

LOOKING BACK:

*CONTAINMENT, ABSENCE AND MEMORY IN
ERIKA KIERULF'S CHANTS DE LASSITUDE*

Robert Lendrum

In those grey months that follow a breakup, you may catch phantom glimpses of your former lover: it can be something as simple as someone walking in front of you with a similar hairstyle, or the feeling that passes over you when you return to a location that the two of you frequented – its meaning now completely changed. Erika Kierulf's work immerses us in this feeling of loss. The idea for Kierulf's exhibition *Chants de lassitude* came from her attraction to a pair of small parrots living together in the same cage. In English we call them lovebirds, however the French name is much more meaningful: "les inséparables." Lovebirds cannot stand to be apart; they nearly spend their entire lives together. But the word "inseparable" shifts the sentimental connotation into something darker like a lover's embrace constricting into an asphyxiating bind. This particular couple had lived together in the same cage for a long time, but a recent change in location had affected the female unfavourably. She wasn't adjusting and her anxiety caused her to pull out her own feathers. Her mate, in an act of solidarity, also began self-mutilating.

Lassitude is a rarely-used English word meaning weariness, weakness or listlessness. It's appropriate that throughout *Chants de lassitude* there is a deep sense of loss,

as well as a feeling of retreat to a safe place, but a place that only exists in memory. These memories are both comforting and imprisoning. Weighted down by a chorus of sadness, Kierulf's work also reminds us that regeneration and personal renewal are slow processes, beginning only after a sharp rupture. Such processes require revisiting and trying to make sense of the past. Kierulf's act is to contain her memories in photographic jars. She sets us up for the gravity of her work through a sculptural installation that explores feelings of abandonment.

Visitors to *Les Territoires* are greeted by *It's All the Same to You* (2009), a collection of nearly 50 black birdcages hung tightly together with each door left ajar. Each cage shows some evidence of a former occupant, but no signs of recent life remain. The cages become a single structure, ensnaring each other, but obstructing the viewer from entering the swarm. We can see through them, but there's a sense of suffocation. The repeated vertical lines create a dizzying effect. Although sad in tone, the cages are presented as fetish objects. They are ornate and beautiful; they entice us to possess them. But what



Erika Kierulf, *Untitled*, 2008, C-print.

use is a cage without a prisoner? The installation presents a visual paradox: the bars imprison the birds, but this confined space is also the bird's sanctuary. This piece helps us consider Kierulf's dilemma with relationships and the freedom they compromise.

While the cages bring the viewers directly into a knot of emotional anxiety, the photo-series *I believe in this* (2008) offers glimpses of hope, escape, release, longing and renewal. The only untitled image represents a more positive outlook on the paradox presented by *It's All the Same to You*. Here Kierulf's visual trope of containment takes on a much less threatening tone than the cages. Rather than feeling trapped, the man in the mosquito mask feels safe and comfortable. It protects him, giving him time for internal contemplation. This lone image of a man acts as the accompanying piece to the lone woman in *Sirena*.

Sirena would seem to speak to the idea of luring a new lover. A woman holds a lilac in the early weeks of Spring, hiding her face, enticing us to approach her. *Sirena* is the Icelandic word for lilac and sirens are the singing temptresses of the sea from Greek mythology. As the legend goes, the sirens would sing seductive



Erika Kierulf, *Sirena*, 2008, C-print.

songs to sailors who, distracted and enchanted, would ultimately crash their ships on the rocks. The woman's pose and her concealment conflates her with the siren, beckoning to us. The image carries sexual connotations, but the title of the series gives us a different point of consideration. The



Erika Kierulf, *Drift*, 2008, C-print.

song of this siren is not a song of seduction. *Chants de lassitude* are all she can muster. Why is the siren so weary? Is she truly optimistic about the arrival of Spring? Or is this an image of regret?

In *Drift*, a hundred plastic bags take flight against a threatening backdrop of dark clouds. Below them, rows of garages or storage units watch the bags escape. These bags could be birds and these garages could be cages. There is a tension between escape and release in this image. These bags are escaping from us and fleeing away into the distance.

We can even think of these bags as containers of memory. Each bag represents a nuanced moment of the relationship blowing away; an inside joke, a silent stare, a particular fight – fading into the distance. Hopelessly unable to catch them, we instead can only marvel at their getaway. Like the cages, *Drift* positions the viewer as the one left behind. However, there is always hope with the release of a burden carried for a

long time.

Mound can be seen as a direct reference to Rodney Graham's 1980s camera lucida photo series of upside down trees. Kierulf creates a visual trick by reversing the elements. Recently cut branches lie in a pile at the base of the tree, and by turning it, she re-inscribes life into a lifeless looking trunk. The tree is a metaphor for a relationship now lost – its branches, or its growth, severed, abandoned and swept into a pile. By flipping



Erika Kierulf, *Mound*, 2008, C-print.

the image upside down the tree is reborn, but this glimmer of hope is tempered by its reliance on abstracted reconstruction. The tree cannot exist this way except as an abstraction, a reconstruction, or a memory. *Mound* is an attempt to get something back, but it's a fix that doesn't solve the problem at heart.

La Cache embodies bountiful contradictions.

Simultaneously a secure private space and a space to watch over potential prey, the hunting platform conjures feelings of a recuperative escape and methodical violence. For children or weekend explorers, hunting platforms are readymade tree forts in the midst of forests. Usually positioned on the

cusps between thick woods and open fields, these are spaces that are animated by childhood imagination or used as hiding places for peaceful solitude. The hunter's purpose shares the same respect for isolation. Silently waiting for a deer to come within range, the hunter uses solitude as a weapon. The platform becomes a trap and the hunter becomes Death awaiting its prey. In this image, the safe hiding place of recuperation is inverted into a site of entrapment – or is it the other way around? Let us not forget, we are looking at a site of execution.



Erika Kierulf, *La Cache*, 2008, C-print.

Kierulf's images are filled with weightless objects, yet she creates formal strategies to contain them. This strategy can be seen in her earlier work such as the photo-series *Vertigo* (2004-6), but where *Vertigo* felt like a formal study at times, *I believe in this* verges on a conceptual auto-ethnography. The spaces in these photographs might be familiar to Kierulf. They could be locations or reenactments of events that have had a deep personal effect on her. As a study of relationships, Kierulf's work helps us recognize the importance another person can have in our lives, even in absence. Even when we free ourselves from relationships,

phantom lovers have a way of making their presence known. At what cost comes freedom?, she asks. The melancholic pieces like *It's All the Same to You* or *Drift* suggest that Kierulf considers sadness the immediate price of freedom. These images are sites where inseparables once lived. Now they're graveyards for memories.

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Erika Kierulf lives and works in Montreal. In 2007, she completed an MFA in Studio Art at Concordia University (Montreal), and a residency the following year at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Her photographic and installation work has been shown in Canada, Sweden, and Indonesia. She has exhibited at the Eastern Edge Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland, La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse in Montreal, most recently at the Museo de la Ciudad in Querétaro, Mexico. For more information please visit her website at www.erikakierulf.com.

Robert Lendrum was raised between the suburbs of Toronto and the hamlet of Fallbrook, Ontario. He is an emerging artist working in video, performance and documentary and his work has exhibited in Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Ann Arbor. In 2007 he received the Ontario Arts Council grant for Emerging Media Artists for his video installation *Family Re-semblance*, which exhibited at Interaccess Electronic Media Arts Centre and gained critical attention in *Blackflash* magazine. He received his BFA from the University of Western Ontario, his MA in Media Studies at Concordia, and is now completing his MFA at Ryerson University. For more information please visit his website at www.robertlendrum.com.

CHANTS DE LASSITUDE

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