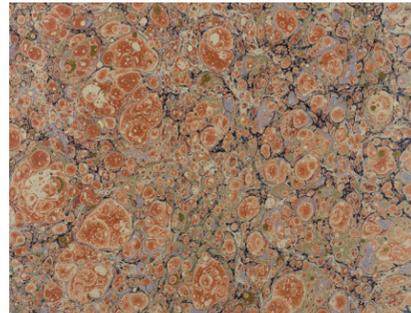




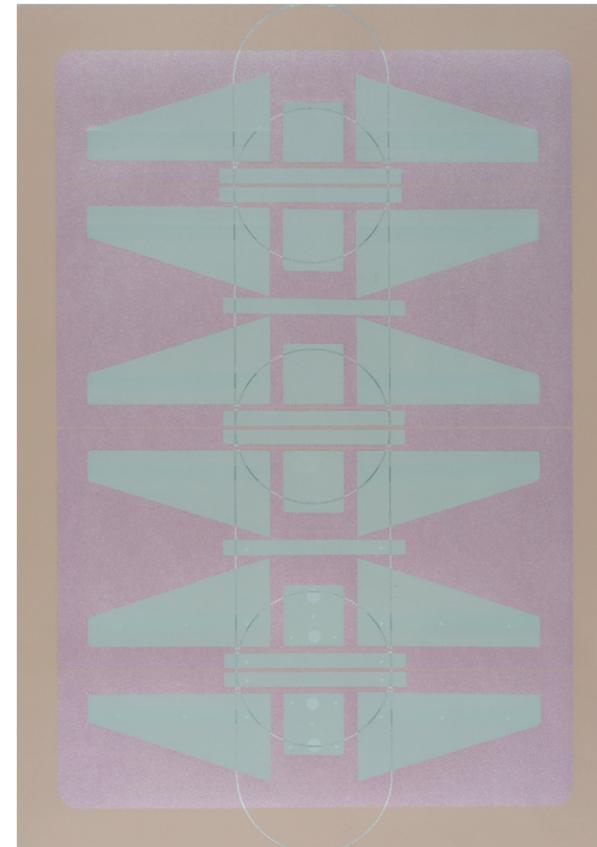
Beach Acapulco Mexico, Laura Letinsky, black and white silverprint, 89035F



Manitoba Rd 63 West, #67102 [homestead] (photo: K. McFadden)



Lichens II, Janet Carroll, marbling on paper, 91032C



Symphony, Tony Tascona. 29/75, silkscreen on paper, 86031G



Untitled (Alec and Lillian, work truck), Black and white snapshot, c.1940



Dog and Wound, John Gurdebeke, color photograph on paper, 89026F



Untitled (Tabolotney bros.), Black and white snapshot, c.1940

**WITH ALEC IN MIND,
SELECTIONS FROM
THE MANITOBA
ARTS COUNCIL ART
BANK COLLECTION**

CURATED BY J.J. KEGAN MCFADDEN
APRIL 19 – JUNE 09, 2012

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

J.J. KEGAN MCFADDEN

Is an artist, curator, and writer, whose projects in exhibition and book form often blur the lines between cultural research and storytelling. Since graduating with a Masters Degree in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory (University of British Columbia, 2007), McFadden has organized numerous exhibitions, both as an artist and curator, across Canada and beyond. Having previously exhibited with the AGSM as part of the three-person show, *found* (2010), this is McFadden's first curatorial project with the gallery.

With Alec in Mind,

“Thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived. These drawings need not be exact. They need only to be tonalized on the mode of our inner space.”¹

With Alec in Mind, curated by J.J. Kegan McFadden from the Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank Collection, is an exhibition of over fifty artists and close to one hundred works. Centered around the installation at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, the exhibition is further accompanied by an artist book published by As We Try & Sleep Press, off-site projects at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones and Oseredok Ukrainian Cultural Centre, as well as a prose piece in Prefix Photo Magazine. Through this web of images and writing, McFadden revisits a traumatic experience in his family history – the 1995 murder of his great uncle, Alexander Tabolotney, or Alec.

Alec was murdered by his grandson, Aaron, in the hallway of his homestead in rural Manitoba between Austin and McGregor. Aaron confessed to the crime immediately and spent the following few years in various mental health facilities, only to be released having successfully appealed his case in the late 1990s. The public records of Alec’s death, the result of two shotgun wounds to the chest, document the events of the night he was murdered, including the fact that Aaron was experiencing alcohol-related blackouts leading up to the murder which compounded his mental issues. Reproduced in the accompanying artist book, the coroners’ diagrams are the most visual of these documents: the bullet entered here, and exited there - these paths were noted during the autopsy and used as evidence in the trial. The diagrams and the descriptions of the event in the court documents suggest a conflicting reading of their place in McFadden’s project: on one hand, they are its most objective aspect and are evidentially tied to the murder, playing an important role in its consequences for Aaron and constituting a large part of McFadden’s research for the project; however, they say nothing about their subject beyond the evidential. Their language is too rooted in legal typology to allow the reader to enter through the subjective lens of remembering or projection. Unlike the works in the exhibition, they resist an emotional response, and yet they constitute the most direct trace of the murder.

McFadden selected the works from the Manitoba Arts Council’s Art Bank Collection to respond to the story of his great-uncle’s murder, as well as to reconstruct - through a web of previously unrelated and disparate images - his memories of Alec’s death and the stories of his life. McFadden’s methodology of ‘curator as storyteller’ positions the works from the Collection as parts of the narrative, while a series of audio recordings by McFadden act as nodes through which the story unfolds. Four main groupings of work from the Collection comprise the gallery installation: a salon-style wall of images of the domestic; a long horizon of seventeen landscapes; a second salon of melancholy black and white images that bridge the house to the land; and finally the hallway in which Alec was shot, covered in antique aged wallpaper and abstract works that allude to events surrounding his death.

The space of the house, repeated throughout the exhibition and in the sound pieces, is at the core of McFadden’s storytelling. In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard suggests that domestic, intimate, interior spaces open themselves to imagination and daydreaming - and offer a way to move beyond history.² Stepping outside the murder mystery and the court documents in *With Alec in Mind*, the images of home establish the memory of his life and tragic death in images made by others, originally unrelated to his story, but now inhabited by it. The paradox is that that these works, despite their imprecision and disparate intentions, tell more than the documents or evidence, or family pictures, even as they remain completely dissociated from the event itself. The imagining of the event, through its reconstruction in the exhibition, is more potent here than its physical traces, “... localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.”³

The exhibition further incorporates traces of Alec’s life, such as clothing, furniture, rusted cans, and old tools found on his property. Laid out in a glass vitrine as museum artifacts, these mundane objects suggest a meditation on the poetics of the everyday: things that we all inhabit but often take for granted. In once being a constant part of Alec’s life and work, the objects foreshadow his death and the remnants that he left behind. The ubiquitous tools and rusted cans are poignant because they are so unimposing and trivial, and yet in outliving their original functions they continue to act as witnesses to the family tragedy.

*“While growing up on the farm Alec thought the horizon would go on forever; an ever-thinning line that stretched from Austin to Winnipeg (the only big city he had ever known at the time). Under the warm glow of the Manitoba moon, Alec would lie in the field late into the night and dream how the horizon could take him anywhere.”*⁴

A row of landscapes in oil, silkscreen, pencil, and photography hangs on the wall, their horizon lines aligning around Shirley Brown’s *Norman’s House* (1991), where the house from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* looms over a prairie drive-in theatre. The horizon lines in the images combine to create a personal geography, constructed from the Collection to act as a stand-in for Alec’s daydreaming of faraway places, but also his attachment to home and his life on the same homestead where he was born. The house from *Psycho* stands in for the homestead that is constructed throughout the exhibition.

*“Before I was born, this hallway was all empty preserve jars waiting to be canned and cellared... In 1995, this hallway is shotgun shelled, torn, and without any life at all. This hallway will always be a moment - from here to there.”*⁵

The hallway, reconstructed in the gallery space and covered in antique wallpaper made to look worn, echoes a nearby wall of domestic images from the Collection: beds, gardens, farms, interiors. The fragmented images of home, just as in McFadden’s description of Alec’s homestead in one of the sound pieces, are frequently conflicting; they oscillate between intimate and haunting.⁶ As Bachelard quotes Rainer Maria Rilke, a Bohemian–Austrian poet, “...it is not a building, but is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and

here is a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form. Thus the whole thing is scattered about inside me, the rooms, the stairs... in the darkness of which we advanced like the blood in our veins.”⁷ Alec’s house is split, its traces spread through the images in the exhibition, its physical remains kept in a museum display as artifacts. The house is scattered inside the gallery to echo McFadden’s memory, an attempt to structure it, but with no clear distinction between the inside and outside, and the hallway stretching through it. In Aganetha Dyck’s *25 Jars* (1988), a collection of canning jars is filled with buttons, cigarette ashes, and other found materials. The jars grow to signify the rows of preserves lining the hallway when Alec was a young man; meanwhile their abject contents point to the dark history of Alec’s death in that same hallway years later; and Janet Carroll’s series of marbled paper titled *Lichens* (1991) become Alec’s blood splatter.

Another component of *With Alec in Mind*, is a set of family photographs displayed at the Oseredok Ukrainian Cultural Centre in Winnipeg and accompanied by the same set of audio pieces as the main exhibition. The family photographs reiterate many such similar images held at Oseredok, chronicling lives of Ukrainian immigrant families in Manitoba as archival documents of the community. McFadden’s photographs become a part of that history, while allowing for his own subjectivity and memory in the audio pieces to join the Oseredok archive, and pointing to how its other holdings are also carriers of infinite family histories. However, like the rusted tools that Alec used on his homestead, the photographs remain opaque: there is nothing about them that strays out of the typical and the mundane, until personal storytelling activates the characters within them. By inviting the viewers to share in the process of his private remembering and offering his stories as a guide, McFadden opens the dialogue about family history and its role within the public sphere - such narratives have the power to counterbalance official representation of the events, suggesting strategies that answer to the processes of memory. In that, their placement at Oseredok, separately from the main exhibition at the AGSM, emphasizes their place in these archives. As parts of a family history, they join the network of such stories that make up the collective narrative of immigrant families settling in Manitoba. One of the photographs at Oseredok of Alec with Lillian posing with their work truck is repeated in an light box billboard outside La Maison des artistes visuels francophones in Saint Boniface, inscribing its urban location with Alec and Lillian’s first generation Canadian labour history and McFadden’s extrapolation of their lives. Meanwhile, this same photograph, which features the photographer’s shadow looming over the subjects’ awkward composition, is at the centre of McFadden’s prose piece in Prefix Photo Magazine⁸

*“I have no context for so many of these images. I know, or was told, they are family. Taken well before I was born, before my parents were even born, what do these snapshots mean now?”*⁹

With Alec in Mind, can therefore be considered a meditation on domesticity, although fractured and scarred by Alec’s murder. The family figures at its core through the objects, the photographs, and the stories, but also primarily as a structure

through which the narrative is constructed. Alec was a brother, a husband, and a father, his grandson shot him, his great-nephew is retelling his story. The family photographs, separated from the rest of the exhibition, do not tell these stories but they are imbued with them. Moments of leisure, intimacy and adventure that constitute their subjects provide tangible evidence of what is absent in the rest of the exhibition, that the people depicted in them had lived: Alec, his wife, and their children. In their tie to the event itself, the photographs and the objects lead to a gap: the process of reconstruction, selecting the images, recording memories, looking at the family photographs, they all surround the event, which remains ultimately inaccessible. The absence of the family photographs from the exhibition at the AGSM, even though McFadden’s concluding audio piece addresses them directly, is a testament to the impossibility of imagining the event through them. Their imagery is so typological that they allow the viewer to imagine one’s own family photographs in their place: a young bride, couple on a boat, a proud owner in front his truck. The project of reconstruction and preservation of the memories that activate them, as eulogy, is a testament to the irretrievability and loss of their subjects.

-
Natalia Lebedinskaia
Curator, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba
-
ISBN 978-1-927076-02-6
-



¹ Gaston Bachelard, & Jolas, M., (1994), *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 12.

² Bachelard, 8 - 9.

³ Bachelard, 9.

⁴ Audio Track no.8, 0:50.

⁵ Audio Track no.7, 0:34

⁶ Audio Track no.1, 1:41.

⁷ Bachelard, 57, [from Rilke, *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, (Fr. tr. p. 33)

⁸ *Prefix Photo Magazine*, issue 25, vol. 13 #1, May 2012.

⁹ Audio Track no. 10, 1:56.