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## Questions of Purpose

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## REVIEWS



Natascha Niederstrass  
*Behind Closed Doors: Body of Evidence* 2015 Mixed media Dimensions variable  
PHOTO MATHIEU PROULX

OTTAWA  
GALLERY 101

# NATASCHA NIEDERSTRASS

by Bernard Lamarche

For more than 10 years, Natascha Niederstrass has been addressing notions of criminality, forensics, violence towards women and misogyny, all with a strong sense for narrative and for dealing with the ambiguity of signs and found traces. Her series *The Final Girl* (2006) showed photograms taken from horror films, catching the very moment when women on the verge of losing their lives regain momentum and take back their destinies, becoming obligatory assailants. More recently, *L'affaire de Camden Town* (2014) presented mysterious photographic prequels to paintings by early 20th-century London-based artist Walter Sickert, who was named in recent decades as a suspect in the unsolved case of Jack the Ripper.

Although photography is not far away, "Behind Closed Doors: Body of Evidence" embraces installation. The subject of this perfectly set accumulation of traces and signs is one of the strangest cases in recent crime history—the so-called Black Dahlia case in Los Angeles in January 1947. The gruesome murder of Elizabeth Short was never solved, and many questions still linger. Authors such as Jean-Michel Rabaté (*Given: 1° Art 2° Crime: Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture*, 2006/10) or Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Bayliss (*Exquisite Corpse. Surrealism and the*

*Black Dahlia Murder*, 2006) link the murder to the American Surrealists.

Within that scope, Niederstrass confirms her convincing ability to shroud signs in mystery while bringing them to light, proposing an investigation through a labyrinth that combines the infamous murder and Marcel Duchamp's work. The aforementioned authors built on how Duchamp's posthumous work *Étants donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...*), secretly built between 1946 and 1966, might have been influenced by images of Short's murder. Nobody can reject the troubling resemblance between the mannequin in Duchamp's piece and the way Short's mutilated body was found. It suggests that Duchamp was well informed on the slaying.

In the darkened gallery, Niederstrass displays writings on the wall based on notes left by the artist. The text in this context is made to seem odd, which is where Niederstrass excels. She lays out signs for us to reconstruct meaning, never allowing us to rest while we shuttle back and forth between the elements at our disposal with their resolution suspended. She extends Duchamp's words, like "instantaneous state of rest" and "*fait divers*" (news item), so that they outline the ghostly silhouette of a female body severed in half. The words take on new and ghastly implications.

Elsewhere in the space, after turning behind a wall, Niederstrass leads us to Duchamp's studio, with *Étants donnés* set up in an incomplete state. Hidden until then, the main elements of the work are present, including the disturbing segment showing a leg with paintbrushes to the side. Even more flustering are images of the Black Dahlia crime scene pinned on the wall next to a handmade reproduction of a Duchamp drawing from 1947. Niederstrass unfolds a mystery where darkness builds. By inverting background and foreground, she affirms the scene of a crime where the evidence is missing and forever gone.