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Adam Nayman reviews

PORTRAIT OF RESISTANCE

excerpted from POVs Spring issue
review of the 2012 REEL ARTISTS
FILM FESTIVAL where Adam features
Portrait of Resistance, devoting the
second half of his article to the film.

If Toscani’s work is articulate, the tableaux vivants of the Toronto-based photographers Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge are positively loquacious: proof that sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand pointed words. Their photo collages, which use a combination of stately classicism and sly postmodernism to probe global states of social, economic and religious inequality, are multilayered and elaborately staged, often using real activists as models. Their strange, surreal juxtapositions have an aesthetic power that heightens the political content, creating a sense of outrage melded to a sense of humour.

Roz Owen’s fine documentary *Portrait of Resistance* similarly works on two levels: as an informative primer for the uninitiated on a major body of work in modern Canadian art, and as a deeply affectionate profile of a couple who’ve lived and worked together for four decades. Owen conceived the film when she and her longtime collaborator Jim Miller (the film’s editor and producer) met with Condé and Beveridge for dinner in 2007, when the photographers were working on a monumental piece modelled after Brueghel’s epochal painting *Fall of the Rebel Angels*. Their version, entitled *The Fall of Water*, recast the *Battle in Heaven* as a sprawling, violently contested fight over two kinds of flow: that of water and, more importantly, cash which determines who controls the worldwide sup-

ply. The visual quotations of Brueghel are quite specific, relating the painter's sevenheaded dragon with headshots of the heads of seven major water corporations. It's not subtle, but then neither was Brueghel (who, coincidentally, was also paid homage to in the Polish artist Lech Majewski's extraordinary 2011 feature *The Mill and The Cross*).

"I was struck by the extraordinary beauty and complexity and depth of ideas that they were working with," says Owen. "When I sat down for dinner it popped out of my mouth: 'We have to make a film about you two.'" Appropriately enough, given its title, *Portrait of Resistance* begins in the furor and confusion of the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto, with Condé and Beveridge, both of whom are in their sixties, standing gamely in the middle of the fray. It's an arresting overture that speaks to the ongoing commitment of two people who got their counterculture bona fides back in the 1960s, when they were art-school loiterers in Yorkville.

It also illustrates their eye for a good story. Given that so many of their collages depict riotous clashes between symbols of authority and the underclass, the teeming throng of the G20 was fertile ground for inspiration, the logical follow-up to projects where they have documented and aestheticized labour struggles and union activities.

"It was very chaotic filming at the G20," says Owen. "I was worried about getting the shots we needed and Jim was worried about our camera being confiscated or that I would get arrested. It's a strange position when you are documenting an event rather than participating as you see things that perhaps others who are caught up in chanting don't."

Owen's observation could double as an apt assessment of Condé and Beveridge's attempts to look at the bigger picture, a trend borne out in the way that they literally removed images of themselves from their work after the 1970s. Owen and Miller have a little fun with their subjects' self-effacement. In one



image above is the staged photograph, *The Fall of Water* (2007). The first page image is a detail from *Liberty Lost* (G20, Toronto) (2010). Both are by carole condé & Karl Beveridge.

memorable sequence, their ruminations on avoiding self-portraiture are interrupted when a seemingly static figure in the photo collage behind them comes to life to give them a hard time about their camera-shyness.

The man is radical filmmaker John Greyson, and as he begins to wax rhapsodic about Condé-Beveridge's trademark form of "visual or photographic karaoke" and its place within art history, the pair flees the frame, a pretty good meta-joke about their modesty. "Carole and Karl didn't want the film to be about them," says Owen, "but about their work and the community of people they work with. They never wanted to be the stars. I think that this created some of the dramatic tension in the film and is definitely why we named it *Portrait of Resistance*."

At the same time, there is a personal dimension to the film. A sequence describing how Condé and Beveridge overcame the potential pitfall of competition early in their careers—"art is about being an individual," says Condé—is intercut with footage of them trying to build a bench for one of their photos. The DIY endeavour ends on the first go-round with a pile of discarded wooden planks;

a simple but effective visual metaphor for the idea that collaboration is something that you have to work at.

Owen's film is itself a clear labour of love, produced without much of a financial safety net. She says that in the two years that it took her and Miller to raise the money to make *Portrait of Resistance*, Condé and Beveridge had completed the other three paintings after *The Fall of Water* in their "elemental" quartet. But she and Miller saw the project through, mirroring their subjects' dedication to their own palpably independent practice. "More than anyone I've ever known, Carole and Karl have lived according to their principles," Owen says. "Given the fact that the world is now living through a financial crisis—the clear result of deregulation and greed—I think it's time for people to pay more attention to the ideas of Condé and Beveridge. In many ways, with the Occupy movement capturing attention, the world is only just catching up to them." pov

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