



MagMag

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Dominique Blain

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<http://www.magentafoundation.org/magazine/dominique-blain/>

Blancs de mémoire (Memory Blank)
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In this latest solo, suggestively entitled Blancs de mémoire (Memory Blank), Blain once again demonstrated just how repletely unafraid she is of pursuing the bleakest and harshest subject matter in order to awaken in her viewers not just old memories but empathic feelings. Out of darkness, she conjures the unavoidably human. This artist has long been recognized as a savant of a sociologist. The works here, sourced from a vast archive of images from various sources, including print media, all share a humanistic thematic. This element resonates in her three decades of work and has an uncanny ability to touch the human heart.

Blain traces a 'hurt curve' in her videos, collages and photomontages that is far more than poetic reportage. She stirs memories, and essays memorialisation for victims of

human rights abuses and legions of the lost across a wide geographic array. Consider the video entitled *Blancs de mémoire*, the title referencing a seminal book by Georges Anglade (1944 – 2010), a Haitian-Canadian geographer, writer and able political activist who founded and served as president of the international writers association PEN's Haiti Center. Anglade spent much of his adult life in exile in Quebec, where he was instrumental in founding the Department of Geography at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He was killed alongside his wife, Mireille Neptune Anglade, a woman's rights activist, in the Haiti earthquake. In this powerfully auratic work, Blain portrays a group of refugees poised on the threshold of disappearance. As we stand before them, mute witnesses of their eloquent dispossession, roiling smoke, clouds or waves efface and sweep them away. We are alerted, with quiet insistence, to the relentless violence and dynamism of our time, in which humans have been systematically erased, reduced to nameless ciphers, forgotten. And yet, Blain does not forget, and she does not want us to forget, either. She wants us to remember and to go on remembering. In a very real sense, Blain has commemorated Anglade and his life's work by the allusion and content in this video.

If the social world and political history plays a significant role in Blain's work, well, that work also offers a potent critique of the construction of social reality itself. Blain is a gifted poker player of an artist, her work is never strident or aggressive in its mien but always sotto voce. It is precisely her poker face and quiet obtrusiveness that draws us into works that, however unsettling, also seem seductive and unprepossessing upon first inspection, but then proceed to spring a trap – an ineluctable recognition on the viewer's part of the righteousness of her "J'accuse". She is aware that truth and reality seldom, if ever, coincide in the life-world. Her aim is to make viewers realise this unbridgeable divide, even as she reminds us of a central truth of our time: at the very juncture when our culture is supposed to be evolving wholesale in terms of its ethical wherewithal, a deep and abiding barbarism has taken root. Blain wants to penetrate the invisible structure of social reality, and bring it home to us in ways that will awaken conscience and invoke truth, often using strategies that have more in common with a sophisticated advertising campaign than with straight photography. Of course, the "memory blank" here is notably our own. It is our own myopia and forgetfulness that is the real target here.

She wants to disrupt in order to instruct us in the ways and means of the instruments of darkness. She fearlessly explores themes of genocide, misogyny, war, racism and tiered regimes of domination. Take the extraordinary light box image entitled *Décombres*, in which what at first seem mountainous regions in the background are, in fact, collated clots of faces and huddled masses of those in peril, subject to imminent erasure in the arid landscape. Blain attempts to break with sundry orthodoxies of the gaze and installs doubt, essays memorialisation and numinous gravity in the hope that sensitive viewers will then question their own

assumptive contexts and potentially glimpse another order of truth.

We should remember that the role of memorials is to make us remember. Blain's art is political, sociological and, above all, an art of memorialisation. It constructs a potent symbolic space that binds us to it. In the works exhibited here, her invocation of suffering and loss intends that we not forget or hide the past, but effectively relive it. Blain schools us in the need to remember, and her work has always been a splendid, subtle and overwhelmingly authentic art of felt commemoration.