

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Natascha Niederstrass

by James D. Campbell



Natascha Niederstrass
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The works in Niederstrass's exhibition *L'affaire de Camden Town* may have been inspired by the paintings of British artist Walter Sickert (1860-1942), but one does not really need to know the back story to appreciate the superb atmospherics generated singly and in tandem by them. Still, Niederstrass essays a riveting photographic prequel to Sickert's paintings, so it might be useful to investigate that here for a moment. She assumes Sickert executed his paintings using live models, so she chose to re-imagine the scene he would have observed before the execution of a given painting, which always includes a fully clothed male character and a nude female character. Sickert was one of the first suspects to be interrogated in the case of Jack the Ripper. In *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed* (2002), a nonfiction book by crime novelist Patricia Cornwell, the author claims that Sickert, a British

painter, was the 19th-Century serial killer known as Jack the Ripper. Cornwell's book garnered considerable controversy, especially in the context of the British art world, and among Ripper devotees who were critical of her scholarship and conclusions. Cornwell argues vigorously that Sickert had the psychological profile of a killer and that his work is pervaded by a misogynistic theme. She examines Sickert's paintings and sketches, showing women in prostrate poses uncannily similar to Ripper victims at the crime scenes.

So now does Niederstrass. But, I should point out again, and emphatically, that being unaware of the Sickert/Ripper controversy does not diminish the sheer gravitas and beguiling aura of the images by one iota. The fact is that the shadows in these works rule, the Freudian concept of the "uncanny" (*Das Unheimlich*) always comes to the fore quite unbidden, and both composition and luminosity ignite a narrative that moves and haunts us. (Freud referred to a situation where something can be both familiar yet strange at one and the same time, inducing supreme psychological discomfort, and often associated with a repressed memory that suddenly jumps into the foreground of consciousness, full of foreboding). As we experience Niederstrass's ambiguous narratives and their haunting *mises en scènes*, she lures her viewers into a sort of perceptual trap that has unsettling ontological overtones. Compositionally pristine, ambiguous in meaning, yet repletely haunting in their mien, these photographic images nest in our heads and refuse to be exorcised.

I should also mention an earlier installation by the artist at Galerie Trois Points (also 2014). In *Deconstruction of a tragedy*, a series of photographs and a video, the artist revived the myth of one of the most sordid murders in Montreal's Griffintown neighbourhood's history: the brutal beheading of Mary Gallagher at the end of the 19th Century. Ghost sightings are still reported around the murder scene with numerous witnesses averring they have glimpsed the decapitated figure walking the streets in search of her missing head.

The artist included a series of photographs of evidentiary details, inspired by contemporaneous local newspaper descriptions. She also presented a stop-motion animation; its treatment of the headless ghost raised a frisson equal to that induced by Susan Hill's novels like *The Woman in Black* (and subsequent film adaptation) and was such a fitting (and frankly terrifying) complement to [Natalie Reis's](#) splendid exhibition held at the same time.