Chopaka I, 1997
Photolaminate, silkscreen, and acrylic on canvas
152.5cm x 244 cm
Ian Wallace
Gary Pearson

You've shot photographs for your work in a variety of locations around the world including hotel rooms, city streets, landscapes, construction sites, art galleries, airports, universities, and artists' studios. Some of the locations are tied to on-going series of work such as that focused on hotel room interiors, a subject that addresses your mobility as an artist as much as anything else. In this particular series, one is reminded that your place of art production is wherever you happen to be. To some extent your creative mobility is also reflected in your photographic style, which you've said has been influenced by cinéma vérité, a camera style that emphasizes action and spontaneity as an aesthetic response to the dynamics of everyday life. Is there a particular conceptual or aesthetic response to a subject or location that needs to be triggered to motivate you to click the camera shutter?

Ian Wallace

As far as my art is concerned, I do not habitually take photographs then select from a random archive. I do take many photographs of views from the window of my apartment, dinners I like, flowers and gardens, touristic photos of buildings and cars, etc., and even occasionally pictures of people I meet, just like everyone else. But this photography is not "art."

When I use a photograph in my artwork it almost always is a picture that I think of as "art" from the beginning, and it almost always follows from themes and observations, often repetitiously re-photographed and sometimes "staged," that I have developed as a personal language of references that give focus and substance to the content of my pictures. The street intersections, hotel rooms, my studio interior and work table, construction sites and so on, are "locations" which present "event structures" in the ongoing narrative of my imagery. They are thematically conceived as the framework for a wide range of references...
to those interests, experiences and concerns that recur in my work. These images are as much pictorial “event-structures” as they are photographs per se. There is an underlying cinematic model operating here and your reference to cinéma vérité, the spontaneous documentation of the experience of the moment, is a style that emerged from the realist-modernist movement in cinema that I specifically use as a cinematic model for my way of looking at the world. In this sense I do not think of myself primarily as a photographer, but more as an artist who inserts into the field of content-less abstract painting the surplus of content that is contained in every photograph.

As for that conceptual moment when the picture needs to be taken, yes, I love it when it appears spontaneously in front of me, but usually I have to go looking for it. In doing so, I am usually attempting to resolve conceptual conundrums. Of course, after the original moment of photography, it goes through a severe editing treatment, although with very little digital manipulation in the process of being converted into the aesthetic object. By the time it becomes a “work,” the original photograph acquires many layers of meaning that emerge from its context as an artwork that is read in a relation to other artworks, beginning with my own. It is all a form of highly-controlled spontaneity.

gp You’ve travelled to the Okanagan a number of times and have shot photographs in the region for art purposes and personal pleasure. Two artworks Chopaka I, and Chopaka II, contain photographs you took just off Highway 3 between Osoyoos and Keremeos in the south Okanagan. Chopaka is, I believe, not much more than a postal code across the border from Nighthawk, Washington, but the area itself is much more substantial. When you took the photographs, was it one of those moments when it felt like art from the beginning? Did you discover the location accidentally or had you some prior idea for this location in mind? The photographs are quite spectacular and wonderfully integrated into the broader compositions.

iw Part of my childhood was spent in the Okanagan. When I was very young we lived in Penticton, then Oliver, then in Midway in the Kettle Valley boundary country, so this landscape has a very important place in my imaginary. I always like to take the quiet side roads. Even when they lead to a dead end, they evoke that sense of adventure that I remember from childhood. One day on approaching the Richter Pass, I decided to follow a side road that led to the US border. Very soon the road overlooked a very beautiful open valley. In the middle of the valley I noticed a very large rock that was geologically different from its surroundings. I knew that this rock would have been an isolate or an erratic that was carried there by glacial action, then dropped in the middle of the valley as the glacier melted. Since it formed such a distinctive marker in
the space around it, I also knew that it must have had some significance for the early First Nations peoples crossing through this area. And sure enough, upon examining this rock, I found it covered with pictographs. I have always been interested in the origins of language and these pictographs are excellent local examples of a very ancient form of sign-making. They are the essence of art as I understand it. I have been to many of the great museums of the world, but the aura of this place overwhelmed me. The beauty of the landscape, the authenticity of the inscriptions, and the reward of discovery driven by intuition made this place very special to me, as it must have been for the peoples who went before me. It is not on a map but I gave it a name: Chopaka Rock. I returned later with a large format camera and photographed the rock and its pictographs with the idea of making a work that could capture the magic of this experience. I made one image that monumentalized the rock, but I had to do something more than appropriate this pictographic art in a strictly referential or documentary way. I wanted to express my connection to the space as a whole. So I then made two large canvas works that did not show the rock itself but the whole valley as a form of abstract panorama. On the field of the white canvas I combined the photographs of the valley with silkscreened images that showed details of a pioneer wagon road cutting through the sagebrush. In my work I like to evoke complex references to experience in a very direct and uncomplicated way – rather like the pictographs themselves. I suppose my work is like a very modern form of pictographic art. I titled these paintings Chopaka I and II and they are now hanging in the Wosk Center for Dialogue in Vancouver.

I was struck by how you tied in your experience of Chopaka Rock with reference to some of the great museums that you’ve visited. Rocks and museums, pictographs and photographs, are in many ways not that dissimilar.

In his book The Voices of Silence (first published 1953) André Malraux takes his discourse beyond the influence of the museum, to the “museum without walls,” which situates photography and reproduction technologies at the centre of the changing reception and meanings of art. While museums served to promote the intellectualization of art, photography and reproduction technologies transformed our experiential relationship to art, in fact our very idea of art, and it might be further argued, the idea of reality itself. As it would be near to impossible to experience art in the same climate or conditions of its time and place of making, we should, as you described, embrace the experience in our present moment, including all its accompanying weights and resources.
I would only like to say that museums as such have had an important function in forming our larger historical cultural awareness. My ability to appreciate pictographs is partly informed by what I learned from those works preserved in the museums, including the “museum without walls,” that discourse of reproductions of original works of art from everywhere and all time, but which have entered our lives through the language of images. As an artist I don’t just passively admire works of art. I speak back to them in my own expressive way. We “picture” our world and that is how we come to know it and feel at home in it. Making art is one of the ways that I feel at home in the landscape of my experience. It is a way of communicating with those signs that I discover in my wanderings, whether they are painted on rocks or hanging in the museum.