

**présence
actuelle**

projets en art contemporain n° 18

*Gwen
MacGregor*



**present
tense**

contemporary project series no. 18

*Gwen
MacGregor*



CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

Time is an indulgence only a few can afford, or so the phrase “be late” used in recent advertising for a luxury wristwatch would have us believe. Our daily language is full of expressions that attribute material value to time. We spend, save and waste time. And we always need more of it because there is never enough. Yet time as experienced is not linear, nor is it a substance measurable by the instruments relentlessly marking its passage. Instead, time affects us as random moments, fleeting impressions, incidental details collected from the unexceptional circumstances of our lives.

In a culture of speed, as the media and communications writer Paul Virilio has described ours, MacGregor’s work defiantly insists on a slow apprehension of events, so that everyday occurrences, the ordinary and overlooked evidence of time and place that inform memory, accumulate and are given uncommon value.

Since the mid 1980s, MacGregor has made work in several media, intuitively attracted to the potential for meaning in the ordinary and expendable. Her pieces evolve through process rather than by following a premeditated design, though for an artist whose practice was formed in the 1980s artistic climate of theoretical debate, MacGregor’s initial engagement with such an open-ended approach was neither immediate nor obvious.

While living in London, England, in the early 1990s, she was inspired by the layers of history that the city offers. Her involvement in mudlarking, a salvaging activity that is for some a serious professional undertaking entailing considerable risk and expertise, led to her installation works based on collections of commonplace, plentiful objects such as clay pipes, buttons and pins. Retrieved from the tidal mud of the River Thames, this ancient detritus provided clues to social activities or industries that flourished centuries earlier. MacGregor’s interest in collecting these objects resulted less from a desire to make faithful archaeological reconstructions than from the potential they represented for creating material models that embody rather than document time’s passage.

More recently, Gwen MacGregor has begun to use media that permit her to, in her words, “mess with time,” as she focuses on temporal inscriptions that would otherwise elude our scrutiny. Her immediate environment at home and away, its quirky but mundane constancy, link the three new works presented here. They are all drawn from ongoing records made over extended periods, some as long as five years, some as short as six months. Each work is a form of evidence, a record of witnessing, without an implied narrative line. Confronted by images of events of little consequence, we may begin to piece together these fragments of the artist’s day-to-day life into a whole, perhaps relating them by conjecture and projection to situations and sites we have known ourselves.

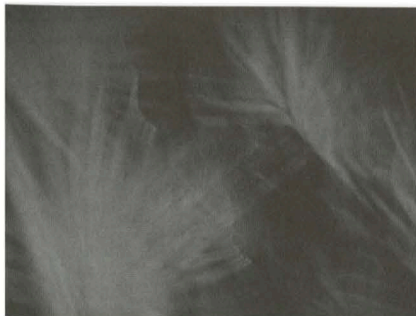


The more than four hundred black-and-white Polaroid photographs seen here were taken by MacGregor during her intermittent travels since 1995. She kept the photos for no particular purpose and formulated the enigmatic title *I was never here* in advance of assembling them in their present format. The title of this piece declares the artist’s resistance to the tourist’s tendency to be a detached observer, a voyeur, and renounces the claim to presence usually secured by imposing oneself on a scene for a snapshot. MacGregor’s photographs are imprecise, apparently haphazard and undistinguished – the antithesis of those defining images that state “I was here.” Many even resemble missed shots – the double exposures, out-of-focus views and unidentifiable details captured when the shutter is released inadvertently. Though the images are in linear sequences implying a progression in time, MacGregor’s arrangement is in fact random and changes with each installation of the work. In this respect, her mementoes approximate the experience of place in time.

The mnemonic distillation of places away from home that constitutes *I was never here* finds its complement in a 1999 piece titled *Whatever* (later re-created as *My Place*), in which MacGregor made an extended photographic portrait of the contents of her private domestic space. She numbered the more than 1200 colour snapshots in the original room-to-room sequence in which they were taken, like evidence from a crime scene or meticulous records for an insurance company, and then installed them in associative groupings based on the objects depicted. These were displayed with a video clip from the 1960s television series *The Prisoner*, in a witty self-reflexive mockery of our relationship to our possessions.

In this exhibition, the recent video piece *7 pm* may be seen as a temporal equivalent of this earlier work. Similarly personal in content, *7 pm* consists of the systematic documentation by MacGregor and her partner, Lewis Nicholson, of whatever happened to be going on in their lives at 7 pm every day. Photos taken in sessions of at least five minutes have been edited to segments of one unbroken minute for each day and, unlike the earlier work cited, are shown in their original sequence. While the rigorous parameters of making *7 pm* underline the habitual continuity of our lives, the assembled content reveals the extraordinary range of mood and activity that occurs at the same moment on any day.

MacGregor’s *7 pm* is an intimate document of personal time slipped into the timeless and public space of the museum. Of the three works brought together here, this one is most directly reminiscent of the programmatic



procedures common to conceptual art, yet the inherent sense of wonder it conveys is closer to the casual real-time explorations in video made by artists drawn to that medium when hand-held cameras first became available.

MacGregor supports her art with her work as a graphic artist for television news, a job that requires the ability to speedily select and integrate images highlighting significant current events for efficient consumption by viewers. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that in the *Stupid little moments* videos presented here, she delights in useless information and minor phenomena. The absurdity of a wristwatch secondhand mechanically malfunctioning so that it advances and retreats repeatedly becomes a metaphor for the ultimately arbitrary and elusive nature of time, which we try to subject to physical bounds. MacGregor draws time out in these videos, holding her subjects in a continuous loop. She follows a Winnie-the-Pooh balloon as it floats around a room, appearing ridiculously to be contemplating standard Wild West wallpaper scenes, or captures a happy face symbol on the lens of party glasses as it is animated by the flickering flame of a candle. In time, a parallel world of gratuitous magic is revealed. MacGregor's art marks time through the modest and attainable wonders of the everyday, where the banal meets the fantastic – if we are watching closely enough.

Jessica Bradley
Curator, Contemporary Art

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1.
I was never here, ongoing since 1995
black-and-white Polaroid photographs mounted on board
each 10.8 x 8.5 cm
2.
Stupid little moments, 2000–01
5 digital videos looped, 5 LCD screens
3.
7 pm, ongoing since September 2000
digital video, current version 180 minutes
Gwen MacGregor in collaboration with Lewis Nicholson



Whatever 1999, 1200
colour photographs
and video. Photo:
Gwen MacGregor.

SUGGESTED READING

Fold it up and put it away: Fernie's Curse, artist's book project. Lethbridge, Alberta: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1998.
Morgan, Chris. "Flywheel Exhibition at the Nunnery." *C Magazine* (Spring 1999).
Wawzonek, Donna. "Moving and Storage," *Parachute* no. 96 (Oct/Nov/Dec 1999) :79–80.

OTHER RELATED READING AND FILMS

Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way, In Search of Lost Time*.
Viola, Bill. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*.
London: Violette Editions, 1998.
Virilio, Paul. *The Vision Machine*. London: British Film Institute, 1994.
Les Rendez-vous d'Anna, Chantal Akerman, 1978.
Landscape in the Mist, Theo Angelopoulos, 1988.
Solaris, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972.
Nostalgia, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983.

BIOGRAPHY

Gwen MacGregor was born in 1960 in Calgary, Alberta, and now lives in Toronto. She studied art history and studio art at York University, Toronto. Since graduating in 1982, she has shown her work nationally and internationally.
Her recent solo exhibitions include *A few reasons for messing with time*, The Koffler Gallery, Toronto (2000); *Arriba*, a site-specific installation at Ex Teresa Art Gallery, Mexico City (1999); *Fold it up and put it away: Fernie's Curse*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (1998) and Mercer Union, Toronto (1994). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, recently including *Moving and Storage*, seen in locations in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto (1999); *Centrifugal*, Art Gallery of Hamilton (1999); *Flywheel*, The Nunnery Gallery, London, England (1999); *The Real MacKay*, Clarington Arts Centre, Bowmanville (1998); and *Mudlarkers and Measurers*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, and Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa (1997).

Gwen MacGregor has been active in the Toronto art community as a member of several artists' collectives such as Blanket, Spontaneous Combustion and Flywheel, and she has served on the boards of Trinity Square Video and Mercer Union Gallery.

PRESENT TENSE

The work of contemporary artists is the museum's vital link to the present. As a continuous series of projects, Present Tense attempts to share with the viewer the range and complexity of artistic production in our time. The series is intended to offer a timely and intimate encounter with recent work both by younger and more established artists. By focusing on the variety of approaches and issues within contemporary artistic practice that contribute to today's critical debates, Present Tense is an invitation to engage in a creative process of inquiry and discovery.

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Gwen MacGregor
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