



The visible world, through the ground, being and somethingness, reading in the air, from location/dis-location(s), c. 1999 - 2016. From: A history of photography (detail), MKG Gallery, Toronto, 2016.

Pieces of the World: The Photography of Jayce Salloum

By Keith Wallace

Jayce Salloum has been working as an artist in photography, video and performance for close to 40 years. His early career found him living in Toronto, San Francisco and New York, with extended visits to Lebanon from where his family is descended. Having explored in his early work the genre of ready-made images intended for circulation within the public realm and proposing new ways of understanding them, upon his return to New York in the late 1980s he

embarked on a series of photographic suites that consists of images he photographed. Under the summary title of *untitled photographs*, and sub-titles that differ from installation to installation — for example, *TO THE TRADE* or *22oz. THUNDERBOLT* or *NEUTRAL / BRAKES / STEERING*, etc. (1988–1998), *location/dis-location(s)* (1996–ongoing) and *subjective affinities* (2004–ongoing) — this extended body of work forms the basis of different photographic

installations that morph from location to location and represent various, mostly urban, settings.

The majority of images in the New York City *untitled photographs* consist of storefronts representative of low-end personal business ventures rather than brand-name franchises; enterprises that exist on the “backside of urban capitalism.”¹ As individual images, they are modest, recalling the tradition of

street photography affiliated with the documentary exploits of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, artists who captured the ambience of urban life through chance encounters and impulsive observations. Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher discussed the aspect of spontaneity evident in these images in the way that Salloum, while walking down the street, would suddenly stop, take a photo and move on.² The resultant images, cropped in a way that seems

to forgo compositional considerations, emphasize the street photography snapshot aesthetic.

But these images of New York are not simply arbitrary illustrations of the urban environment or examples of a provisional movement of goods; they are a visual diary, as well as a form of research, offering evidence of Salloum’s relationship with the cultural, social and geographic conditions that he occupied

at the time. In installations of these photographs, the very public subjects of the storefronts, where one is looking through glass from the outside to the inside, are punctuated by images directed to the outside, looking through glass from the inside of either apartments or taxis. Oddly, there are no people represented, and the storefronts he pictures are subjective stand-ins for the individual proprietors who present for the public an idiosyncratic transaction between their

own personal aesthetics of display and the commodities they offer for sale. These images speak of stories, and “stories behind the stories,”³ not ones that can be literally identified, but, rather, stories constructed by the viewer in response to the objects on display and the context of their surroundings.

As with all of Salloum’s work, the method of display plays a crucial role in communication. While each exhibition is composed of individual photographs, the photographs have been positioned in ways — isolated, paired or clustered in syncopated patterns across the wall — that tease out similarities or contrasts among them, and echo the disjointed and fugitive experience of moving through the city. In addition, the arrangement of the images is not set, and may alter with each subsequent installation so that new relationships can surface among them.

A number of photographs from *untitled: location/dis-location(s)* were exhibited

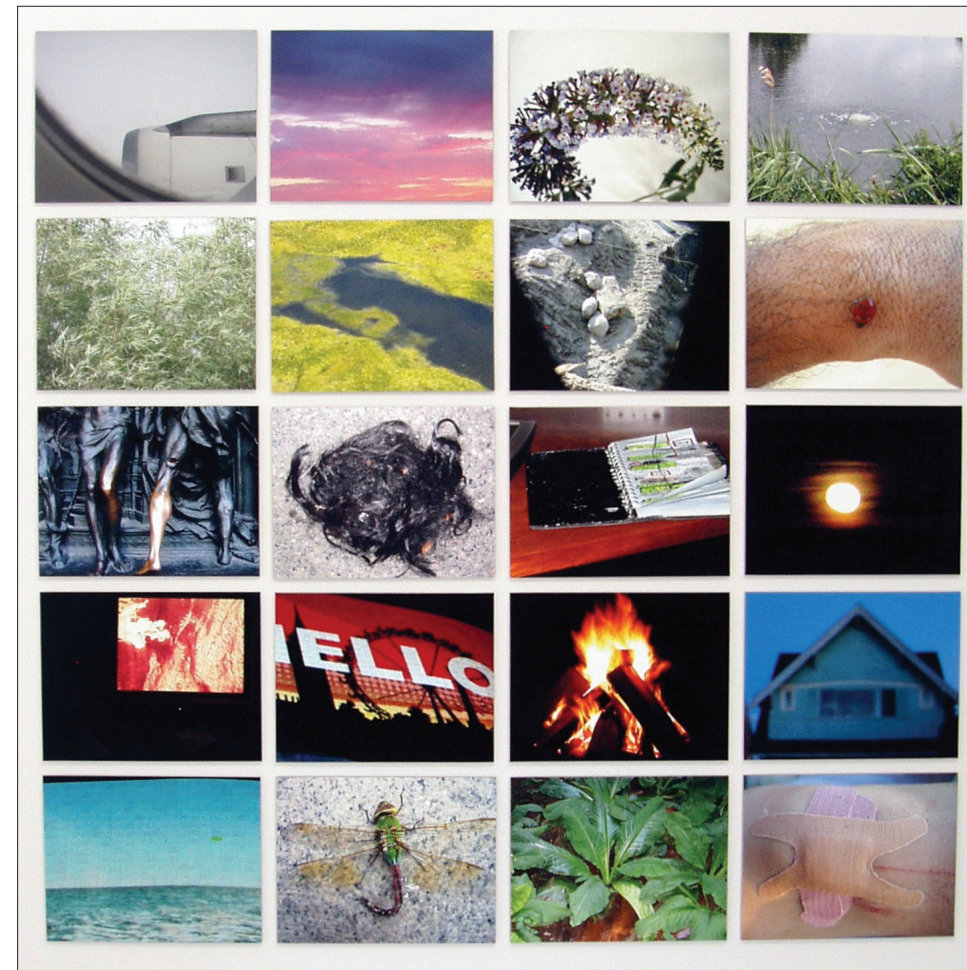
for the first time as a selection of backlit posters in bus shelters throughout Vancouver, away from the Downtown Eastside, the neighbourhood in which most of the images in the series originated.⁴ At the same time, others were inserted into storefronts in the Downtown Eastside. Together, these two modes of installation played a highly public role in the self-reflection of a community, and communities within this community. In *location/dis-location(s)*, while images of storefronts have a continued presence, other incidental details have entered the picture within his experience of the urban environment, not only in terms of the marginal, grittier sides of the city — discarded garbage, temporary shelters, empty and condemned buildings, all existing in some undetermined interstitial space — but also, for example, in the persistence of nature, whether wild or domesticated. Collectively presented in thematic or typological, tightly arranged clusters — piles, containers, nature, signs, sunsets, airports, fire, etc. — this universe of discreet moments makes visible that which might normally exist only in our peripheral vision as we maneuver through the city; moments that most people might unconsciously overlook, but ones Salloum seeks out. The stories they have to tell are fragmentary, abstract and even poetic.

Even though the images in these bodies of work share similarities, the sense of spontaneity that characterizes the New York series appears less evident in the later series, where the “eye” of the camera lens, via the eye of Salloum, seems more intentional in what becomes the subject of his photographs. His archive of images multiplies and diversifies, particular objects, moments and scenarios seem to acquire greater resonance within his typological radar. In reference to other artists who have also photographed Vancouver streets, Bill Jeffries alluded to this difference as the “relations between documentary photography and photography as a semiotic project,”⁵ which, he proposed, might also distinguish the early documentary-like photographs of Fred Herzog, Kurt Lang, or Fred Douglas, from those of Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, or Stan Douglas. The latter are representative of what is called the Vancouver School

of photography, and whose urban investigations more aggressively blur documentary style with artistic intent — they are, and are not, documentary. What this suggests is that these artists, Salloum among them, are more self-conscious of the visual social/symbolic content of their images at the moment the photograph is taken, not after, which redirects the narrative content from the purportedly objective, to something more deliberate, more subjective.

Salloum’s images have a decidedly less traditional fine art photography aesthetic relative to the high production values found in the work of most Vancouver School artists. Instead, he remains rooted in the imperfect and provisional characteristics of street photography, an approach that extends back to his earliest photographic work in which aesthetic “finish” was never a goal. But, perhaps more to the point, the conceptual underpinnings of his work did not evolve out of being in Vancouver, and thus might be more difficult to interpret within the established discourse of the Vancouver School. While many of his images are of Vancouver, his approach to photography is the result of having lived, learned and carried out his practice for extended periods elsewhere — Kelowna, San Francisco, Toronto, San Diego, New York, Beirut — and, as such, his work is not so dependent upon place, but instead upon an encounter with potential images wherever he may be or wherever they may exist.

Looking beyond Vancouver is even more prevalent in his most recent series of photographs, *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, which continues the “cluster” arrangements that he employed with his earlier *location/dis-location(s)* photographs of Vancouver. This new series represents places Salloum has visited in recent years, among them Argentina, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Hawaii and Mexico, as well as remote and rural places on the west coast of British Columbia. Yet none of these locations are identified, they do not assume a placename, so the interaction among them is through a visual, even subliminal, register. They do, however, share similarities within their differences. The tropical flowers, for example, with their electric colours and



Subjective affinities, 2004-2009, from *location/dis-location(s)*.

bizarre formations, are not common to Vancouver, yet an image of dandelions or an evening primrose found closer to home have a comparable presence within the visual cluster, so, in a sense their meeting within Salloum’s installation both “locates and dis-locates” them.

As one scans the wall, cadences emerge in which a cluster of images such as the brightly coloured flowers will shift into a cluster of geological formations, then to a cluster of architectonic entrances and exits, to birds and reptiles, to little bits of debris that have become hostage to a power line or a crevice in a piece of wood, and on and on. And in some cases the clusters emphasize formal relationships, be it architectural, colours, or the presence of something as seemingly banal as rectangles within sites that are worlds apart. Yet, Salloum does not restrict these clusters to tightly regulated themes; unrelated images are

inserted into a cluster to complicate our reading of it, and as one navigates further through the installation even more of these juxtapositions emerge — conveying encounters that are inescapably a part of lived experience.

The contrasts between discarded detritus and images of nature in earlier manifestations of *location/dis-location(s)* have continuity in *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, where human intervention in both its most gentle and destructive ways appropriates the space of nature. In this installation, these relationships are less geographically or culturally specific and suggest that they are not confined within any single political or sovereign space. Flowers are not necessarily natural in that many undergo a process of hybridization or genetic modification that situates them within the domain of human mediation. In Salloum’s work, human intervention

is seen and not seen; it is there but not always obvious; for example, potholes that are carved into a road by the vehicles that traverse it. Indeed, images of humans remain rare in this installation — a hand picking up ice crystals, a figure gazing into the distance. Images of nature transform into more human habitats, some representative of the worst kind such as the Museum Of The Revolution in Nicaragua, where torture chambers have become memorials, a marked disparity to the sublime expanses implied in the images of sky and ocean that in human terms are symbolic of constant change above and beyond our control.

Presenting such a vast array of images offers an unpredictable wealth of visual experience, and though Salloum sees this particular project, as he does others, as research, as collecting and as a subjective chronicle of his various journeys throughout the world — for the viewer, the work is not necessarily meant to be considered exclusively about an experience that is his alone, but about how we can each construct yet another meta-narrative from pieces of the world that Salloum has picked up. **M**

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Notes

1. Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, “archive of the street,” in *untitled: jayce salloum*, eds. Keith Wallace and Jan Allen (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre/Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1999), 21
2. *Ibid.*, 22
3. Interview with the artist, February 10, 2009
4. *Territory* was an exhibition co-produced by Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, and Artspeak, Vancouver, in 2006.
5. Bill Jeffries, “The Shock of the Old—Street Photography in Vancouver,” in *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955 to 1985*, eds. Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry, Jerry Zaslove, *West Coast LINE* 47, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2005, 21



Sylvia’s shop, cabinet, previous wares holding their own, 245 Main St. (between Cordova & Powell St.), Vancouver, 7/6/04 (272); Renfrew St., Vancouver, from the ‘Territory’ project, transit shelter signage space photograph (prod. Artspeak & Presentation House, Vancouver, 2006; from *location/dis-location(s)*)