

Adumbrating the Uncanny: The Installations of Natascha Niederstrass

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Natascha Niederstrass, Fragment no.2 (suaire), Cotton textil, 45.7 x 61 x 7.6 cm, 18" x 24" x 3", 2017

Apollo Studios, Montreal

Ongoing, by appointment

By JAMES CAMPBELL February, 2019

In this survey exhibition at Apollo Studios, Montreal-based multimedia artist Natascha Niederstrass offers a replete haunting with riveting excerpts from three bodies of recent work: *Le Point aveugle* (2017), *The Missing Week* (2015) and *Deconstruction d'une tragedie* (2014). [1]

Installed in the various spaces inside Apollo Studios and curated in-house by sound creative Pascal Desjardins, Niederstrass's video and photographs ensnare her viewers floor-to-floor in a web of spectral filaments. It is a web that suggests a world of far-from-benign ghosts proximate to but thankfully apart from our own.

Informing her work with a full array of forensic aesthetic protocols and invoking the Uncanny, this artist infuses it with a moody and haunting ethos. She raises and communicates with the dead with verve, panache and alacrity.



Natascha Niederstrass, Dentelle et cercueil, Digital print, 76.2 x 54.4 cm, 30" x 21.42", 2017

In *The Uncanny* ("Das Unheimliche"), Sigmund Freud's famous monograph of 1919, the phenomenon of the uncanny is examined from various perspectives. Freud referred to a situation where something can be both familiar yet strange at one and the same time, inducing supreme psychological discomfort, and often associated with a repressed memory that suddenly jumps into the foreground of consciousness, fraught with angst and a palpable sense of foreboding. [2] Freud said that the experience of the Uncanny was felt most intensely in relation to death, dead bodies, spirits and ghosts. He specified that dismembered limbs, severed heads, hands cut off at the wrist and feet that dance by themselves all give rise to a perception of the Uncanny. That Niederstrass is a diligent student of the Uncanny as Freud understood it is clear from an inventory of the sundry mutilations and bodily absences that appear in her work.



Natascha Niederstrass, Vase, autel et cercueil, Digital print, 86.3 x 61.6 cm, 34" x 24.28", 2017

Indeed, Niederstrass evokes the Uncanny with the power of an Edgar Allan Poe or a Susan Hill (think of the mirror and its shadowy inhabitant in her splendid *The Mist in the Mirror* novel). The psychotherapist Edgar Herzog once wrote that horror draws its power from its ver incomprehensibility and it is this very unfathomable nature that Niederstrass brings to bear with the full authority of her dramatic voice, *sotto voce*. [3] Herzog argued that: “The world becomes “uncanny”, and man feels that his whole existence is threatened and called into question... [4] Niederstrass convinces her viewers that the earth is shifting under their feet as they attempt to come to terms with her numinous wherewithal.

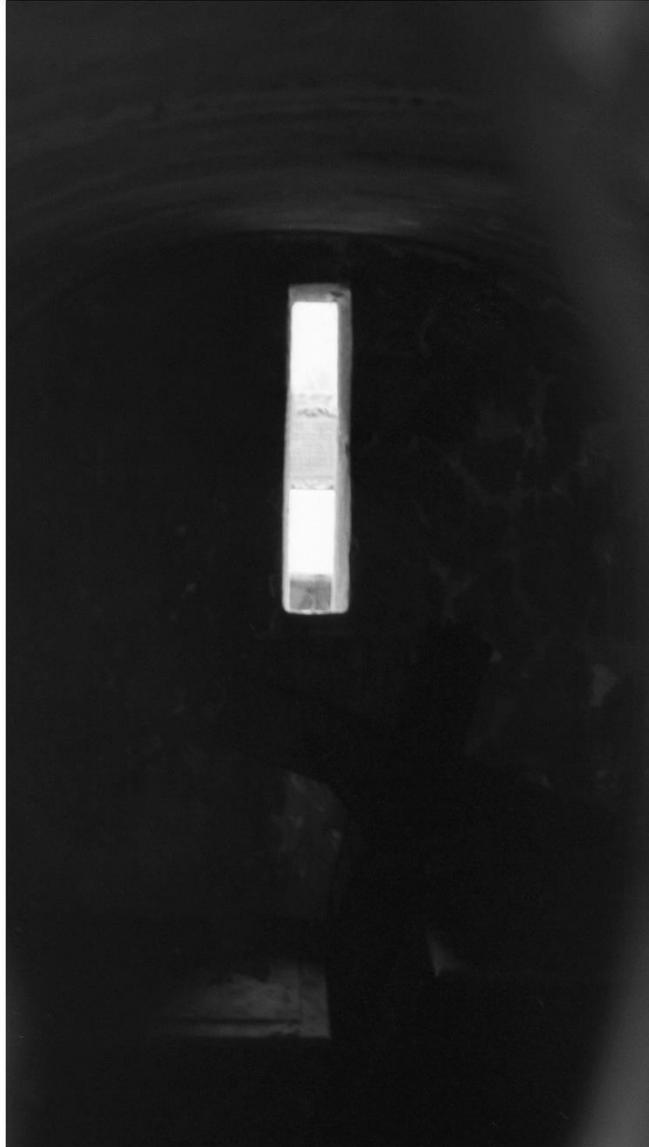
In the works from *Le point aveugle* exhibited here, Niederstrass was inspired by Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘optical unconscious’ and essays a labyrinth in which the viewer is entreated to enter and negotiate spectral depths gingerly. But as in any labyrinth there are dark surprises and invisible worlds lurking within. There is a sense of disquiet that is almost palpable. It can catch you off guard – and sweep you away.



Natascha Niederstrass, Pièce à conviction no 2, 276 x 102 cm, 30" x 40", inkjet print, 2013

In this series, Niederstrass took as her starting point various images she had taken in the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires. She made her usual judicious choice, then digitized her negatives and digitally post-processed the images. In so doing, she ‘enhanced’ the images by occulting them as she saw fit, seeking to blur and scar them lightly, presumably to suggest age, attrition and the liminal. She then installed those images in relation to a handful of enigmatic objects – an undersized hand, a sealed ‘reliquary’ containing cemetery detritus swept from the floor of a crypt – to deepen the overall sense of mystery as we moved through her maze, one that is both actual and aura-laden.

Inside Niederstrass's beautifully and painstakingly constructed labyrinth, Thanatos is the presiding minotaur. The tremors of a world previously invisible to us reach out of latency and impinge on the seen. Strange dimensions of the spirit open up everywhere in her work -- like the coffin lid in *Suaire, cercueil et cadaver* (2017) or the vertical niche of light in *Chapelle funéraire* (2017) which does nothing to diminish the interior darkness or offer any comforting zone of solace, but only amplifies it, as though it is opening the parentheses on a thematic darkness impervious to any illumination.



Natascha Niederstrass, *Chapelle funéraire*, digital print, 76.2 x 54.4 cm, 30" x 21.42", 2017

In *The Missing Week* (2015), Niederstrass focussed with rare probity and auratic splendour on the murder of 22-year old aspiring actress Elizabeth Short, also known popularly as the "Black Dahlia", who was found murdered in Los Angeles in 1947. She dilated on the "wholly other" and summoned strange oneiric dimensions which induced "shudders" in her viewers. Drawing upon actual archival records of the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) and research published by Steve Hodel (a private detective, former police

investigator and son of an alleged murderer of Short), opened parentheses on the “missing week” before Short’s death.

Niederstrass produced a documentary series of photographs including those exhibited here of varying locations where sundry witnesses reported seeing Short in the seven days before her mutilated body was discovered. Her use of forensic aesthetics serves a dual purpose: laying bare the history of a heinous act and rendering what remains for many the closed-off world of contemporary art porous and open.

In *Deconstruction of a tragedy* (2013), a series of photographs and a video, the artist revived the myth of one of the most sordid murders in the history of Montreal’s Griffintown neighbourhood: the brutal beheading of Mary Gallagher at the end of the 19th Century. The artist included a series of photographs of evidentiary details, inspired by contemporaneous local newspaper descriptions and reported sightings of the decapitated spirit searching through the empty streets for her missing head. She also presented at Apollo Studios one of her most powerful and poetic works to this date: a stop-motion animation of the headless ghost.

Niederstrass’s practice has as its point of fulcrum an ongoing feminist exploration of violence against women based on sources that include crime scene photography, murder cases, horror cinema and the literature of the spectral and unseen. Each of the works seen here embody the Numinous, yield aura and are genuinely unsettling and unforgettable.

Endnotes

1. All three series had been previously shown in their entirety in solos at her dealer Emilie Grandmont Berube’s Galerie Trois Points in Montreal, now sadly closed.
2. See Freud, Sigmund. 1919. "The Uncanny" in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Standard ed. Vol. 17. London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), pp. 217-256.
3. Edgar Herzog, *Psyche and Death: Archaic Myths and Modern Dreams in Analytical Psychology*, trans. David Cox and Eugene Rolfe (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1966). P. 23.
4. Ibid, p. 24.