

Liz Magor

LIVING IN THE WILD, WILD WEST

Liz Magor: LIVING IN THE WILD, WILD WEST

an essay by Jennifer Fisher
written for the exhibition LIZ MAGOR
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CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL IDENTITY

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ON SPOKANE RIVER

Field Work series, 1989
gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Liz Magor: LIVING IN THE WILD, WILD WEST

In *Fieldwork* and *High Plains*, Liz Magor explores re-constructions of “cowboy and Indian” identities. Both popular types came to consciousness during the nineteenth century at the frontier of North America. *High Plains* (1991) documents “weekend” cowboy enactors in photographs which are juxtaposed with captions taken from Will James’s cowboy novels. *Fieldwork* (1989) documents the artist’s lived experience of hippie culture, bringing together photographs of her friends taken twenty years ago with titles from Edward Curtis’s photographs of Native American people taken between 1907 and 1930.

Magor is fascinated by what happens when one identity is superimposed upon another. The unresolved tension of this relationship becomes the fulcrum of her examination. She brings to light the identifications of individuals within reconstituted historical space which effect a simulation of “touring in time.” These works locate the problem of identity as contingent with its framing. Each piece constitutes a *mis-en-abîme*, a frame within a frame.

In the first instance, codes of dress—a cowboy re-enactment on one hand, and hippie self-adornment on the other—frame the emulation of a particular material culture. On a second level, Magor contextualizes these images with captions. What may not be initially obvious to viewers is that Will James and Edward Curtis, the creators of the captions, to a great degree also created themselves.

Magor assumes the ethnographer’s role of participant-observer to focus on the spaces between “enacted roles” and “everyday life” where the invention and hybridization of identity take place. Elements of dress signify the entry into an affective state which is “already” meaningful as it is enacted. In turn, the labels provide cues for the gallery viewer: “marking” the work as part of an exhibition continuum. Yet, the assumed authority of such labelling practices is undermined by quoting from “unauthentic” sources. In this sense, the double fiction creates a conceptual hall-of-mirrors which plays with the viewer’s frame of reference for the exhibition itself.

The seeming linearity of history dissolving in *re-enacted* events sets up a circular (rather than linear) pattern, where participants “invent” themselves within the context of a narrative that is already known. The expression of self, in a cyclical performative pattern, functions in the same manner as ritual.

In his consideration of performance, anthropologist Victor Turner introduces the concept of “liminality” to designate symbolic states and processes marginal to day-to-day life.¹ Turner typifies liminal time as being similar in feeling to the subjunctive, a mood tense, as a time when anything might (or even should) happen. Liminal socio-cultural processes invoke actions and states not as facts, but as things to be entertained or emotionally viewed as a matter of desire, will or possibility: “If I were a cowboy living in the 1890s, I would look like this.”

As such, the performative “doing codes” function as a kind of ritualistic passage into an affective space. Where in *High Plains* the codes of the cowboy serve as a vehicle of transition from one socio-cultural identity to another, in *Field Work* the adoption of elements of aboriginal material culture allows for the affirmation of collective cultural experiences.

HIGH PLAINS

Now — I've finally gathered me a little scope of range like I've always hankered for — a place away from lanes, and in the heart of a wide-open cow and horse country — only a hundred miles from where I was born.

Will James, 1930

The *High Plains* series is composed of images from a two-week period in November, 1990, when Liz Magor joined with a group of fourteen “cowboys” — paying ranch guests which included a policeman, a lawyer, a stockbroker, and a house painter — for a “real” cattle drive. During the two-week drive, they travelled 150 miles from Montana to Wyoming.



FAST ACTION AND DANGER
MADE HIM FORGET THE HURT
HE PACKED IN HIS HEART...

High Plains series, 1991
gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist



THE PONY HAD BEEN HARDER
TO GET NEAR THAN ANY OF
THE WILD ONES HE WAS WITH...

High Plains series, 1991
gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

These images are overlaid with captions taken from the novels of Will James (1892-1942), a celebrated American cowboy artist and writer. James's thirty-two books on cowboy life, which he illustrated, brought him fame and Hollywood stardom, with the production of films such as *Smoky* (1933) and *Lone Cowboy* (1934). *Lone Cowboy*, ostensibly his "autobiography," recounted his birth under the stars, the early death of both his parents, and his being raised by an old man who taught him the ways of the West. Actually, James had been born a francophone Québécois named Ernest Dufault at Saint-Nazaire-d'Acton.

By 1933, the popularity of his illustrated stories on cowboy life had made James rich. He entered Hollywood high society, entertaining celebrities at his 8,000-acre ranch near Billings, Montana. The tensions of fame evidently pressured him, and he became increasingly afraid that his original identity would be



ALL WITH THE SKY FOR A CEILING
AND THE SUN FOR HEAT AND LIGHT...

High Plains series, 1991
gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

discovered. One of the last letters to his family describes his fear of losing everything if it were discovered that he was “really” Ernest Dufault. He stated that he could never have foreseen his success and could never sustain it if he were classified as an imposter. When he died, of cirrhosis of the liver, he left everything to Ernest Dufault — his former self “to whom he owed everything.”

During the cattle drive enactment documented in *High Plains*, Magor rode through Will James’s ranch in Montana. She chose to concentrate on one participant, named Mike, who fashioned himself in the style of a nineteenth century buckaroo. In his everyday life he was a house painter. In *All with the Sky for a Ceiling ...* he appears as an authentic surrogate of an historical photograph. The leather cuffs on his arms are held in place by adjustable straps, to protect his wrists and hold his sleeves in place. His boots—a cowboy’s pride traditionally

costing two months salary—are high-heeled for proper placement in stirrups. His hat is old-style. Mike has no collar on his unstarched shirt, allowing easy breathing and mobility. His handkerchief functions as a mask against dust, and as an occasional masquerade. The vest was also central, here in Wyatt Earp-style. In other photographs, Mike wears a white canvas, 1890s-style coat. His dedication to the rigorous codes of clothing prepares the psychological space for the loving performance of the “amateur” cowboy to begin.

The will to participate, in itself, becomes a framing device. The enactor must, to some degree, accept a “willing suspension of disbelief” in order to comprehend the experience.

FIELD WORK

When the last Red Men shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become myth among the white man, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children’s children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone.

Chief Seattle’s address as he surrendered the Puget Sound region in 1855.²

Where Will James popularized the “cowboy,” Edward S. Curtis could be credited with inventing the stereotypical “Indian.” From 1907-30, Curtis documented the aboriginal cultures of western North America, resulting in a twenty-volume work entitled *The North American Indian*. By Curtis’s time, however, Indian ways of living had been decimated and most native people were living on reserves. Curtis asked his subjects to dress up in traditional costumes, wear wigs, shave beards and re-enact aspects of traditional life. The nostalgia and romanticism that drove this project are characteristic of the “salvage paradigm,” that mode of anthropology self-designated to save so-called “authentic” cultures. Sometimes, Curtis’s photographs involved rebuilding structures on particularly photogenic sites, or eliminating clocks and automobiles from negatives.

The meanings of Curtis’s images can be better understood in relation to the complex factors which influenced their creation. During the time he “invented” the American “Indian,” Curtis himself was involved in the process of renegotiating his own identity.³ He had jumped social classes and, coming from humble beginnings, had to learn the ways of the social elite of the time. In ennobling native people he was actually ennobling his “savage” self.



FISHING CAMP - LAKE POMO

Field Work series, 1989
gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

In *Field Work*, Magor superimposes titles taken from Edward Curtis's photographic portfolios onto photographs of friends she took during the time the first TV generation began a return to "nature" and "authentic" culture. Like ethnographers building a collection, the hippies built their identities through the consumption of particular objects and ideas. Anthologies on native life that were available during that time were often illustrated with Curtis's photographs. By using Curtis's captions in this series, Magor puts into question the bias of his photographs that acted as a model for the '60s generation.

In the present context, *Fishing Camp - Lake Pomo* can be seen as poetically punning on Postmodernism's fascination with the unstable sites of unconscious processes. The Pomo were actually a first nation. In Curtis's version of this title, he had a Tule reed fishing hut—no longer in use at the time—reconstructed and placed atypically close to the water. In Magor's version, a man is seen smoking

a salmon over an open fire. The relation between the photographic content of these two images shows no obvious correspondence. In contrast, Magor's *Homeward* refers to one of Curtis's early prize-winning photographs taken at Puget Sound near Seattle in 1898. In both versions, figures in a boat with a similarly shaped prow, row across calm water. In Curtis's version the horizon line is formed as the water meets a sublime, stormy sky with sunlight peeking through. In Magor's work, the high-water mark of a rocky cliff intersects the composition at approximately the same height. According to the artist: "I don't intend all the pictures to work ironically with their titles. I wanted to peel back the most obvious layers of mimicry and appropriation to see if perhaps there was something genuine or authentic in the experience."⁴

Magor's focus on the codes of reconstituted culture articulates a space where identity circulates across time. As such, re-enactments in a subjunctive "timeless past" can play a role in expanding the frontiers of self. The captions flow below the images like water, both reflecting and revealing the romantic beliefs that have informed their ritualistic inventions.

Jennifer Fisher

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Notes

¹Victor Turner, "Frame Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison, Wisconsin: Coda Press Inc., 1977), pp. 33-83.

²M. Gidley, *The Vanishing Race: Selections from Edward S. Curtis' The North American Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1976), pp. 10-11.

³Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians* (New York, Pantheon Books in association with the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982).

⁴Letter from Liz Magor, July 7, 1991.

Liz Magor

Liz Magor is a Canadian artist who, between 1966 and 1971, studied at the University of British Columbia; the Parsons School of Design, New York; and the Vancouver School of Art. She has exhibited extensively in Canada since 1973, as well as in Europe and the United States. Her work has been included in the *Venice Biennale 1984*, *Documenta-8*, Kassel, Germany; the *First Biennial of Contemporary Art*, National Gallery of Canada, 1989; and *Places with a Past*, 1991, in Charleston, South Carolina. She also recently collaborated with artist Joey Morgan, on the production of an exhibition and publication for the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff. She divides her time between Toronto, Ontario, where she teaches at the Ontario College of Art, and West Redonda Island in British Columbia.

Jennifer Fisher

Jennifer Fisher is presently working for her doctorate in the Humanities Program of Concordia University, Montreal, where she also lectures in the Department of Art History. In 1988 she received her Master of Arts in Media Studies from Concordia for her exhibition thesis *Museums and Mediation: Locating the Exhibition Experience*, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Assistant editor of *éditions Parachute*, in Montreal from 1986-91, Ms. Fisher is an artist, writer and critic and has also worked in various capacities within organizations such as St. Mary's University, Halifax, Harbourfront Art Gallery, Toronto and Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery, Halifax.

List of Works

Field Work, 1989

A portfolio of 10 silver gelatin prints with titles,
each 40.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

High Plains, 1991

A portfolio of six silver gelatin prints with titles,
each 27.5 x 35 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Yoho Chair, 1991

chair, fabric, foam, steel,
100 x 100 x 100 cm
Courtesy of the artist

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