

## THEY DIG WITH THEIR CAMERA

When the Norwegian explorer, Helge Ingstad and his archaeologist wife, Anne Stine, first crossed the Atlantic to look, with new eyes, at L'anse aux meadows in Labrador, they brought with them Old World sagas, and were able to uncover a part of the New World history lost to Canadians, who although immersed in history, were blinded by the opaque lens of their prejudices and assumptions. What the Ingstads did by looking at the past was to change the future of Canada, and as Canadians moved forward with a new meta-narrative, they were obligated to revisit what they had been taught to believe. The myths that the Ingstads brought to Newfoundland in the 1960s became melded with the geography, fusing idea and form into a new "reality", and forcing governments and educators across the country to rewrite the history of Canada.

Some times it is good to be reminded that we are not the first to have walked down this road, that others too have dreamed this journey. In our current rush to live in the future, we abandon the past, and forget to live the present. Now, the Hammers have come to our shores, not to dig with shovels, but to use their cameras as archaeological tools to "dig" into our past, and to reveal our future. Like the Ingstads, Christoph and Maja are new eyes. Not passive detailers of artefact and antiquity but transformative chroniclers whose contact with their subject is fraught with an existential query. Their photographs ask who these people were that went before us, and what has become of them? It is as if these images, a street bending to the harbour, power lines disappearing, a broken road and tilting dreams, expose our transience and celebrate our permanence. A paradox of emotion and will. The sea and the sky skulking just past the shore where bright paint is doused on rotting buildings in a fragile attempt to hold off the inevitable assault of nature. Hamlet's "O what a piece of work is man!" must bow to the power of erosion. Here we have it, not a prescriptive courage, but a descriptive one. It is no easy thing to boldly face the past and the future in one click of a shutter.

Their archaeological approach to photography betrays how intensely in conflict they are with their "dig". These profoundly urban Europeans, having honed their wits surviving the city jungles of the world, are razors that lay open the surface and expose what is hidden to those of us whose quotidian proximity has been an anodyne. These, starkly majestic images are fraught with a wire-tight tension linking the photographer's attempt to lay bare the beauty of the present - thereby exposing the nostalgia of the past, to the inevitability of the future. Their camera traces the outlines of a boat's hull, deserted and tilting precariously against the solid line of the horizon. The geography will prevail, the boat will

not. Wooden homes and tenuous hamlets cling awkwardly to the shoreline like a cliché of who we were - the inhabitants long gone to work the mines and oil fields of the prairies. An old pier rises out of the rocky seabed, the faint mists of time cloaking our history. The Hammers pull back this veil, and Canadians must, once again, change our meta-narrative if we are to move forward. These images rip away the nostalgia and force us to face our future and re-evaluate our mythologies.

Prophets, archeologists, and chroniclers - it all comes down to a way of seeing. This photographic dissonance that observes the tension between the past and the future by looking at the present is in the neatly marked road, flanked by orderly power lines, but where the organic lines of decay ripple across the asphalt and towards our future. It is in the incarnadine soil of Prince Edward Island raked open in long corrugated furrows running to the sky, the earth's flesh exposed to our rapacious craving for ever more and more of its lifeblood. And it is in brightly painted boats, tiny points of primary colour on the open sea, that bring home the men and women and brighten the harbour with their garish panache and hopeful names.

Perhaps, therefore, it is not so strange that E.J. Pratt's quintessentially Canadian poem, *Erosion*, would serve as an appropriate epigram to Hammers' art, because in these photos too we see that, although, "it took the sea a thousand years to trace the granite features of this cliff ... it only took the sea an hour one night to place these granite seams upon a woman's face." It is in this erosion of nature and man that the palimpsest of the history of human activity in the Maritimes can best be seen. There are implicit strata of the comings and goings of humans in many photos, and yet there is never a person to be seen. A yellowed and rotting boat lies covered with red vegetation and beside it, a red house, growing out of the rocks, bulrushes, and moss, peeks just above the horizon at the sea. Does anyone live here, or have its inhabitants, like the shoreline, been eroded away, covered in time, their story lost, until the Hammers began to "dig" with their camera?

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