

An Interview with Raymonde April

by Sheilah Wilson







Previous Page: *Sans titre (18 février 2013)* (Untitled, February 18, 2013), 99 x 149 cm, chromogenic print. **Left:** *Debout sur le rivage (standing on the shore)* (detail), 1984, 100 x 100 cm, gelatin silver print.

Over the course of the last three interviews, I have had the pleasure of speaking with artists who have used photography throughout their careers. This project began as a query into how a photographic practice responds to change. What emerged were the ways we change *ourselves*, and how aging implicates the relationship to photography.

Photography is a fierce democracy of profusion and possibilities. It refuses stasis as it morphs to serve and appeal to an ever-growing demand. How can we bathe in these waters, and yet find something to save from the plentitude and simultaneous sameness? All of the artists I spoke with engage with the medium by exploring new ways of interacting with it. I was surprised by the degree to which they were able to imagine re-inventions of their own materials and medium in response to technological changes. The act of choosing (which camera, which image, which story, which story untold) becomes the defining photographic act.

Raymonde April speaks eloquently to her long-term relationship with the photographic medium. She embraces and questions both the alluring specificity and simultaneous openness of photographic images. The way in which the photograph eludes us is precisely the trail she has followed. The photographic image is mysterious, the narrative as slippery as the particularity of the objects/people depicted. In the various states between ways of being, something surprising emerges.

Sheilah Wilson: What drew you to photography in the beginning?

Raymonde April: I think it goes back to when I was really, really young. I think the big fascination was with the negative image. That is funny, because of course it is the positive image you see in family albums, but as a child when I saw the negatives and they were the reverse of the positives, and all the faces of the people with their eyes white and skin dark—this reversed image—really impressed me. It held this idea of being a matrix for another image. It was showing something real and real events and places, but there was also this reversal of reality in another world, and I think that was what really fascinated me from the very beginning. And my dad had a small darkroom when he was young in the basement of his house, so he took lots of photographs and printed them in many different ways, and those albums were always around when I was little. I guess it started there.

I always knew I wanted to be an artist, but when I went to art school I was very tense around trying to do drawing or painting. I had no ease with it. Making photos was exciting, and so that is the way I went. Photographs and Super 8 film were more of me, and not such a stretch for me to create. But, at the time it was not acknowledged as a medium we could use in the fine arts. The school was a fine arts school, and photography was not included in fine arts. So there was this ambivalence about it being an artistic medium or a technical medium, and that sort of blurry zone. I think I felt really

Chambre noire de feu Desmond Adams (darkroom of the late Desmond Adams) (from *Equivalences*), 2010, 99 x 132 cm, chromogenic print.



Autoportrait chasse et pêche (self portrait, hunting & fishing), 1997-2007, 40 x 50 cm, gelatin silver print.



comfortable there in that blurriness. I think most of the references in my early work were in literature and cinema.

Which literature and film?

François Truffaut, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker and any Marguerite Duras, Anaïs Nin, Marcel Proust—this kind of literature that has to do with the subjective voice. Even earlier it would have been Gabrielle Roy... I still read mostly fiction. I just can't get myself to read theory. I was living in Rivière-du-Loup and there weren't many exhibitions, and so I would just look at photo magazines that were showing mostly the work of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus and that kind of documentary work.

Did you identify those photographers with the same kind of subjective voice you were interested in?

I think so. With photography it was the 70s and the fictional place was not so strong; it was mostly documentary because that was the big practice at the time. But if you look at the way Robert Frank would do his images, there was such a big autobiographical thread to it I could identify, even as it fell under documentary. I was really moved by the Quebec documentary tradition as well: *Cinéma Direct* as practiced by Pierre Perrault and the French section of the National Film Board. To see the transformation from where I lived to this image on film was like a way of knowing, and also distancing from reality. It was the act of making something from something really close. I could see myself producing something from what I knew and not having to invent. That is how I worked with photography since then. I love available light and daily life situations.

Did you believe at the time that all documentary lies on a spectrum of fiction? Is the documentary even possible?

Well, there *is* a document. In my work I have always felt it is not documentary, there is an element of construction that might be really minimal, but when you look at it after twenty years it has this documentary element. I think it is with the distance of time that it becomes the document. I think there is a potential documentary reading to any accumulation of images. I have been taking images for over thirty years and it constitutes this archive, and it can be interpreted in so many different ways. It could be interpreted as purely historical, or it could be something totally different. I don't take less pictures now, but I am conscious of the weight of everything I have accumulated. I wonder what



my responsibility is to it. If it never sees the daylight, it stays in boxes and it dies. In a way, to bring it back to life you have to re-activate it, and I feel I have to do this. I don't do it all the time.

Interesting, this idea of the accumulation/sedimentation of the image. I find it particularly so because I have always felt that your work pulls from multiple times. There is this fluidity of place, occurrence and relationships.

I have created a research group, and I am working with 10 artists and grad students. The group is called Afterlife or *Outre-vie* in French, and it is all about that. It is about how images have a life and an after-life. They have meaning, and the representation can be literal or linear, but they can always be re-activated through formal experiments like juxtaposing them, printing them big or small, inserting into films—it is about the tangible or formal existence of the photograph and their own life, and the life contained within the photograph ... This may seem pretty esoteric or strange, but it was easy to find people who are working in that way, and we have had good conversations.

If you are the one who births the photo, you constructed what is inside the frame and it means something to you. Does it mean the most to you? Does that intensity exist for others? For instance, does Roland Barthes' intensity of relationship to the photograph of his mother die with him? I think about your work and this idea of intensity and specificity of relationship. What does it mean?

That is interesting, because for Roland Barthes there is something about the photograph that dies when he dies, but it is still alive because we use this metaphor every day—well, not every day—but we use it as an example, and how to relate it to our own work. Each time we describe an image without showing it, each time we make projections about what should be there and is not there, I feel that the ghost of Roland Barthes is still around, and the ghost of his relationship to that photograph. In a way, yes, it is dying, but it haunts us; there is a persistence. It is very abstract to think of it this way. Sometimes when you have time-based work (moving image work), maybe there is some kind of internal life that stays there that is not as fragile because you

have to spend time and look at it. A lot of the people I see are using photographs and moving images, and then they are caught in that dilemma of choosing, because they aren't the same thing. I am very attached to both things. This is a zone of blur.

There is so much more available and so many kinds of images/ways in which to capture them; it sometimes seem like a process of elimination to get to what you want. You have talked about the idea of nostalgia implicit in the image, and maybe becoming more potent with time. Yet the image is so ubiquitous now, can it be as powerful?

These days it is so challenging because everyone is recording themselves and posting it on social media. There is something to make you feel insecure about it, once you have reflected about how to read images. There is something continuous and anonymous and fragmented in the image world that is unfolding around us all the time. There is a lot of activity that people have around recording themselves, but these images don't have a duration. They are quick and abundant and there are many, many. They don't last as long because they are replaceable. It is so interesting because so many people do similar images. Some great genres of looking through a window, driving, and of course I am not even touching on cats, dogs, babies, etc. It is this big body of work that has been created, almost like a collective practice that I find pretty interesting.

I am curious about this idea of the collective practice, and how that could be activated. I use social media networks, as we all do, and I am struck by the fact that the images that I post of my daughter, for instance, are just an endless stream of such images, and they will be replaced momentarily by another such image by a friend and their child, or another child. How does this kind of repository of an endless present speak to the idea of the document, or the ability to feel time in the image?

The definition of being an artist is no longer to make unique objects. It is much more to have a unique process, or to have a unique position in the world. It is not about making beautiful images, anymore. It is in the continuity of making it and the place from where you stand to



make the work. This is maybe informed by the fact that I have been teaching for so many years. I enjoy the idea of opening up some place where things can happen, and sharing with students, and I am also replenished in the process. I think it has to do with getting older. What was special or distinctive about the work I was doing in the late 80s has now been stated multiple times, and I don't need to talk about how I work and "this is my language." I have done that, and so now I can open up to something else; perhaps because the medium has changed, perhaps because I am getting older, perhaps in between these things.

You are saying that it moves from creating and developing your language to facilitating that sort of acquisition or articulation for students?

Not necessarily in the education process. It is like setting up things and waiting and watching for them to develop. You just create the conditions, and you can enjoy the images that are created. It is more food for my own work and thinking. It maybe reflects my experience in the world right now. At the same time, I am still putting images together for shows. It is not a total shift, but maybe it has to do with having so little time for my own work, and spending so much time talking about other peoples' work.

You said earlier that the images you take now are a continuation of the way you were taking them when you first started. If you had to characterize that way of making work, or your relationship to the practice, what would it be?

I assume that things have changed, given that the tools have changed and the way my attention has changed. But in other ways it hasn't really changed. I could say that I used to use a film camera and now I use a digital camera, and I have followed those changes in the technical world. I keep the process the same, though. I always print everything I can print that looks interesting. I always need a wall and a pile of photographs to put up on the wall, and things that fall off the wall, and the ones I take off, and then the ones that stay, will stay.

I am still fascinated by these formal processes of how we put images together and that is what I love, is having a pile of images and making choices. Of course, taking pictures is a big pleasure, but I think it is

really when you have the images and you decide to do something with them, that is where the transformative activity happens.

I definitely get this sense of specificity and simultaneous fluidity within the selections of photographs that you make, and there is a certain kind of paradox there, or perhaps it is just the nature of images that they are so specific and yet so open.

I like this idea of connections being made and then switched. I like the control to be minimal, and I like to lose control, and I like when things surprise me. I think in the juxtaposition of images, I always think about the space outside the images and also the spaces inside the image. I want to make people work I want people to invest what they have available to project onto these images. In that way, it is always better to have less images with more space in between. That is always the big challenge, and I like this ellipse that is not linear; there are lots of jumps between things. There is such an interesting hesitation in having to choose. You are always so aware of all the different directions that you could go with your images. There are always many possible directions.

It is a fine balance.

It is so hard to talk about it. I am trying to step out of the picture to look at it.

It is funny how we are connected by voice, but all we are talking about is the visual and images. I am staring at a glowing computer screen talking about images.

And I am staring at my screensaver, which is just my iPhone photo folder, and the images are shuffling through. I love this randomness when you have a catalogue of images and then the sequence is generated by the computer, and the order is not your order, and so you are always surprised. I would love to do something with that. You set up everything and let it shuffle. We work so hard in trying to control meaning, but the shuffling actually has a meaning as well.

Sheilah Wilson was born in Caribou River, Nova Scotia. She is a multidisciplinary artist currently teaching at Denison University in Ohio.