Midcentury Studio

This series of forty-two photographs is the outcome of a complex fiction that Stan Douglas has crafted: the record of a self-taught Vancouver photojournalist who stumbled into his vocation after completing his service as a pilot in World War II. Douglas conducted meticulous research in two significant photographic archives: the Black Star archive, a collection of over 250,000 photos at Ryerson University dating from the early part of the century onwards, and the Artray Limited photo archive based at the Vancouver Public Library. As evident in many forms within both archives, it was a pre-standardized and non-formulized aesthetic of 1940s photography that influenced Douglas in creating *Midcentury Studio* and the photographic meanderings by its fictitious author. This kind of photography predates the norms common in most postwar photography, which tended toward a more formulaic composition, narrative, and style. Earlier photographers had wielded large, clumsy cameras with flashbulbs, and had neither the settings nor the manuals that accompanied the later 35mm camera which became standard in the profession. Thus the photos in *Midcentury Studio* appear more reliant upon the intuitive and entrepreneurial skills of photographers of the time, such as the more renowned Weegee, or other photographers such as the Canadian Raymond Munro, whose often sensational work has many deliberate parallels with the images and settings of *Midcentury Studio*. Casting crews, stylists, wardrobe, location research and shooting, and stage setting were all employed in making the photographs, in a full production akin to the process of cinema. The historical settings of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the technique and aesthetic of this anachronistic photography, are faithfully reproduced by Douglas, as identified by his research in the aforementioned archives.

The photographs in *Midcentury Studio*, which portray scenes as if pulled from the years 1945 to 1951, have six key forms. Photos such as *Trick or Treat*, *Athlete*, *Horse*, *Juggler*, *Worm Digger*, and *Dresser* pertain to everyday moments, all seemingly concealing or referencing some greater unknown or anxiety beyond the frame. A series of fashion-like illustrations emerge in *Hair*, *Intrigue*, and *Shoes*, all of which seem to hint at malevolence or feverish vertigo (the reference to Hitchcock is most evident in *Hair*). An uncanny world of magicians and illusion emerges in photos such as *Rings*, *Smoke*, and *Flame*, where this world of trickery may be more akin to the postwar context and this type of photography than normally apparent at first glance. A world of murder and crime is depicted in *Cache*, *Dice*, *Incident*, and *Burlap*, where these common photojournalistic tropes may betray a greater context of the uncertainties and anxieties of postwar North America, again also complemented by the very nature of this almost mechanical photographic aesthetic. Then there are scenes from more public settings, including sports events, such as *Hockey Fight* and *Cricket Pitch*, and lastly a series called *Malabar People*, which depicts individuals swathed in dark shadows. They represent the regulars and staff of a nightclub based in Vancouver at the time, a nightclub that really existed—and the research for the series is based on the thesis of Douglas's uncle, a sociologist.

Guises, staged countenances, masks and askance positions, acts of illusion, scenes of crime, and variations of the human condition are illuminated in the photographs. Meanings are anything but fixed, despite the indexical nature of the medium as well as the archetypal and identifiable components of the images. Douglas refers to this 1940s photography as an "idiom" of photography. There is an uncanny precision in

the way he has re-created the unstable signs and gestures that are bound within the mechanical chance of the camera as activated by the photographer, where transient specters and agents of some greater, unknown force both appear and elusively glide in and out of the apparent roles they play.