



Pierre Tremblay

300 Days of Indulgence – Negotiating with the Beyond

300 jours d'indulgence – comptabilité avec l'au-delà

Pierre Tremblay

at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

May 29 – June 26, 2011

Introduction by **Maralynn Cherry**

Curator, The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

“Nascent Perception” (Henri Bergson)

Spending time with Pierre Tremblay and the rebirth of images

“The memory-image, in its turn, partakes of the “pure memory”, which it begins to materialize, and of the perception in which it tends to embody itself: regarded from the latter point of view, it might be defined as a nascent perception... Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act of *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera.”¹

I am caught in the poetic dilemma of not understanding the depth of an artist’s *tekne* (Greek for art, skill). Yet, the works of Pierre Tremblay contain a virtual body ready to expose and unravel imaginary mindscapes. In *300 Days of Indulgence – Negotiating with the Beyond*, there is a willingness on my part to become vulnerable in my perceptions because of a simultaneous projection of the unconscious working synchronously with so many memories. A mind field of archival footage triggers a singular past with a layering of many temporal and visual sources beyond the apparent privacy of their gathering. Information here balances on threads of light, digital time warps and an ever pulsing field of reading, seeing, erasing, fading into and out of form.

This particular exhibition allows Tremblay to meld the richness of his practice with his personal ancestry; the latter kept in a box, hidden, since he was 14 years old. Through an extraordinary collection of indulgence cards, and photographs of generations of the Tremblay clan, the main gallery becomes a resource for the artist and for many viewers, including those with a rich Catholic heritage. Such indulgence cards, for generations, unleashed an invisible kind of “soul real-estate”. A prayer card that buys many days of indulgence – a dead family member could leave purgatory for heaven. In these genealogical apparitions, the act of remembering conjures generations of relationships. Lingering a bit with Barthes on Barthes and his commentary on family photos, I wonder what riches Tremblay is surmising, like the rest of us from our own treasure of family photographs. As this artist puts under erasure some of the written-text-traces left on images, I wonder at the interplay of language, heritage and patriarchal/matriarchal lineage. Barthes comments in some of his collection: “In both sets of grandparents, language belonged to the women. Matriarchy?”² One carries this Barthean novella throughout the remaining rooms of the gallery. Tremblay’s visions intermingle. A multi-lingual process is in the making.

In the small adjacent gallery, a two-channel video *Traces* plays on two separate walls. Here the camera shifts to a genealogy of the landscape at the water’s edge. Tremblay and the camera are the invisible witnesses of traces, memories and signatures.

These marks and gatherings surface as textures, worn, and transforming time into signs, events or imprints. At times, each video shows the same frame, then disperses to its own views, moving at the periphery of our left or right field of vision. The geology of rock surfaces, the pictographic mimicry of engraver beetle marks in wood, and the fragments of worn away ceramics fade in and out of the viewer’s “imaginary”. These landscapes, at close range, encapsulate the body in rhythms. The earth itself implants a genealogy of event horizons. Erosion, etching, grinding and the smoothing of edges leave elemental traces on matter. These raw and beautiful signs relate to our human journey through life and through generations of memory. For Tremblay, the edge of the landscape is mapped alongside the genealogy of the family tree. It feels as though the artist is birthing a new process of viewing these relationships, as complex and ephemeral as they are.

Family Trees, a seven-channel video installation, in the third floor loft space, becomes the thesis, antithesis and synthesis of this transformational process. Entering the raw loft, we encounter three large separate trees of televisions, in black boxes, juxtaposed in their own separate taxonomies. Tremblay unleashes a network of synthetic and biological patterns in an array of light patterns. Each separate tree has its own set of synchronous interrelationships. Flickering screens capture traces of *300 Days of Indulgence*. Family faces, gatherings, and cut up and cut out text

appear and disappear. A test pattern, a kaleidoscope cut into screen pages. Water fades into a grand-mother's apparition. A fragment of words lingers in the aftermath of tree foliage and old houses. At this point, we encounter a collage of memories. Here, the same technologies invading our living rooms are turned inside out to reveal and enact the potential theatre of our own lives. The archive becomes a virtual theatre of memory. Each trace sets out an archaeology of signs on a reflective screen. The surface, the glass and the shape of the apparatus is ever with us. Tremblay intersperses random modernist colour fields at intervals and Matisse-like cut out patterns splice into an archive of timed events. Colour, snow patterns, erased words are washed by waves as vision, memory and time are stored. The nascent perception of Pierre Tremblay's camera lens and editing process may appear complex in its orchestration. And yet, through the making of such grand displays, this artist manages to simulate a contemporary vision as encompassing as the layers of memory in some of the best of Marcel Proust's recollections. ○

Endnotes

- 1 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Zone Books, 1991) 133–134.
- 2 Roland Barthes Hill and Wang, *Roland Barthes* (1977) 13.

Indulgences, 2011; colour; 24 × 30 in.

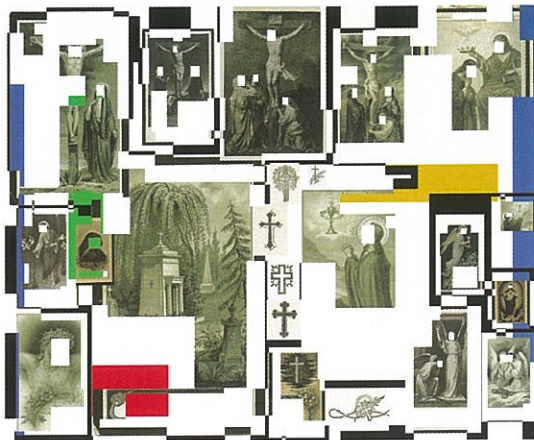
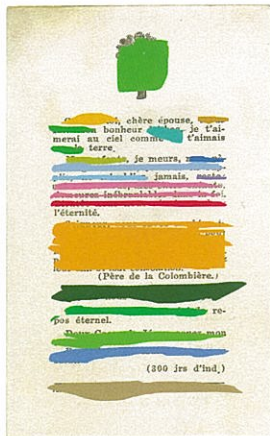
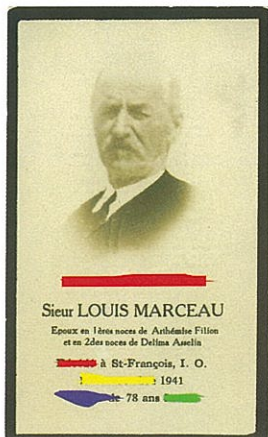




left: *A la douce mémoire*, 2011; colour; 24 × 40 in.
right: *Antoinette & Rosilda, trous*, 2011; colour; 24 × 50 in.



300 Days of Indulgence – Negotiating with the Beyond, 2011; 36 colour prints



left: *Carte funéraire*, writing, Louis Marceau, 2011; 24 × 20 in.
 right: *Images religieuses*, 2011; 24 × 30 in.

Negotiating with the Image: The Work of Pierre Tremblay

Essay by **Don Snyder**

The roots of the Tremblay family can be traced from Québec to France to medieval Normandy, where Pierre du Tremblé of La Rochelle established the family that now bears a variant of his name. The word itself – tremblé, tremblaie, trembleia – derives from Latin and Old French terms for poplar trees, whose leaves tremble in the wind; it was sometimes translated as “a place planted with poplars”, or used to refer to those living near such places.

It is recorded that the first Tremblay arrived in New France in 1647: Pierre Tremblay, born in Randonnai in the Perche region of France, completed his voyage to North America on the 6th of August of that year. He settled on the Beaupré coast, where he and a small number of others built farms, homesteads, and eventually churches; he married Ozanne Jeanne Achon, who had emigrated a few months earlier, in Quebec City in October of 1657. The Tremblays had twelve children between 1658 and 1677, and the next generation grew to fifty-three. In following decades and into the next century, other Tremblays made their way to the new world: Louis in 1751, Jacques in 1756, André, with his wife Catherine, in 1769, another Jacques in 1770 and Michel, with his wife Françoise, in 1783.

While the families that settled in Québec City, Charlevoix and Lac St-Jean were eventually to spread throughout North America, many Tremblays remained in Québec generation after generation. The individuals portrayed here – the great-grandparents, grandparents and parents of the artist, part of an extended family network that includes surnames such as Campagna, Drouin, Émond, Fillion and Marceau – are among those who chose to stay, re-planting a culture brought from Catholic France in the fertile lands along the Saint Lawrence.

Photographs began to be made in Québec as early as the daguerreotype era, and by the late 19th century, tintypes, cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards could be found in homes and communities everywhere. The cabinet card in particular took on a dual role, as a portrait while the subject lived, and a memory image after death. With funerary text added to a photograph, prayers could be offered while the deceased was visualized in the mind. Departing spirits asked their survivors for prayer well into the twentieth century; as recently as 1944, Marie Marceau enjoined her family to pray for her:

Oh! mon époux, mes enfants, parents et amis –
conserver mon souvenir, ne n'oubliez pas dans vos

prières, et dites souvent pour le repos de mon âme:

Doux Cœur de Jésus, soyez mon amour.

Doux Cœur de Marie, soyez mon salut...

O Bon Jésus, donnez-lui le repos éternel.

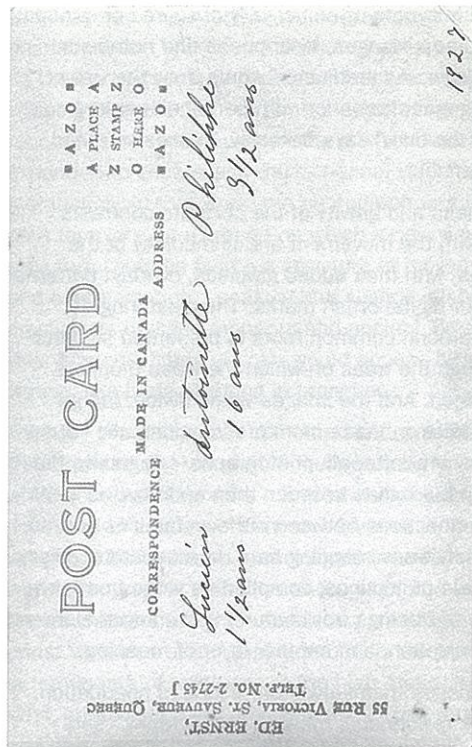
Repeated faithfully, these incantations would bring indulgence for a wandering soul as well as solace for those who grieved. And over time, a sufficient number of prayers could bring up to three hundred days of relief from purgatory. Photographic images could focus remembrance for the living, and requests for blessing could bring divine intervention for the deceased – no small matter, either then or now.

The collection of family photographs and funeral cards from which this exhibition was formed came into Pierre Tremblay's possession when he was fourteen. Intrigued with his family's history, then largely unfamiliar, and sensing he might one day want to use the pictures, he kept them, stored in the same box in which they were found. Notations he made on some prints reveal his first efforts to trace relationships across earlier generations. When Tremblay's father passed away in 2007 and his mother's memory began to fail soon thereafter, his curiosity to explore their past – to "connect the dots," as he put it, by accurately aligning photographs with families – took on a new urgency. The pictures, originally memory objects or totems for negotiating a benign afterlife, became components of something entirely new.

Tremblay had begun adding color, graphic elements, animation, text and sound to photographs as early as the *Portraits in a Sentence* series, which took shape in the 1990s from photographic images and recordings of spoken phrases, and which was later expanded to encompass multi-channel video and installation. In that work, the photograph was used as a template, or a ground on which a new visual structure could be built – a structure of movement and contemplation, speaking and silence, displayed on clusters of video monitors and ancient TV sets. On their screens, fields of color would appear, flicker and vanish, like birds alighting in branches.

This way of working was continued and extended in Tremblay's recent video work, *Lumières de Nunavut*, in which found photographs – in this instance, images downloaded from a webcam on Kimmirut, a tiny village on Baffin Island – were again interwoven with color, graphic elements and sound. The video shows changes of light, season and weather as the prime variables of its display, and also the prime determinants of existence in the high Arctic. It is brief, gripping and visually complex, mixing months and days, hours and instants into a beautifully crafted, cinematic whole, yet a whole in which every component photograph can be clearly seen.

In *300 Days of Indulgence*, the viewer can sense echoes and traces of these earlier works, but the approach here is re-framed, and the experience made more haunting. Words and prayers are sometimes



Antoinette, Philippe et Lucien Tremblay, 2011; colour; 24 × 18 in.

opposite: *Family Trees*, 7 channel video installation, 2011; 14 minutes, music Dafydd Hughes





Family Trees, 7 channel video installation, 2011; 14 minutes, music Dafydd Hughes

Esthétisation de l'archive.

L'exposition *300 Days of Indulgence. Negotiating with the Beyond* proposée par Pierre Tremblay s'articule autour d'un ensemble d'archives photographiques personnelles conservées depuis son adolescence. L'artiste inscrit ainsi son travail dans une longue tradition historique. En effet, dès les années 1920-1930 les mouvements avant-gardistes (Dada, surréalisme) recyclent dans leurs collages des photographies existantes, suivis plus tard par les membres du Nouveau Réalisme et du Pop Art. Les artistes conceptuels attestent également d'un goût prononcé pour l'esthétique de l'archive, afin notamment de redéfinir le rôle de l'auteur et de s'affranchir des hiérarchies en vigueur dans le monde de l'art. Les "artistes archivistes" conjuguent deux temporalités, le passé et le présent, par le biais de la réinterprétation et de l'expérience plastique. Comme l'écrit le critique d'art américain Hal Foster : « Dans un premier temps, les artistes archivistes cherchent à rendre l'information historique, souvent perdue ou déplacée, physiquement présente. Pour cela, ils exploitent l'image, l'objet et le texte trouvés, et privilégient la forme de l'installation.¹ »

Abandonnant le caractère fonctionnel de l'image d'archive au profit de l'expérimentation esthétique,

le projet de Pierre Tremblay associe deux types de production *a priori* antinomiques. Les documents familiaux déplacés et détournés se voient attribuer une valeur artistique, passant de la sphère privée à l'exposition publique. L'artiste découpe et isole des fragments, ajoute des touches de couleur, masque des portions et assemble des éléments pour créer un agencement de tableaux inédits. L'objet de mémoire et de souvenir est ainsi transformé par la reproduction, l'agrandissement et le montage en objet d'art.

Ductilité de l'archive.

L'artiste s'est réapproprié un ensemble de tirages familiaux et notamment des anciennes cartes d'indulgence illustrées de portraits photographiques, représentant des personnes décédées. Ces cartes funéraires au format modeste appartiennent à la tradition catholique : outre le portrait du défunt, elles comprennent de courtes prières à réciter afin d'abrégier le temps à passer au purgatoire. L'hommage fait aux Morts permet aussi de racheter ses péchés, et les objets acquièrent une valeur mémorielle intime tout en témoignant d'une foi religieuse. Cet ensemble d'images et de documents a été collecté à l'origine par la grand-mère paternelle de Pierre Tremblay et présente des membres plus ou moins éloignés de sa

famille originaire du village de Saint-François sur l'île d'Orléans, près de la ville de Québec.

Les clichés reproduits sur les cartes d'indulgence sont des portraits généralement réalisés en studio selon un protocole de prises de vue quasi immuable. Les yeux des modèles fixant l'appareil photographique, l'aspect répétitif des poses, l'esthétique volontairement neutre et constante des images, la modestie des documents et l'effet d'accumulation induisent une formidable malléabilité du matériau collectionné. Face à cet ensemble de photographies "sans" auteur et dénuées d'ambition formelle, l'artiste peut s'autoriser toutes sortes de manipulations et d'expérimentations plastiques. Le montage et l'installation de tirages grand format permettent à Pierre Tremblay d'aborder dans son œuvre une grande variété de thèmes comme les notions de généalogie et de mémoire, l'histoire régionale du Canada francophone ou encore les croyances religieuses qui forment autant de strates d'un projet au caractère autobiographique affirmé.

Usage de l'archive.

Le projet est le fruit d'une lente et longue maturation, comme en atteste la présence de notes manuscrites à l'écriture encore enfantine au dos des cartes et des photographies. Comme l'écrit Jacques Derrida, « le trouble de l'archive tient à un mal d'archive. Nous sommes *en mal* d'archive. À écouter l'idiome français

et en lui l'attribut « en mal de », être en mal d'archive peut signifier autre chose que souffrir d'un mal, d'un trouble ou de ce que le nom « mal » pourrait nommer. C'est brûler d'une passion. C'est n'avoir de cesse, interminablement, de chercher l'archive là où elle se dérobe.² » La résurgence de cet ensemble d'archives apparaît alors que la mémoire familiale de l'artiste tend à s'éteindre : son père est décédé il y a quelques années et les souvenirs de sa mère vieillissante commencent à disparaître. De ce désir de mémoire naît alors une quête d'archives, doublée de l'ambition de transmettre ce passé à ses propres enfants.

Pierre Tremblay tente de reconstituer les filiations et de retrouver les dates, aidé par les diverses annotations rédigées au cours du temps sur les objets. Ces indices permettent l'association et la juxtaposition des documents. L'artiste reforme les couples et retrace les histoires individuelles en rapprochant les portraits d'une même personne à des âges différents. Il montre également le verso des images et les traces de retouches sur les photographies originales. Mais si l'artiste respecte ainsi l'archive comme objet, il intervient également de façon visible : il détoure ou souligne les phrases et les visages, il camoufle certaines parties à l'aide de bandes blanches, noires ou de couleur. Les objets ayant été conservés pêle-mêle dans une boîte, l'absence d'album et donc d'ordre imposé lui donne l'opportunité de réinterpréter son histoire familiale, refusant le strict inventaire scentifique. La richesse de la proposition de l'artiste réside

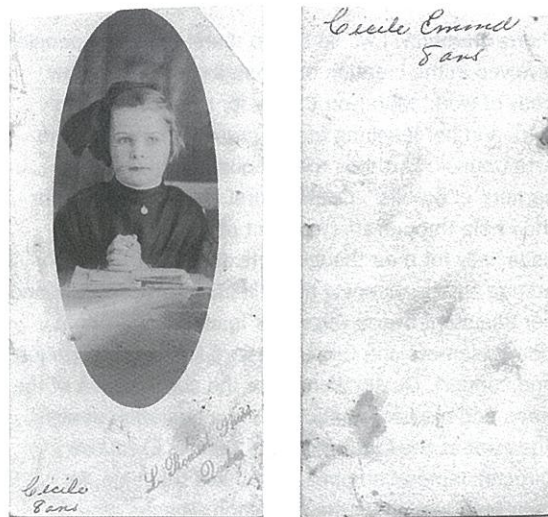
dans cette hybridation, entre associations visuelles arbitraires et attention portée aux généalogies.

Imaginaire de l'archive.

Sans éléments tragiques ni héros à honorer, la relecture de ces "petites" histoires insiste sur la représentation banale et universelle de la finitude humaine. La malléabilité offerte par ces images sauvées de l'oubli permet la reconstitution d'un arbre généalogique à la fois réel et fictif. Chaque spectateur peut dès lors projeter sa propre histoire grâce à ces traces forcément partielles et fragmentaires. Avec *300 Days of Indulgence. Negotiating with the Beyond*, Pierre Tremblay réussit le difficile pari de s'adresser à une mémoire commune au travers d'une recherche personnelle. L'archive privée nourrit ainsi l'imaginaire collectif. ○

Endnotes

- 1 « In the first instance archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so. » Hal Foster, « Archival Impulse », *October*, no 110, Fall 2004, p. 4. Notre traduction.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive : une impression freudienne*, Paris, Galilée, 1995, p. 142.



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- 16 **Pierre Tremblay:** I would like to thank the many people involved in the creation and installation of this new body of work. Maralynn Cherry for her interest in my work and her inspiring text. A grant from the Ontario Arts Council: "Artistes médiatiques en milieu de carrière et établis". Gaëlle Morel and Don Snyder for their help through every aspect of the project and especially for their thoughtful texts. Peter Higdon for editing and sequencing the still images. Jenn Park and her assistant Becca Gilgan for installing the prints. Udo Kasemets and Ginette Legaré for their inspiration and support. Dustin Wenzel for the construction of the trees and his participation in the installation design. The staff at the Clarington Arts Centre, Executive Director James Campbell, and David Gillespie, for their help setting up the exhibition. Thanks also to Linda Ward and Dayna Riemland. Dafydd Hughes for the wonderful music he composed for this exhibition. Joseph Devitt Tremblay for the electronic connections, exhibition set-up and documentary photography. Daniel Froidevaux for video documentation of the exhibition. My family: Nan, Joseph, Maeve and Oonagh.

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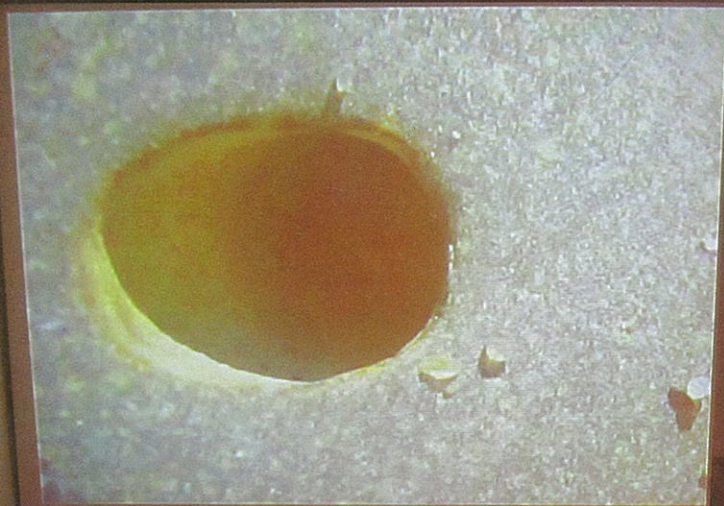
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