipeg.

ASIDE

Buying cigarettes for older teens while in Grade 8 at the local Esso station, not because I looked older but because I didn't care or maybe because they cared too much. I'd buy three or four packs a week, all different varieties but mostly Player's

King Size or Du Maurier Regular.

K, who had a crush on my friend A, couldn't start a conversation without asking to bum a smoke. That same year, boys from the neighbouring high school wanted to fight a group from my school. In some bizarre peace treaty that pre-empted the actual battle, I was singled out as someone who would have a pen with him. I think they wanted an actual document indicating the truce. I did indeed have a pen with me that day.

SIDE NOTE, GAS STATION 2

A year after *The Exiles* was released, Ed Ruscha published his first artistbook, *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, 1962. In this work Ruscha indexes exactly what the title purports and pairs his black and white shots with the corresponding brands and location names.⁹ Roughly halfway through the book appears "Rimmy Jim's Chevron, Rimmy Jim's, Arizona," the only photograph of a gas station that refers to a larger culture beyond the automotive through the painted signage advertising "Navajo Rugs, Beer and Liquors." Though there is a difference between Navajo rugs and Pendleton blankets, it is the possible fibers, and elegant investigation of them, that ties Boisjoly to Ruscha, or so I might speculate.



7. In 2012 Boisjoly produced the series of photographs, *Rez Gas*; documenting various gas stations on reserves in British Columbia the artist used sunlight to burn an image onto construction paper. These are more collage using light than they are photographs, and as such give off the false appearance of fragility when in fact they are as fixed as the subject matter. Boisjoly has made the point that to photograph gas stations on a rez is an updating of ethnographic documentation, proving for himself and all of us that the indigenous population of turtle island is not something found in a text book but a living, changing reality.

8. Roy Kenzie Kiyooka, OC (18 January 1926, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan - 04 January 1994, Vancouver; British Columbia) was a Canadian arts teacher, painter, poet, photographer, and multimedia artist who fell short of being recognized as part of the *Regina 5* after his (un)timely move to Vancouver in 1959. Having devoted the early part of his career to Modernism, in particular

painting, his focus broadened in the '60s and he began experimenting with photography.

9. Edward Joseph Ruscha IV (16 December 1937, Omaha, Nebraska). The complete list of *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* is: Bob's Service, Los Angeles, California; Texaco, Sunset Strip, Los Angeles; Union, Needles, California; Shell, Daggett, California; Whiting Bros., near Ludlow, California; Phillips 66, Flagstaff, Arizona; Mobil, Williams, Arizona; Standard, Williams, Arizona; Texaco, Jackrabbit, Arizona; El Pas, Winslow, Arizona; Beeline Gas, Holbrook, Arizona; Flying A, Kingman, Arizona; Dixie, Lupton, Arizona; Rimmy Jim's Chevron, Rimmy Jim's, Arizona; Self Service, Milan, New Mexico; Conoco, Albuquerque, New Mexico; Enco, Tucumcari, New Mexico; Hudson, Amarillo, Texas; Standard, Amarillo, Texas; Enco, Conway, Texas; Mobil, Shamrock, Texas; Texaco, Vega, Texas; Conoco, Sayre, Oklahoma; Apco, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Knox Less, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Fina, Groom, Texas.

ASIDE

Onigaming First Nation in Northwest Ontario, listening to Guns 'n' Roses and to stories from W's elders. Boating. Mountain climbing. Cedar. Puppies. Sun. Buying Freezies at the store along the highway. Shade and schist. On the shore one afternoon before I knew anything, wearing only jean cut-offs, the boys from the reservation laughed in shy but curious amazement at how my pale skin would show handprints so easily, a white ghost or momentary stain against the softer pink sun-kissed flesh. W's mom corralled us and quickly organized a race—"Swim out to the rock and back" she instructed, adding, "Kegan is a super swimmer! Watch." Those kids whipped my ass. I barely made it ten yards in by the time they'd reached the rock and began their victorious return. Back on the sand, out of breath, I congratulated them, not understanding the implications of my defeat.

Where do gas stations fit along the journey from past to future? Are they a non-place? Included as part of her 1966 collection of essays, *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag considers "The Anthropologist As Hero," stating: "Most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness. The felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change has led every sensitive modern mind to the recording of some kind of nausea, of intellectual vertigo. And the only way to cure this spiritual nausea seems to be, at least initially, to exacerbate it."¹⁰ Ruscha's artist book is an exacerbation of spiritual nausea as put forward by Sontag. In his indexical analysis of gas stations along the west coast, he is ridding himself of the "inhuman acceleration of historical change" by reveling in its amplitude. More recently the art world has been struggling with the notion

of precariousness (first through blind acceptance, then reticent reconsideration, and then some place in between). Can we not also consider Ruscha's rambling a sort of precarious, homeless, non-state? By indexing twenty-six gasoline stations is he solidifying someplace through its alternating points?

ASIDE

Leaving W's reservation, listening to Ministry's "Just One Fix."¹¹ I caught a ride back to Winnipeg with a friend of his family, who jokingly told me we could listen to anything I wanted but it couldn't be louder than *this* (at which point he turned the dial on his car stereo all the way to the right, as loud as it would go; Ministry blaring!). I laughed. At some point along the TransCanada shuttling between those huge mountains blasted out to make room for the highway I fell asleep. I was wearing what I wore that whole summer: a t-shirt from some band or another I was obsessed with (Ministry, Sonic Youth, Pearl Jam, Nirvana, etc), khaki green shorts and black combat boots, both purchased from the Army Surplus at 460 Portage Avenue, where Plug In ICA now stands. Just inside the front doors of the new building is a work from 2010 by Jimmie Durham called *Pole to Mark the Centre of the World (at Winnipeg)*. Some place between those blasted out mountains, in a dream state, I spilt Mountain Dew on my fatigues, and the driver, this stranger, noticed and woke me up. Embarrassed for the both of us, he said he'd pull over at the closest gas station so that I could dry off the big wet puddle on my crotch. The twenty minutes or so on the road, waiting to spy a gas station, I rested a blanket from his backseat on my lap.

The din that populates the soundtrack of the film, when it is not overrun by surf music performed by The Revels, is not unlike a slow



10. Susan Sontag, "The Anthropologist As Hero." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. (Dell Publishing Co. Inc, New York: 1961). First Laurel Edition, 1969. P77

11. "Just One Fix" is the third single from industrial metal band Ministry's 1992 album, *Psalm 69: The Way to Succeed and the Way to Suck Eggs*. The song features samples from the 1986 biopic, *Sid and Nancy*, along with Frank Sinatra reciting "Just One Fix" (from the 1955 drama, *The Man with the Golden Arm*), and most importantly for me, William S. Burroughs saying "Bring it all down." Unknown to us 11-year-olds at the time, the unmistakable voice of Burroughs would reappear time and again in our teenage life. His role as Father Tom Murphy in the film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), based on the autobiographical novel by James Fogle, directed by Gus Van Sant, and starring Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch is a funny example. Ministry front man, Al Jourgensen, was open about his long-term drug use, and it is rumoured he and

Burroughs shot heroin together.

12. I first met Raymond Boisjoly while living in Vancouver, attending grad school at UBC. We were in the same department, though he was part of the MFA stream and I was in curatorial studies. One of those exhausting September nights when there are more opening receptions than good shows to see, I was stumbling down main street from one wretched gallery to another, a king can slid into a brown paper bag, as I struck up my first conversation with Raymond. He had insightful commentary on the subject of funk music. He would later produce the exquisitely simple, yet powerful, photocopy on salmon colour paper, *Lucky X Lager 8* (2012) that records the grids of circles we know from a pack of canned beer in two rows of eight, somehow mimicking a metallic moon rising or perhaps a rigid drum dance confined against an ever blacker background.



leak of recent and not-so memories when thinking of gas stations, dislocation, way finding, old photographs, gossip, parties... What about those parties? It seems like every other scene in *The Exiles* features Lucky Lager. The cast is frequently seen with the beer in hand, either at the neighbourhood watering holes they frequent or purchasing roadies at the local corner liquor store.¹² In a poignant scene, one of only a few flashbacks in this "documentary," we see Homer waiting outside the liquor store reading a letter from his parents. A photograph tucked between the folded hand-written note triggers a memory of life back on the land.

SIDE NOTE, GAS STATION 3

The oil on canvas, *Gas*, 1940, by iconic American painter, Edward Hopper,¹³ is a composite image of several gas stations. The lone attendant is seen at the pumps, likely closing shop for the night; the light from indoors mingles with the natural hues at dusk. This is somewhere between Kiyooka's road trip and Ruscha's cataloguing, though predates them both. I suppose gas attendants are often alone, which is how MacKenzie wrote the scene in his film that in turn is captured by Boisjoly. Indeed the only Caucasian with a speaking role in the movie is the gas station attendant. It's worth noting he is very polite to the customers, Homer and his pals, even when they try to stiff him for the gas.

It is the scene before the gas station—the scene denied to us by Boisjoly—that I can't stop thinking about. Homer and his buddy are in a neighbourhood bar where a limp-wristed, mincing, white queen dances close to his Asian boyfriend, and laughs gregariously in ever louder intervals, catching Homer's attention until our protagonist mumbles to himself, "If he don't shut up, I'm gonna bust his lip!" For such an atmospheric film, this scene has an intensity that is unrivaled by any other that MacKenzie presents.

Shortly after I met Raymond, I ended up in Los Angeles and found myself in the strange exhibition halls of the Getty Museum. They were showing the photographs of Sigmar Polke, which just happened to be of window ledges and television

screens. I was amused and then amazed at the way he captured Muhammad Ali, with his camera in several takes, knocking his opponent to the mat. Another image, cereal in the bowl mingling with the milk and spoon, looked cosmic. A Dresden figurine sits static on the windowsill next to a plant in another shot. Polke's modest black and white prints were indicative of late modernism's aestheticization of boredom and monumentalizing of the post-war era that seemed to take place simultaneously.

ASIDE

On a recent road trip from Winnipeg to Minneapolis, I stopped for gas in Osakis.¹⁴ After a confusing conversation with the young woman behind the cash register concerning the pronunciation of the town's name¹⁵, I was cruised at the urinal by a local boy with long black hair and knock-off designer sneakers. He had a scar the shape of a hook from a fishing lure below his right eye that reminded me of the ones my dad has on both his cheeks from an accident on the farm as a kid. Flattered but uninterested, I zipped up, washed my hands, and returned to my car.

Ultimately, what Boisjoly has successfully strived for with this new body of work is a creative misrecognition. To engage in creative misrecognition is to make room for missteps, to allow for something to spring forward from a different place entirely—a cultural rabbit hole. There is something echoed in Boisjoly's speculative approach to image-making in the unfolding of Homer's letter, revealing the photograph sent from home (from the past as he contemplates his future). *Station to Station* doesn't attempt a synthesis of histories but instead urges for a collapsing of temporal realities.

A writer, curator, and artist, J. J. Kegan McFadden is a proponent of the artist-run world. Notes with a Broken Camera is Kegan's first serial column, and he dedicates it to his friend Jeanne Randolph.

13. Edward Hopper (22 July 1882, Nyack, New York – 15 May 1967, Manhattan, New York).

14. Osakis was founded in 1857. The town takes its name from the lake on which it is located. The name Osakis is thought to mean place of the Sauk and commemorates a small group of Sauk Indians who lived near the lake in the early 19th century. Apart from The "Sauk Valley Man" (or "Sauk Valley Skeleton"), an important archeological find dated to

approximately 2300 B.C.E. unearthed a few miles outside Osakis, likely the most famous local [Osakian?] would be John Tax (1894–1967). Notable for his handmade fish and duck decoys, one of which has sold for over \$100,000, Tax has been called "The Last of the Prairie Carvers."

15. Apparently it is pronounced oh-SAY-kiss, not ohsa-KEY-ce.