

## **2013 Eldon & Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize nominee: Allen Ball**

On behalf of the Multicultural Centre Public Art Gallery, it is my honour to nominate Allen Ball, an exceptional candidate for the 2013 Eldon & Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize for his exemplary work *Sight Unseen*.

The desire to create work that is explicitly social in nature, with an emphasis on public art and social engagement, has been central to Ball's practice for over 25 years. He is interested in a broad range of methodologies that encompass painting, screen-based projects, film, video, and immersive digital photography. *Sight Unseen* is a prime example of this immersive approach for this screen-based installation was specifically designed for presentation at the Multicultural Centre Public Art Gallery, Stony Plain, Alberta.

*Sight Unseen* ran from May 12 to June 5, 2013, and was comprised of a video portrait projected alongside a large-scale photographic image of Room 34 of the Musée d'Orsay. The video portrays a partially blind photographer—the artists' brother—staring out at the viewer, while the photograph looks into a gallery of Monet paintings and young couple staring at a cellphone. A mirror, an eye-test and two chairs round out the objects in the exhibition.

Ball took the photograph of a couple visiting Room 34 in the Musée d'Orsay in June 2007. We can see them staring intently at the tiny screen but we cannot see what they are seeing. Ball explains that he had noticed this couple actively engaged in taking, and then, reviewing images of paintings on their mobile device. They proceeded to spend more time engaging with the arrested images on their small screen than with the actual objects in front of them.

Ball felt compelled to capture this “act of looking at art”, for just as the screens of digital media have become the crucial mode of communication in our cultural, social and technological landscape, this now familiar scene presents us with one of the ways people experience and interact with art, and in this case painting, in our digital age.

The photograph was presented in *Sight Unseen* as a 10 ft by 15 ft digital print on white poplin. The photographic image was designed to completely fill the field of view in the entryway to the gallery, so that the couple in the Room 34 image are presented larger than life size, and thus act as an introduction to the rest of the exhibition.

The print is literally hung on the picture rail that borders the gallery space, while simultaneously dividing the room in half along the north/south axis, thus compressing the space and amplifying the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. The scale and position of the image within the gallery is of critical importance, as it was intended to immerse the viewer within the artwork, as it maps Room 34 at the Musée d'Orsay over the gallery space at the Multicultural Centre

Public Art Gallery, for these spaces share an uncanny similarity in their respective colour schemes and architectural form.

On the other side of the screen we see a back-projected video portrait of a man staring intently out at us, while a white fabric sheet wafts in a breeze behind him. This is a Super8mm film portrait of his younger brother Steven, originally shot in the Spring of 1984, as he was recovering from the effects of brain surgery following a cerebral aneurysm in December 1983.

At the time, he simply wanted to record moving images of Steven's face, to bare witness and document his ongoing recovery from these traumatic events. Similarly, in the looped clip *Ball use*, Steven appears to be "staring" blanking back at us, but this not an effort to avoid such theatrical affectations, for he is in fact, legally blind.

Although Steven's blindness is a central theme of *Sight Unseen*, it is a fact we could not possibly cipher from the Super8mm footage alone, and so it is acknowledged within the exhibition by the presence of a sight-test. This image is a single stimulus supra-threshold diagram that illustrates the extent of Steven's faulty vision, its black circles reveal his particular absence of sight as partial, incomplete, but still blind.

Turning away from the sight-test and screen, we are confronted by the presence of a framed mirror. The mirror and the sight-test are mounted in antique hand-silvered frames, which reference the traditional ones we observe supporting Monet's paintings in the photograph of Room 34. We instantly recognize the mirror within *Sight Unseen* as a screen that reflects back to us an inverted view of the world.

The mirror is placed on the opposite wall perpendicular to the projected Super 8mm film. Anyone peering into the mirror obscures the moving image that is projected behind them, guaranteeing the viewers' inclusion within the artwork. This was one of the strategies Ball employed to encourage the viewer to consider their participatory role in this exhibition as their very presence concurrently changes and completes the artwork while also creating a place to incite intersubjective encounters.

Two, more or less identical vintage chairs, round out the objects in the installation, with each chair positioned beneath the mirror and the sight-test respectively. These chairs have a contemplative function, not unlike the seating that is common within art galleries and museums, such as the benches we see within the image of Room 34. But unlike the neutrality of chairs within these cultural spaces, the chairs in *Sight Unseen* have other operative functions, as well as being sculptural objects and products of material cultural, they actively direct the gaze of the passive viewer toward an incomplete view of the exhibition, since one cannot see the work that is literally, hanging-over our heads.

Representative of many times and places, the pieces included in *Sight Unseen* are meant to create a contemplation on the mediation of viewing through alternative means – specifically, our modern utilization of screens by looking at the screen as a site of projection, the screen as a veil between subject and object, the screen as a sifting mechanism that separates elements, and the screen as the process of detection.

Filtered through the various functions of the concept of the screen, from film theory and media studies to psychoanalytic concepts of “screen memory” and “projection”, *Sight Unseen* was an attempt to challenge the audience to contemplate their participatory and essential role in both completing and changing the very nature of the work itself.

Ball has also presented these ideas behind this work in his paper *Sight Unseen: Toward Constructions of Blindness*, presented as part of *Looking at the Looking of Looking: the Uses of Phenomenology Across Disciplines/Penser le voir: réflexion sur les rapports entre la phénoménologie et l'histoire de l'art* session of the Universities Art Association / l'association d'art des universités du Canada 2013 Annual Conference, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, Canada, October 17 – 20, 2013.

Combining both still and moving images, *Sight Unseen* interweaves subject/object, seeing/seen, active/passive through specific moments in art history to interrogate multiple, sometimes contradictory experience(s) of viewing art. Viewers' are active participants rather than passive observers, Ball is both producer and spectator, and the installed objects themselves reflect multiple planes of engagement. These tensions between site, image, and phenomenology facilitate critical self-reflexivity of the contradictions intrinsic in viewing and of viewing art.

Allen Ball has been an important and committed member of the visual arts community in Edmonton for over 25 years. He is widely recognized in many capacities, as artist, educator, and community leader. He has been a real force within the university and broader visual arts community, in all these capacities devoting his time and energy to developing the visual arts in Edmonton and beyond. *Sight Unseen* is an exemplary work of art that is worthy of this prestigious award. He deserves my full support and I have no hesitation in offering you my highest possible recommendation to forward his nomination as a worthy recipient of the 2013 Eldon & Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize.

If you require any additional information or have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (780) 963 - 9935, (780) 963 – 2777 or maywood36@hotmail.com.

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