

From the Interior: Frank Rodick

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It begins in the city, in pursuit of some definitive moment, a thread of meaning where all visible elements coalesce and finding only the familiar uncertainty, where everything appears broken. Yet by allowing the medium itself to “fail” in an especially revealing

way, finding time and its distortions as something fluid, irrational even, Frank Rodick begins to articulate a particular language within photography, where the present itself becomes unrecognisable, torn apart. It is no coincidence either that these first images concentrate on the movement of people through the city, the figure and its permutations – *slippages* – are fundamental to Rodick's work, its real core. Faces become masks, reduced to gesture and outline, perhaps we're seeing the real face, or at least another of many, the infinite regression of permissible (and *impermissible*) selves.



He then begins to move even further inward, descending bodily into the labyrinth, but the effect is much the same. Boundaries don't hold and are subsequently impossible to restore; these changes are *material* – or even more so, of some deeper substance. Trace the nerves, under the permeable skin, the hungering flesh, to an architecture of bone, all the abrupt transitions of self – to *nothing*, and the fact of that incomprehensible absence is what animates Frank Rodick's work, out on the furthest edge of consciousness.

Image and reality bleed together, each finding a way to contaminate the other. The use of language becomes crucial too, though not necessarily *validating* – it serves only to deepen the mystery, a challenge to whatever expectations we might have about the difference between words and the pictures to which they are so tenuously anchored. There's also something about the multiple images and series that suggests a real frustration with our understanding of what photography can be, his purposeful insistence on a *fractured* perspective.

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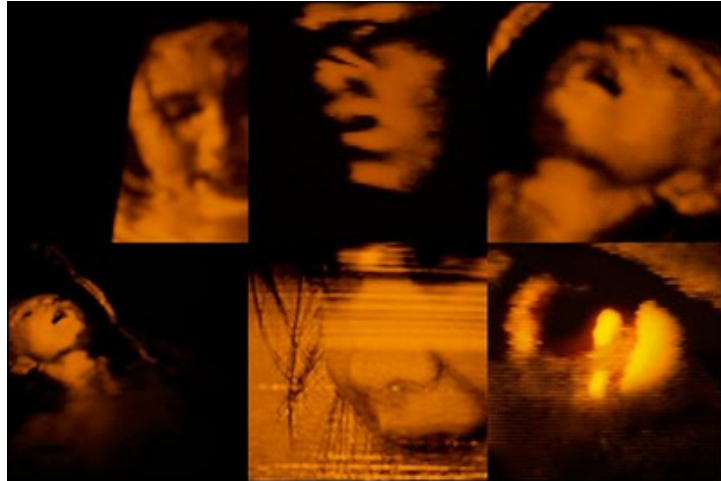
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(Fragments of a celestial abattoir and La pucelle from Arena)

A shifting, ambiguous sprawl, resistant to meaning – whatever rises unbidden from the depths, these are fictions interchangeable with truth, a plunge into the chasm of our visual unconscious, connecting memory and trauma in some visceral way. They are fragments of an internal dialogue played over obsessively, messages from the interior. Rodick finds grotesque (but *faithful*) mirrors for our own tragic profanity, our brokenness and the impossible hope for redemption, this horribly immediate and liquid flesh, with its longings that cannot be fully satisfied, yet never denied. He goes even further to demonstrate its presence; these are dense objects, enclosures for the slaughterhouse tracings of desire.



(Room 36 (Time on earth) from Faithless Grottoes)

So this is how we come apart and what shows through the cracks, the often desolate landscape of our souls. These images reveal the numb confusion in discovering that the most violent extremes of experience and emotion are concealed by stray aspects of everyday life, it's just a matter of pulling back the curtain a little, or a slip in the habits of seeing for this other world to be laid bare. The brutal and beautiful photographic work of Frank Rodick touches on the darkest themes of our existence, the deepest shadows brought reluctantly into the light.

He has been kind enough to answer a few questions, providing a real insight into his background and the development of his extraordinary work. (Frank's website is [here](#)).

What was it that first drew you to photography?

A number of things come to mind. First of all, it was a marriage of relative convenience. My father was an amateur photographer who could be pretty fanatical about it. Apparently there were nights when he wouldn't sleep at all because he was printing in the basement darkroom. Then he'd just go to work in the morning. So I grew up surrounded by photographs and cameras and darkroom equipment and started using all of it pretty young. If I remember correctly, I knew how to print a photograph before I learned how to ride a bike.

Also my parents owned a bookstore, which was a pretty amazing place to grow up in. It

was a true independent, liberal bookstore in Montreal at a time and in a place that actually made this a big deal. Because my father was into photography, they always carried a lot of books and other stuff that was very oriented to the image. Part of the business was used and antiquarian materials, so not only were there photography books, but there were old pamphlets and postcards and magazines. My parents just bought everything they could, selling some of it, keeping the rest. There was tons of this stuff in the house, so the home I grew up in was like some mythological library, with printed materials of all kinds, stacked everywhere, literally up to the ceilings, just waiting to be found. Also, my parents never stopped me from looking at anything I pleased. It didn't matter what I found; I could look at it. It could be an old magazine about blue movies – I remember a few of those – or World War One pamphlets or children's books. It didn't matter.

So I really grew up inundated by photographic images. Maybe because the house – rather like the store too – was quite chaotic and crowded – my parents weren't hyper organized to say the least – I think I got pretty used to the idea and the feeling of all kinds of images juxtaposed against each other, regardless of where they came from. I don't know if I thought that was great or not back then – it sounds pretty great to me right now – but it didn't feel weird at all. Maybe it was like living in a 3D collage.

So, when I got around to deciding that I wanted to do something along the lines of artistic expression, photography was right there, as both a technical process I was familiar with and as an experience I'd lived with.

There are aspects of this decision that came on another, later, level. Once I decided that I'd make art my vocation – and that decision was, for at least a brief period of time, a pretty painful one because I'd had another career rather neatly mapped out for myself – I seriously considered some kind of filmmaking career. I really loved the medium, and still do – there's nothing like it, it's magic when it works – and I did a couple of years of formal study. But I came to the conclusion that the communitarian part of it, the necessity of making teams work, would eventually drive me crazy. I grew up doing a lot of stuff on my own – for what it's worth, I'm an only child and I spent lots of time by myself – and I just came to feel that photography was a better fit for my character. There was something that felt soothing and romantic and even heroic about working alone for hours in that orange darkroom glow, listening to music, and trying to bring images to life.

Aside from all these things, when I reflect, I think, and still think, that still photography does a particular thing for me better than any other medium, even film, and that is to somehow make things feel “real” to me, more real than they feel in so-called real life. I don’t mean natural, I mean real, in the psychic, experiential sense. Certain photographs can just make me feel like I’m experiencing something for the first time in its most basic and fundamental sense. It’s not just seeing *that* expression for the first time, for example; it’s really like getting an experiential sense of what an expression actually is, which through words is indescribable. There’s something about photography’s stillness, its special relationship to time, its two dimensional quality, the parameters imposed by the image’s physical limits; they all somehow take me to a deeper and more engaged – and ultimately more satisfying – place in myself. In that sense, a great photograph is like a seductress: it draws you in completely, it excites with its promise of something unfamiliar but still approachable; it takes you someplace you’ve not been to before but still has enough of a lifeline to something you think you know that you’re not completely lost, just lost enough that it’s all exciting and a bit dangerous. And knowing you’re at least a little lost – and maybe more than that – is ultimately always a lot more interesting than thinking you know where you’re going, which is almost always an illusion when it comes to anything more consequential than going around the corner to get a liter of milk.



Untitled No. 93 from Liquid City)

There is a gradual, but none the less distinct, shift in your work from early projects that concentrate on the photographic moment (or at least some external reality, however distorted) to what you're doing now, describing closed worlds of visual experience. I wonder if you could describe how this came about?

I think where I am now – wherever that is – is always where I've been heading. You're right, of course, the *Liquid City* work has a more defined connection to external reality, as you put it. It's reality passed through the mill of, say, a dream or a vision... Of course, the medium for that transformation is subjective individual consciousness. And that's what's really interested me all along. It's not that realism doesn't interest me, it's just that for me this is the most fundamental and by far the most interesting reality of all. (David Shields, among others, puts it nicely in his book *Reality Hunger* when he says that deep down all artists want to be realists. They just differ as to what they believe that reality consists of).

The starting point for *Liquid City* was the city street, which was a natural environment for my first real photography project. For one thing, I just loved Robert Frank's *The Americans*, that dark poetry, the unsentimental melancholy... And I grew up on city streets, spending lots of time in Montreal's downtown core, riding subways and buses – my parents never owned a car and sitting on buses was a perfect way to just watch this panoply of human phenomena – and walking the streets was what I liked to do. There was always great stuff to see.

In visual terms the thing was to find a way to make it look the way I felt it, or at least move it in that direction. Like a lot of things, the aesthetic for *Liquid City*, or whatever you want to call it, came about by accident. I just started taking *a lot* of pictures (the best single piece of advice I ever got from a photography teacher was from Henry Gordillo who told us to take more pictures than we ever imagined we could) and some were blurred and a few were shot from the hip and eventually I got a better sense of what I wanted to do. I just really began to like the way some of these images took things away from a kind of particularity that located the image in a specific external place; it started to look to me like the location point was internal in a sense, although there were definite and recognizable correspondences to what was going on in the outside world. And that also defined for me part of the urban experience: that miasma of flowing, transient experience, where nothing stops moving, everything's in play and wonderfully mysterious...

Sub rosa was started later but done concurrently with *Liquid City*, although in a more compressed time frame, from 1995 to 1997. The human figure is almost always central to my work in some way and again, I wanted to take something that engaged with me personally – in this case, the female body – and work that image into something that pushed it somewhere deeper for me. And again, in *sub rosa*, there was the good fortune of accident, which started with some long expired Polaroid film that produced some pretty quirky things. I just pushed it from there.

But throughout the period of *Liquid City* and *sub rosa* I was collecting videotape, some of it appropriated, some I'd shot myself, not sure what I'd do with it but feeling like eventually it might come together into something...



(No. 5 from *sub rosa*)

Céline – who, in my opinion, might have written the best novel of the twentieth century, *Journey to the Edge of the Night* – said this fabulous thing, which I'm paraphrasing here. It was something like "I want to make hallucinations that are more real than real life." And that was just says it so much better than I could. Real life, traditionally expressed in the photograph (whatever that means, probably not much anymore, which is a good thing) just didn't do it for me. So I'd say that around 2000 I just stopped making images of

what was in front of my eyeballs – I stopped carrying my camera around too, for the most part – and started working on visually extracting what was behind them. And I think that was what *Arena* was about... Really, that was what I've been interested in all along. It's not that naturalism is boring – well, maybe it is, a little – it's just that all that tension and chaos and energy and dread and ecstasy – and yes, it's all tied into sex and death, all really interesting things are, after all – all that stuff was just *so* much more interesting, so much more beyond just interesting. And that's what I was looking for, stuff that could really excite me, where I could look at an image coming together and say, simultaneously, I've never seen this thing before but it's as familiar to me as my own life. It was like trying to dredge up the entrails so to speak of your mind, which is the biggest, wildest space of all.



(3 a.m. (engram) from *Arena*)

I guess one question was how to bend the photographic medium around that holy chore. Some people might say, why use photography, there are other media more suited to it. But so what? Bending something in a direction that maybe it's not quite as supple is, again, a rather interesting, even exciting, thing to do. It takes you places you didn't expect, which as you know is a big deal to me.

I think what happened too is that by around 2000 I've gotten that business of linking images to external reality pretty well out of my system. Actually I'm still very fond of the early photographs – *Untitled, no. 1* from *Liquid City* is still one of my favorite images – and I had to make them to get to where I went later. But it took me a while to get to the point where the starting point was no longer outside but inside. Of course, this inside-outside business is a little bit specious; every image is a self portrait, which is to say, that

it reflects internal realities. It's just that our internal realities – and, perhaps better put, our internal *imperatives* – are different enough in each of us that they manifest themselves like different worlds, which is what they are.

Looking at your work, even from the beginning, it seems there is a profound sense of anxiety, particularly concerning the body and the coherence of identity that I would connect (perhaps wrongly?) to the influence of someone like Francis Bacon. But there is also an obvious concern with multiple images and seriality that suggests a broader range of interests. Maybe you could tell me a little about what has helped you arrive at such a unique style?

It's a tough question to answer. Maybe one way to start is with questions of my own, in this case, a list – in no particular order and by no means exhaustive – of questions that have motivated my work or, or more precisely, that I think have motivated my work:

What are the ways of representing “internal” realities through a visual medium, particularly still photography, which is so effective at evoking a sense of external reality?

How can the still image engage visceral emotions and feelings and sensations that correspond to words such as rage, lust, fear, and ecstasy without reducing these conceptions to the intellectual constructs implied in language itself?

Can you illuminate those things pertaining to the self that reside in shadow while still retaining the shadow itself?

How does one balance a faithful representation of what is inherently unclear with the desire to communicate?

Can you give a sense of auditory volume to a still and silent image?

To what degree is self-reflection and self-examination compatible with what might be called truthfulness?

Can one create something without trace of redemptive purpose?

What does the taking of risks really mean in the creative process?

Perhaps these questions give an idea of at least some of the itches I may have been trying to scratch.

As for influences, yes, of course, you're right about Bacon although I engaged with his work relatively late. I'd also include Munch, Schiele, Kiefer, Beckmann, Kitaj, even Warhol, among the painters, in no particular order. From film, Tarkovsky, Lynch, Haneke, Renoir, the early Bertolucci, Antonioni, the early Wenders, Dreyer. From literature, Dostoevsky, Kertesz, Thomas Bernhard, Kafka, Camus, Houellebecq, Thomas Mann, Kundera, Coetzee, and, of course, Céline. Probably literature, as a medium, has been the most important precisely because it isn't visual; I find it spurs me on but leaves me with freer rein in terms of visual imagination. I haven't listed any photographers because they've perhaps been less important to me on the whole, particularly once I started making more images myself. But some of the ones that come to mind include Robert Frank, Arbus, particularly the later work, Witkin, and S.A. Bachman. And no doubt, I've left out many others.

In line with that, what I'd say about the matter of influence is that it's much less about formal elements than it is about a resonant sensibility. What I think all these artists have in common is that each, in their own ways, has done work that cuts to the quick; they're really quite savage in their ability to cut past the bullshit that people use mainly to distract themselves from the realities that trouble us all. And at times that bullshit can even be reasonably interesting or amusing or seductive, but in the end it falls short in that it evades what matters most. But, to me, these artists don't turn away from difficult things; those are precisely the things that draw them even when it involves pretty savage self examination. And they don't try to clear confusion when that confusion is elemental. Rather they stay with that uncertainty and they explore and engage it.

Their vocation isn't to give the audience relief or catharsis or therapy or well-being. Missions are for missionaries. I think they have the instinct to forswear any sense of moral obligation to their audience. When you do that, your creative parameters increase and so does the relative integrity you bring to the whole enterprise.

Harold Pinter said this about Samuel Beckett:

"He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going, and the more he grinds my nose

in the shit, the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden path, he's not slipping me a wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy — he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not — he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty.”

How great is that? It's the most extraordinary compliment paid by one artist to another that I've ever read or heard.



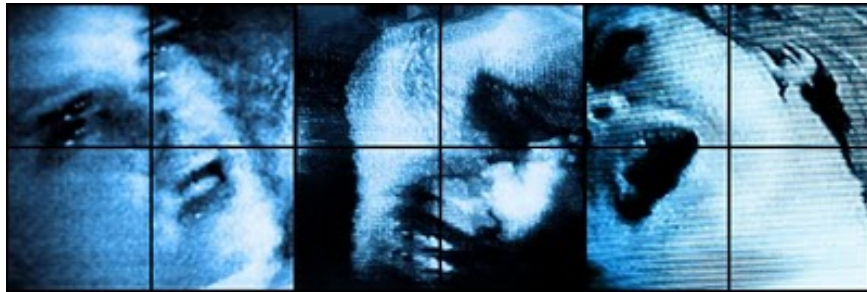
(Decrement from Faithless Grottoes)

In the end, my feeling is that anyone's best work comes from one place and that place is the most profound wound you have in your heart. Everyone has one of those... a great, big gaping wound, and, we spend our lifetimes dealing with it, one way or another.

You mentioned the issue of anxiety and the body. I'd say that whatever anxiety comes through from my work is less *about* the body than expressed *through* the body. I trust bodies more than I trust minds. There's a reason for the term mind-fucking and that is that minds are really good at not only getting fucked around but doing the fucking around as well. But the most affecting truths, I think, are inevitably found below the neck... Sex and death, you can engage those two things on a lot of levels, but the one that counts most in terms of being human is the physical. Just ask anyone who's in the process of getting fucked. Or anyone who really knows and feels they're dying.

When I watched my father doing that – dying – a few years ago, there were lots of words and ideas to fall back on. To a very large extent, civilization is based on varying collections of these words and conceptions. But what I somehow remember is that just watching him die – and it was a very corporeal event, bits of him seemed to be falling away – seemed to drown out the meaning of all those conceptions and it was like all these supposed meanings were put to rest by an existential hum that had become more like a loud whine or a screech. It was unintelligible but as real as anything. And I don't think that experience was an expression of something as simple or not so simple as grief; it was much more elemental. And with that sound – if I can call it that, that's what it felt like – came the kind of anxiety that just settles into bone.

As for the use of multiple images and seriality, what I found after a time was that the single image could only take me so far. Now I really like the still image, precisely for its stillness, which has a kind of otherworldliness that I think is positively terrific. But that just makes combining images that much more interesting to me; it increases the complexity, the ambiguities, the transience of the work, while retaining that mystery of the still image.



Porneia from Faithless Grottoes)

There are lots of ways of describing the differences between artists. And I think one of those ways is along a kind of “clarity/obscurety continuum.” I know that's a terribly clumsy way of phrasing it, but I think there are artists, just as there are people in all walks of life, who incline more to making things clearer and those who don't just revel in but believe in the fundamental reality of a certain kind of intrinsic obscurety. Primo Levi had this great quote in an interview he did in *La Stampa*, where he compares his work to Kafka:

"In my writings, for better or for worse, knowingly or unknowingly, I have always made

an effort to move from dark to clear, like a filtration pump that sucks in cloudy water and expels it clarified, if not sterile. Kafka takes an opposite path; he pours out an endless stream of hallucinations dredged up from levels unbelievably deep, and never filters them. The reader feels them swarming with seeds and spores: they are burning with meaning, but he is never helped to tear down or bypass the veil, so as to see things in the place where they are hidden. Kafka never touches ground, he never deigns to offer you the clue to the maze."

Well, I incline to the Kafka camp – here *please* insert the requisite disclaimers – because for me that's where what I *feel* as reality lies. (W.G. Sebald talked about *the fog*, as the fundamental metaphor for human experience.) Again, there are lots of formal tools to explore and express complexity/obscurity/vagueness and the multiplicity and fracturing of images is just one of them.

When I think of works that really meant a lot to me, not just as an artist, but as a human being trying to make his way through this whole thing, so much of the stuff that comes to mind – Kafka's *The Castle*, Lynch's *Lost Highway*, the poems of Paul Celan, as just a few examples – that stuff was *infused* with multiple meanings. Which is not to say they were a complete mess, although they're necessarily untidy and they're certainly uncomfortable. But one of the things about human beings is that we're creatures that are tend to look for clarity and explanation, but ultimately we live in a world that owes nothing to that inclination, or any of our other inclinations for that matter.

I'm as sure of anything that to get to that place, that place of shadow and fog and roiling emotion, you can't do it through reliance on ideas. Ideas useful for all kinds of things, but when they become a kind of rigid blueprint for art, you suck the life out of the work. I have to rely on, for want of a better word, instinct, on getting lost in things and letting things come to me and getting frustrated and staying frustrated long enough but also excited long enough that I go someplace that feels "elsewhere"... because comfort means that you think you know something, when the reality is that, as Vico said, what we don't know is always so much greater than what we do know.



(The Bathers from Revisitations)

Maybe that helped me feel as free as I have – or as compelled as I have, it depends on how you look at it. There's so much more that could be said here... and I'm not even sure I answered your question.

An excellent catalogue for Frank's recent mid-career retrospective is available from the Deborah Colton Gallery, via their [website](#), or info@deborahcoltongallery.com. It is very well illustrated and has an informative essay by Katherine Ware, curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art. The first part of this interview can be found [here](#), while for further reading try this [article](#) by Bob Black.

Darren Champion writes about photographic art through his blog *The Incoherent Light*, which can be found at www.theincoherentlight.com.

More information about Frank Rodick, his career, and his work can be found at www.frankrodick.com.