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Book Review

Darkroom

Michel Campeau

Portland: Nazraeli Press, 2007

Reviewed by Bruno Chalifour

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Digital photography is here to stay. Photography did not kill painting as was announced by Delaroché in the 1850s; it may just have facilitated its reinvention. In this light, the ongoing debate between analog and digital photography seems a stale one. In early 2005, Michel Campeau, a Canadian photographer based in Montreal, decided to address the issue in a rather humorous, though poignant and aesthetic way. In September that year, he presented his project to Magnum photographer Martin Parr. Parr, who was in the early stages of developing a new collection of ten books by ten different photographers for Nazraeli Press, proposed the publication of Campeau's project as the first book of the collection.

Darkroom was born.

Darkroom consists of a series of color photographs that Campeau took during a span of two years in over seventy-five Canadian darkrooms. Campeau seduced Parr, with whom he seems to share a somewhat iconoclastic approach to photography, with his concept—to visit the vanishing race of wet, silver-halide darkrooms and document his tour with a digital point-and-shoot camera. Campeau could not resist the irony of performing such a project in a digital format.

With the project, Campeau entertained two other motivations: testing the digital tool by making images that

would have been almost impossible to shoot with film, and revisiting a particular space and world that the photographer once knew, and whose very existence is now threatened. The challenge lay in the tension generated by the curiosity toward a new tool, a new situation, the opening of a new door; and the weight of nostalgia. The camera that Campeau used offers unusual angles to photographers and *Darkroom* exemplifies this with humor and creativity. The swiveling LCD screen at the back of the camera allows the photographer to detach himself from the body of the camera, to thrust it into unusual spaces at original angles, helped in this approach by the integrated flash when things get dark. The resulting book, *Darkroom*, is composed of seventy color images, only ten of which are horizontal, confirming the narrowness of the spaces visited. For its format, Parr and Nazraeli chose one that had been recently tested for Anthony Hernandez's *Everything*: a square format that allows vertical and horizontal photographs to be reproduced with the same dimensions. The front cover is, itself, a photograph that occupies the whole surface without title or author's name, clearly indicating the book's emphasis. In the photograph are words that we can just make out: DARK ROOM IN USE.

The book begins with a short introduction by Martin Parr. The title of his introduction, "The Darkroom, RIP," caustically points to the somewhat historical aspect of the project. There are no captions to the photographs, and no list of works. *Darkroom* is unpaginated, reinforcing the concept of the photographic book as an entity of its own, asserting the *gestalt* aim of an "object," a two-dimensional sculpture which asserts the point raised by Martin Parr in his

introduction: "That is one of photography's endearing characteristics; the simplest and most mundane idea can become engaging given the correct attention and treatment."

Many of the images in *Darkroom* are close-ups, if not macro-photographs, and many are high or low-angle views. The whole book definitely gives a "camera's-eye" account of darkrooms; the appearance of things is modified toward the spectacular or the enigmatic in terms of scale, angle, and color. Campeau's range of colors is initially limited to black and white. The book ends with views evolving back toward and within this purposely limited palette. After the first images comes the red that evokes darkroom safe-lights, darkroom trays, sinks, and bottles, followed by the yellow, ochre, and orange of various labels, from Kodak to Agfa, on paper boxes. Suddenly appears the intense azure of the bottom of a dustbin starred with dried-up photo chemicals, followed by the sky-blue of a crown of laundry pegs hanging from the ceiling, holding nothing where there once were rolls of processed film. Most of the work is very graphic, abstract at times, quizzing the memories of current and past darkroom users, puzzling and entertaining neophytes. "Apart from the subject, why are these images so strong?" Parr probes in his introduction. "It is their very simplicity, strong design and by becoming close, their intimacy."

What Campeau's book reveals to the non-practitioner is of archeological quality. It takes a viewer through an intimate, somewhat closed and claustrophobic world, bathed in ochre or red light, filled with the smell of chemicals. The sub-layers of darkroom life are exposed: the tools, the solutions on a shoestring, the pieces of cardboard, the stains, the duct-

taped parts. Once in the darkroom, the photographer becomes a jack-of-all-trades: plumber, electrician, chemist, carpenter, painter, optician, engineer, puppeteer, janitor, and ultimately printer and light alchemist. Campeau's photographs remind the viewer of the vicissitudes of the craft. In *Darkroom*, the photographer's approach to his subject

is very playful while revealing, aesthetic while descriptive. The body of work itself, at this point in time, already stands as a historical document. Parr reminds us that "[t]hese images therefore show the passing of an era, and as digital production takes hold we will look back at these images and mourn the darkroom's passing."

