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Sara's Bat Mitzvah Emile Rubino

Isaac Thomas

'Sara's Bat Mitzvah'

Lightbox at Gallery 295

295 East 2nd Ave

Through May 23

For any artist working with photography today, presenting pictures in lightboxes has become a rather complicated endeavor. Needless to say the reasons for this are quite obvious. Originally brought forward by photographers like Jeff Wall, the luminous trick has since been taken up more or less successfully by countless others. Perhaps more than anywhere else, Vancouver may be the most difficult place for an artist to attempt the hazardous enterprise, previously defined by Wall himself as equal to "controlling a powerful horse".

Awkwardly located high on the narrow wall facing the front entrance of Gallery 295, the 4 x 6 ft lightbox project space exhibits a rotation of transparencies presented independently of the gallery's programming. For the most part, the works presented here have avoided dealing with the local and influential legacy of that particular mode of presentation through a variety of subterfuges. From the wide ar-

ray of abstract looking images to the numerous colorful arrangements of squiggles, without forgetting the occasional anecdotal play on the devices' nature, featured artists have forgone, or abstained from, the inevitable implications of the backlit frame. In this context of willful amnesia, Isaac Thomas's *Sara's Bat Mitzvah* (2015) could mark a turning point in the short history of 295's lightbox project space.

Resulting from Thomas's meticulous arrangement, the large format colour photograph is purposefully deployed to overtly recall the compositional methods associated with the "Vancouver School." Using a large format camera incongruously placed inside a car, the picture shows a man in formal costume standing on high stilts by the side of the road. The man is festively waving his white-gloved hand at the driver in a greeting manner, meanwhile holding a large flashy arrow indicating the direction to "Sara's Bat Mitzvah." The unexpected nature of the scene is enhanced by the banal suburban landscape pictured on a bright sunny day. Here, the grass is green, the sky is blue, and the man waving his hand harbors a large smiling face in what appears to be a picture perfect scene. One could linger on deciphering the religious connotations of the event announced by the displayed sign, but what is most striking in Thomas's photograph remains its composition, which renders the reading of this announcement more complex than merely giving directions to Sara's coming of age.

The sum of all peripheral and central elements of the composition makes for a photograph in which past, present, and future times are collapsed within the contained space of the picture. The rearview reflection situated at the top right of the picture seems

to evoke an idea of the past, whereas the man waving his hand in front of us stands as a marker to announce the event currently unfolding. In the meantime, the two *lignes de fuites* of the picture, present in the form of a yellow painted line on the road guiding the eye to the right edge of the plane, and a passing airplane on the top left corner, guiding the eye to the other side of the frame, seem to suggest an unknown future; an indefinite elsewhere. This dynamic composition, while making more believable and ambiguous the carefully arranged photograph, simultaneously operates a discrete yet significant synthesis. By combining large format photography along with the simulation of a snapshot taken from a moving car, Thomas visually encapsulates the conceptual origins of the artists infamously linked to the "return" of pictorial forms in picture making. Wall's 1969 *Landscape Manual* comes as a self-evident reference that is further reaffirmed through the presence of a comparable early photograph by Ian Wallace, *Untitled, 1970/1995*, recently on display at Catriona Jeffries, located across the street from 295. Lucky coincidence!

When contextualized within the rest of Thomas's work, *Sara's Bat Mitzvah* seems to constitute a punctual and rigorously contemporary response to the intricate context of 295's project space. One could almost use the convoluted word *homage* to describe this piece which indeed asserts Thomas as one of the few young artists experimenting with photography in Vancouver today, who does not succumb to the prevalent angst towards traditions.

Emile Rubino