

North Dakota Museum of Art

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THE FAMILY PHOTO ALBUM

Roddy MacInnes and the Function of Photography

IN 1993, Scottish artist Roddy MacInnes found two photo albums in a flea market in Denver. Inside was the photographer's signature (Nina Weiste), the date the photographs were made (1917), and one geographical reference (Jim River). His research led him to Dickey County, North Dakota. According to MacInnes, "I began the project with the initial intention of addressing such questions as why do we have the need to create a photographic record of our lives, and what role do photographs play in the construction of identity? The project goals have since expanded to include an exploration of connections between people, landscape, memory, and time. I am interested in issues surrounding the relationships between people and the landscape, sense of place, memory and identity. Most often, personal stories, including my own, drive my work, but what interests me most is the area in which the personal becomes public and the specific becomes general.

Although the people and places recorded in Nina Weiste's photographs are unique, and specific to her, we recognize them. In terms of vernacular photography, they are familiar to us because we understand their language. Art critic Susan Sontag writes that vernacular photography and more specifically, the family album, is photography in its truest sense, it memorializes the achievements of individuals. "Through photographs, people construct a portrait chronicle of themselves, a portable kit of images that bears witness to their connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed, so long as photographs get taken and are cherished. Photographs offer indisputable evidence that an event took place or a trip was made. They actively promote nostalgia and give us an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal. In short, it is a way of certifying experience. This is something most of us can relate to, the process of recording our lives, our places and our tribes. Nina Weiste's photographs of life at the beginning of the twentieth century also provide a record of a landscape which was about to undergo a marked transformation. The rural environment she inhabited has change. Her photographs lay claim to another reality and a connection to the past.

Moreover, whether consciously or subconsciously, we use photography to record both what we are, and where we are, in space and time. And because we collectively use photography for the same purpose, the particulars of what and where, are almost incidental. What becomes comforting is the general, or the familiar that we feel when we look at vernacular photographs, because they leave us with the feeling of being connected, or of sharing a common history through visual language.

Many of the photographs in Nina Weiste's albums were taken in and around the small town of Oakes and Guelph, North Dakota, and also in the near-by town of Ellendale where she attended

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teachers training college. Also that year she traveled to Paul, Idaho where, I believe, she was a student teacher for a short time. Within the photographs Nina Weiste took that year, there are recurring themes. The locations change, but the themes are consistent. She photographed the significant people in her life, her friends and her family. She also photographed the landscape wherever she was, and how it was being used. In all of the photographs, there is a sense of celebration and excitement, possibly because of the great transitions taking place in her life. She is leaving home. She is anticipating nostalgia. And because of this, I am tempted to believe that Nina Weiste understood the significance in photography's ability to preserve memory, especially since she knew that great changes were about to take place. She had the foresight to make a visual record of the changes, by photographing what was familiar, and also who she was, and what she would become.

My objectives were to spend time in the environments of Nina's photographs, and to capitalize on her recurring themes with my own camera. I attempted to see what I imagined she would have seen, and tried to convey that in my photographs. I also photographed the people who now occupy those landscapes, and began to understand how the landscapes and people had changed, or had not changed. I also photographed my own feelings of connection and disconnection to what I saw, and whom I met. I want to give visual expression to the connections that exist between Nina Weiste and me, her past and my present. As I occupy and re-photograph the landscape that was familiar to her in 1917, I seek to create metaphors that resonate between her photographic record, and my own. By juxtaposing her vernacular photographs, with my constructed landscapes, a dialogue is generated, one which addresses issues of photography and memory, of past and present, of specific and general.

Nina Weiste died in Pueblo, CO in 1983, and I have very little information about her life between 1917 and 1983, except that she was a teacher in the plains of eastern Colorado before getting married and moving to Pueblo. Through my continuing research I expect to learn much more about Nina Weiste's life, and the new information will give form to the completion of this project.

MacInnes, who teaches photography at the University of Denver, has shown *Jim River: Sad but Sympathetic* at the Opera House Gallery of Art, Ellendale, ND, in May 2008. Other exhibitions include the Dacotah Prairie Museum, Aberdeen, SD; The Arts Center, Jamestown, ND; and the Corps of Discovery Museum, Yankton, SD. Each time the work is exhibited in the Jim River region, local people further fill in the story.

MacInnes's Jim River project will be shown at the North Dakota Museum of Art in the exhibition *Remembering Dakota*, June 10 - August 19, Grand Forks.