

Scott Conarroe: By Rail

In 2006 Scott Conarroe noticed that railway tracks often appeared inadvertently in his photographs of other things. Whether it was Vancouver, Halifax, or London, Ontario, where he was living at the time, tracks and the marginal spaces they occupy appeared in much of his work. Without a pre-determined thesis or an inventory of sites to be documented, he began to gradually evolve this tangential interest in railways into the series of photographs *By Rail*.

So began a continent-wide road trip traveling in an old van to photograph railway infrastructure in various urban, rural and wilderness environments. Conarroe thinks of train tracks as a unifying device that connects diverse geographical and cultural environments. Miami, Florida may be profoundly different from Cochrane, Alberta but the railway tracks in both locations are virtually identical.ⁱ Perhaps because of his studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, a centre for conceptual art theory and practice, Conarroe astutely observed the way in which the entire network of railway tracks in North America conforms to certain aspects of conceptual art theory. Its consistent material construction, precise, uniform dimensions, and even its rhizomatic connectivity all relate, however unintentionally, to the central tenets of conceptual art and the contemporary disciplines of minimalism and land art. From this perspective, the railroad becomes one enormous art installation of interconnected lines that form a skeletal web connecting communities and economies in time and space.

All food for thought when considering Conarroe's cryptic images that appear both straight forward and ambiguous. Despite the almost deadpan yet epic quality of these images with their decided lack of embellishment or drama, questions abound: Why are there no trains or people in most of the photographs? Where are the train stations? What, if not these things, is actually depicted? And why are such specific titles provided for locations that lack the attributes commonly associated with unique places?

Think back to what conceptual photographers like Iain Baxter or Douglas Huebler did in the 1970s photographing what Vancouver photographers and theorists have come to refer to as the "defeatured landscape."ⁱⁱⁱ Their photos of bleak, marginal spaces, often taken from moving cars, give a sense of where Conarroe is coming from. Conarroe, who grew up in northern British Columbia, became familiar with Vancouver photo-conceptualism during his undergraduate studies at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. But while he acknowledges the influence of the Vancouver School on his practice, the idioms of beauty, the sublime and the picturesque evident in *By Rail* are in direct opposition to what some consider its stringent academic orthodoxy.

Despite Conarroe's self-admitted interest in the sublime and the picturesque, *By Rail* is not motivated by a romantic nostalgia for rail travel, that historical yearning for elaborate engines, archaic technologies and gaudy train stations. Nor is it a political statement in support of green high-speed trains or similar utopian desires. Instead, it is an attempt to map the disparate and overlooked spaces that are contingent upon the railroad's ubiquity in the landscape.

Conarroe uses several strategies to imbue each work with his unique epic vacancy. His large photographs command our attention. Using long exposure times, fleeting details, such as moving clouds or rustling leaves, are minimized while the stationary surfaces of inanimate objects are revealed in exquisite detail. Ranging between a couple of seconds (*Boaters, Kalamalka Lake BC*) to nearly 20 minutes (*Canal, Cleveland Ohio*) long exposures, according to Conarroe, are necessary in the subdued light and depth of field he prefers. The scenes change continuously during the exposure, resulting in images that solidify an accumulation of nuanced shifts of light. As he puts it, "Long exposures increase a photograph's autonomy because the truthfulness of its negative doesn't portray a specific instant that appeared a certain way, it portrays a compilation of moments blended together; they underscore the camera's roles of abstractor and editor as well as recorder."ⁱⁱⁱ Conarroe's photographs thus collapse time and space through the accumulation of minute detail in the absence of conventional attributes associated with railways. The familiar imagery has been stripped bare leaving only the provisional arrangements that present themselves along the tracks.

The railway provides an armature upon which much of 19th century North American history is aligned. Western territorial expansion at the expense of First Nations during the second half of the 19th century is inextricably connected in both Canada and the United States with the railway's advance. Environmental degradation, colonization, the continental synchronization of time into standard zones and the resulting regulation of work and leisure are but a few of the dramatic changes railways brought to everyday life.

Governments and industry were quick to use visual representations of train travel to construct a romantic vision signifying progress and abundance in order to encourage immigration to harsh, remote locations and to attract tourists to newly formed national parks. In contrast with these idealized visions, a darker reality often existed and was extensively portrayed in popular culture. This world of factories and slaughterhouses, shabby neighbourhoods and seedy characters was neatly and conveniently divided from respectable society by the tracks themselves. Periods of economic decline, such as the Great Depression or, indeed, the current recession, accentuate the interpretation of railway lands as symbolic of decline and decay, a sort of permanent scar on the landscape that reveals traumas accumulated over time. Conarroe describes himself: "as someone who photographs places where various activities transition into one another, that whole "other side of the tracks" thing is rich for me; the trope of railway tracks defining the boundary between neighbourhoods or economic zones or whatever rings true in books and movies because that's how we've arranged our continent."^{iv}

The concurrent and complementary history of photography parallels in many respects the social and cultural shifts brought about by rail. Both technologies arose in the mid-19th century and changed the way in which people perceived time and space. The camera and the train did much to shrink the world. Just as photographs of exotic places revealed the details of a distant world to mass audiences, so too did the railroad bring global material production within reach of many people in rich societies. The train also allowed individuals to travel beyond their previously limited social and cultural boundaries while photography allowed them to experience vicariously remote and distant regions.^v And photography, like trains, altered the experience of time by providing a way to capture and isolate a moment, and to extricate and abstract fragments of reality into neatly framed images.

By the mid 20th century, both photography and trains had largely been eclipsed by newer technologies. On the one hand, cinema provided a more immersive simulacrum, one that has, along with more recent visual technologies, resulting in the derealization of everyday life. In a similar fashion cars, by allowing individuals to follow their own schedules and journeys, in contrast to the fixed, linear path of trains, disassembled much of the social apparatus of which trains were a part. So what we are left with, and what is apparent in Conarroe's images, is the skeletal remains of a great social organism: the vestiges of a cohesive apparatus for economic and cultural exchange. If *By Rail* reveals the desiccation of a once great North American transportation technology and the provisional communities of trailers, tract housing, and abandoned landscapes that surround it, it also speaks to the loss of photography's legitimacy as an authoritative device for documenting reality. These large, sweeping views, often taken from an elevated vantage point, both emulate and critique photography's long, hard climb from its various roles within the empirical and social sciences to that of aesthetic representation. By conflating the rational and seemingly objective strategies of documentary with the pictorialism of fine art photography, Conarroe questions the legitimacy of two of photography most significant discursive spaces.^{vi}

Despite the apparent similarity to conventional photographic practices, Conarroe's perspective is that of a remote and disengaged subject. His use of long exposures and remote vantage points in *By Rail* emphasizes our distance in time and space from what are essentially two 19th century technologies of diminished legitimacy. More elegy than epic, *By Rail* emerges from Conarroe's relationship to the accumulated discourses surrounding landscape and documentary photography, echoing their formal strategies and re-enacting their historic display within the discursive space of the museum.

James Patten
Director/Chief Curator
McIntosh Gallery

- i Scott Conarroe (interview with Justin Mah, 2010) artist's website: www.scottconarroe.com.
- ii Ian Wallace, "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), p. 97.
- iii Scott Conarroe (interview with Justin Mah, 2010) artist's website: www.scottconarroe.com.
- iv Scott Conarroe (interview with Justin Mah, 2010) artist's website: www.scottconarroe.com.
- v Scott Conarroe (interview with Justin Mah, 2010) artist's website: www.scottconarroe.com.
- vi Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces" *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Richard Bolton ed. (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1989) p.288.