

Art in America

Duane Linklater

by Milena Tomic



"Learning," Duane Linklater's first exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery, takes its title from a print by the celebrated Ojibwa artist Benjamin Chee Chee. The print depicts an instructional moment between two generations of Canada Goose, mother and gosling. Incorporated by Linklater into his exhibition, it hung near the entrance of a bright and narrow gallery space. It was one of four components comprising Linklater's installation. Near the print was a wall painting composed of three parallel yellow lines zigzagging like a stylized lightning bolt from ceiling to floor. Seemingly an abstraction, it is actually the modified logo of the Ontario Northland Railway, a crucial link between the isolated north of Quebec province and the more populated south. An Omaskêko Cree, Linklater (who just won the prestigious Sobey Art Award) is of the Moose Cree First Nation; born in Ontario's Cochrane District, he now resides in North Bay. The triple yellow zigzag is a fixture

from his past, a trace of something that has disappeared. An underused stretch of railway was closed last September, leaving the communities it had served more isolated than they already had been.

The remaining elements of "Learning" were composite images that address adolescent identity. One is taken up mainly by a photograph of Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain at his legendary "MTV Unplugged" performance in 1993. The other features Mohawk activist Richard Nicholas standing atop an overturned vehicle, his rifle raised in the air, during a 1990 clash with Québécois police. Photographed from a computer screen with a digital camera, both images are pixelated and bordered on one side by a gray rectangle that was part of the screen. Taken together, the four elements of "Learning"—a found print, a wall painting with an appropriated motif, and two re-photographed photographs—generate uneasy connections. For example, Cobain committed suicide at 27, one year following the "Unplugged" session. The troubled Chee Chee did the same while held at an Ottawa jail in 1977; he was 32 years old.

What, exactly, are we "learning"? The exhibition's title was timely, given recent reports of nutritional "studies" run by the Canadian government in the 1940s and 1950s, in which more than 1,300 aboriginal people, mainly children, were systematically starved. News of these experiments has reignited debates about education and assimilation in First Nations communities. While Linklater does not deal with these events directly, they are inevitably present. Moreover, one of his past strategies was to reproduce letters he received from cultural institutions in response to queries he sent them. These letters often reveal institutional lapses in properly contextualizing aboriginal issues. Two small vitrines were set up upstairs as a kind of supplement to "Learning," affording insight into Linklater's research process by presenting archival material on the corporate branding of the Ontario Northland Railway. In one, a handwritten letter

from the company's archivist accompanied swatches of the railway's colors—gold, yellow and blue—which, like the wall painting, distill memory.

When he shoots images from his computer screen, Linklater enters into a historical dialogue with such classic appropriation artists as Sherrie Levine, who rephotographed reproductions of photographic masterworks. However, unlike some contemporary work that likewise draws on the legacy of Levine and the Pictures Generation—the beguilingly opaque work of Elad Lassry, for example—the personal relevance of the found material is here quite evident. Nothing is hermetic. Everything has significance.