

# Carole Condé + Karl Beveridge:



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# Canada's *Enfants Terribles* of the Art World

By Vincenzo Pietropaolo

**R**ARELY HAS A CONJUGAL COUPLE had such longevity as a collaborative artistic duo as Canada's Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge. Their role as two artists operating in one sustained practice throughout most of their careers is intriguing. It goes beyond the depth of collaboration that generally occurs between two professional artists. The history of visual art is replete with collaborations between artists and life partners who achieved their greatest critical success as individuals. Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti easily come to mind. Closer to home, we have Christopher and Mary Pratt. But few have sustained a collaboration over a lifetime, and fewer still have signed their works as one single authorial entity. For this reason alone, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge are a unique phenomenon.

Perhaps the closest contemporary parallel to Condé and Beveridge as a collaborative duo are Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German photographers and conceptual artists who worked together for over 40 years. But that's where the comparison stops. The Bechers spent a lifetime creating a meticulous, formalist documentation of water towers, mine head shafts, blast furnaces and other large industrial structures that began to disappear during the post-1950s decline of traditional industry in Germany and other countries. Their detached, "objective" black and white images were presented and arranged in taxonomic groupings, and, though highly influential, remain one-dimensional. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's work is also photographic but it is nothing if not multi-dimensional. Straddling the boundaries between documentary and conceptual art, the essence of their work is political activism. They use multiple forms of visual storytelling to address issues of social justice, class division and political power, working collaboratively with many unions, NGOs and social movements.

"Public Exposures: the Art-Activism of Condé and Beveridge (1976-2016)" is an historic retrospective of these significant Canadian contemporary artists, who have been too-often misunderstood and rejected by the official art world. Curated by Jim Miller, the exhibition seeks to right this wrong. It is the first large exhibition of their work in Toronto since the Art Gallery of Ontario's highly controversial

show in 1976. Not insignificantly, it opened at the historically radical A Space Gallery, and took place concurrently at four other galleries located at "401" (Richmond St. West)—Urbanspace, Trinity Square Video, Prefix ICA, and YYY Artists' Outlet—as well as including a symposium at OCADU (the Ontario College of Art and Design University). A major book that "examines the scope and influences of their activist collaborations in the areas of artists' rights, cultural policy and labour arts" is also underway. The exhibition virtually took over the first floor of "401," and it is fitting that the show opened at A Space, one of the oldest artist-run centres in Canada, which Condé and Beveridge ran as part of a community board in the early 1980s.

The visual extravaganza traces their prolific career, which has produced more than 50 major works, starting with their earliest collaborative project, *It's Still Privileged Art* (1976), a bookwork of cartoons and text in which Condé and Beveridge questioned their aspirations of pursuing critical success as formalist bourgeois artists and made a fundamental decision to embark on collaborative and politicized art as a duo. The show includes their latest piece, *Overtime* (2016), an elaborately constructed mural-sized panoramic photograph that addresses global warming by showing the disastrous effects that climate change will have on a quintessential element of Canadian popular culture: hockey and the neighbourhood outdoor ice rink. In between, the exhibition traces the evolution of their career through works that include fictional photographic narratives evoking classic documentary photo essays; documentary photographs combined with staged ones; collage works inspired by the politicized anti-fascist imagery of John Heartfield in the 1930s; photographs of constructed sets that tell a complete story or chapter of one; elements of the *photo-roman*; and allegorical reinterpretations of famous paintings transformed through digital technology to create multi-layered visual narratives.

From the beginning of their collaborative career, Condé and Beveridge's style has been to stage photographs using themselves, their friends and others as actors representing archetypes to create narrative stories of social justice and workers' struggle. They built elaborate sets manually, processed their own pictures and seamlessly

fused the various components into one image in the darkroom. The duo made their own Cibachrome prints, a photographic process now obsolete but much loved by photographers of the 1970s and 80s for its incredibly rich, saturated colours. In today's digital age, it is difficult to believe that these early works—so seamless and “natural” looking—are non-digital, and that they pre-date the age of Photoshop. The duo were quick to embrace digital technology, which offered many advantages to their style of working, and by 1999 abandoned their darkroom. Through digital technology they could create far more complex constructions, layering them with witty subtleties and poetic nuances that their earlier works typically did not have.

Despite the changes in technology, the collaborative nature of their work remains constant. Collaboration, quite literally, begins at home, as the artists initiate each project with an intimate process of dialogue and negotiation in order to arrive at an agreed point of view between themselves. The fact that they are a couple in a life-long relationship—they met in 1966 and married a year later—has had, according to Beveridge, a “tremendous effect, because you're going through a critical dialogue, right through the whole process, from beginning to end. It's an ongoing discussion, and as Carole always said, ‘an ongoing fight.’” Condé adds, “It's because we have different ways of thinking about how to think about the project... Karl is usually talking about the content. I might talk about the idea. But when he is talking about the content, I am already visualising it within a form. So the form then becomes the dialogue between us, or argument, because he says he doesn't think about the concept in a visual way.” She pauses, turns to Karl and says, “You go ahead, you fill it in.” And Beveridge continues, “We've always had *this* argument. We both visualise, and we visualise in different ways. So it's not that I don't visualise as I speak or have an image of the concept. It's that it's a different way of formulating it.” In the process, they subsume their own personal, individual identities for the sake of the couple's sustained practice. Beveridge adds, as Condé nods in agreement, “Ideas on each side are always being questioned; it's always in a critical process. Our whole lives are integrated in that way. We don't really separate very much what we do socially, culturally, or politically.”

The second stage of collaboration is with the workers whose stories they tell. Group discussions are an integral part of the process of creating a piece, and their intense participatory nature results in multiple benefits. Not only is there full consent of the individuals whose stories are being told, but an archive of the collective memory of working class experiences is created. Group dynamics lead to community building and reinforce the activists' movement. Collaboration is not merely an enabling convention to create their work: it is part of the politicisation process of art making, the defining element of their work.

One of their earliest and most famous examples of this process is *Standing Up* (1980-81), a 27-part photo-narrative that tells the story of an historic strike by a small group of women workers at the Radio Shack factory in Barrie, Ontario in 1979. They wanted to join the United Steelworkers union, which was denied them by their company. The strike lasted nine months, resulting in tensions at home and in the community, with intimidating violence on the picket line, but in the end the workers won. After holding discussions with nine women in collective sessions, Condé and Beveridge planned to take photographs of them in staged re-enactments, but the women were reluctant to be identified for fear of reprisals at the plant. This brought to a head a fundamental truth about documentary—that those who appear “on camera” risk further intimidation and violence. The artists responded to this challenge by writing stories using the women's own words, but relying on actors to play their roles. While this might appear to



CAROL CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

*Fall of Water*  
2007, 60" x 75", archival pigment print



be crossing the boundary of the documentary into fiction, in effect it is no different than docs in which the identities of the characters are protected by obscuring their faces, hiding them altogether, altering their voices, or even using a stand-in actor. It's an accepted convention in documentary cinema, one which closely parallels Condé and Beveridge's own conventions when making politically engaged art.

In one of the four main scenes or stories within the overall piece, a woman, Linda (not her real name of course), is photographed, in colour, in the company's bathroom as she leans by the hand-wash sink having a cigarette. In image three of the series, Linda is wearing the jeans and plaid shirt that she would have worn in the stock room. Her face is very tense, and we see that she's even forgotten to



CAROL CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

Linda, from *Standing Up*  
1981, 30" x 40", Cibachrome

flick off the ash on her cigarette. Someone has scrawled a message on the concrete block wall in large block letters: "Take this job and shove it." In the mirror above, a black-and-white photograph of her partner and herself at home has been superimposed. While her husband shaves, Linda can be seen in the background as if trying to plead with him about the importance of the strike to *her*. The tension is palpable and the message is immediate and dramatic.

As the story evolves and militancy builds up, Linda begins to stand up to her partner. At the same time, she stands up to the factory bosses, while another woman joins her in solidarity. Scenes of domestic life are replaced by strikes, which are represented by actual documentary photographs, some of which were taken by women on their own picket line. Slowly the message scrawled on the wall also changes as some words are crossed out and replaced. "Take this job and shove it" becomes "Take this job company and shove it," which becomes "Take this company and unionise it." By image six, someone in different handwriting has added "Right on!"

The juxtaposition of black and white and colour is an effective means to convey the two separate "realities" of the character: her

physical presence in the company bathroom and her memory of life at home or on the picket line. Technically it is fiction, for it is a dramatisation even if based on documentary evidence, but it is nonetheless so evocative of reality and so full of emotion that it recalls the qualities of neorealist cinema, which was fiction shot in documentary style. *Standing Up* is anchored conceptually in the post-neorealist milieu of political art that was not a call to direct action, but a building block of an activist labour movement and of women's empowerment through workers' history. In effect, *Standing Up* is akin to a still photography version of neorealism, evoking the feeling of films like Mario Monicelli's *The Organizer* (1963), which, not unlike Condé and Beveridge's work, was also about workers going on strike, and conceived as political art. While *Standing Up* was not created or intended to have any allegorical references to any specific work, it nevertheless foreshadows the artists' later predilection for the reinterpretation of historical works of art.

In 1994, Condé and Beveridge were invited to work on a project in Vigo, Spain, home to one of the largest fish processing industries in the world. The cod wars between Spain and Canada were rampant at



CAROL CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

***Non Habera Nada-Pieta***  
 1994, 30" x 40", Cibachrome

that time, and Spanish trawlers were being intercepted in Canadian fishing grounds. The decline of the industry internationally, due to overfishing by huge trawlers owned by large corporations that “mined” the seabed, wreaked devastation on independent fishing families. *Non habrá nada para ningún* (*There Will be Nothing for Anyone*) is an 11-part photographic staged narrative that recounts the history of the cod fishery, from abundance to demise in the 1990s. Shot on location and in the studio in Vigo, the artists play the characters in their story in staged sets that they constructed following their usual methodology of creating storyboards. They based their narrative on discussions with the union that represents Canadian fish workers, but also on research about Vigo.

Referencing the religious cultural life of both Vigo and Newfoundland fishing ports, Condé and Beveridge created images that recall biblical symbols in a visually rich sequence. Image two of the series alludes to the miracle of the feeding of the multitude by Jesus in the Gospel: two fishes and five loaves of bread are photographed against the backdrop of traditional fishing boats, signifying times of plenty. In a later picture, the table is bereft of any fish and bread, as

the traditional fishing boats have now been replaced by industrial trawlers. Particularly evocative is a reinterpretation of one of the most iconic works of art in western history, Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. But this *Pietà* is different: the roles are reversed, and it is a male figure (Beveridge) who holds a recumbent, lifeless woman (Condé) in a semi-silhouette set against a background of wildly gesticulating, menacing sea monsters in business suits that seem to float all around them, superimposed over a gigantic \$100 Canadian bank note that acts as a stage backdrop. It is an imaginatively scathing symbol of the corporate greed that has crucified an entire generation’s livelihood. By using powerful iconography that is universally known, the artists successfully convey their message (there always is a message in Condé and Beveridge’s art) without making the work seem overly didactic.

This series also resulted in an elaborate self-portrait of the duo, appropriately represented together as two workers—*cultural workers*—contextualised in their workplace, the streets of Vigo, counter to the common practice of decontextualising the self-portrait. In each picture it is clear that one or the other is releasing the shutter.

Their interest in historical iconography would reach a peak in



2006-2009, when they created “The 4 Elements,” described by curator Jim Miller as “a suite of four allegorical works about environmental justice,” focusing on fire, earth, air and water. With these works, the artists set on a path towards a new level of virtuosity through Photoshop, creating imagery that is at once political and poetic; complex but accessible, exuberant and witty. The first of these works, already becoming iconic, is *The Fall of Water* (2007), a constructed photograph containing 70 or more characters, based on Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562). The politics of water are the politics of the future, and what better way to

prophesize the conflict of the future than by replacing the Archangels as the forces of Good and Lucifer as the force of Evil with a modern conflict between environmentalists and the abusers of water?

The dominant character, situated in the centre of the composition is an indigenous woman from the Andes mountains, a Mother Earth figure cast as warrior, leading the successful fight against the new money lenders that attempted to privatise water in Bolivia. International solidarity in this ongoing struggle spreads across geopolitical divides from Asia to Canada, as Bruegel’s angels are replaced by environmentalists at the top of the composition, waging war



CAROL CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

***Liberty Lost (G20, Toronto)***  
 2010, 60" x 90", archival pigment print

against a global oligarchy of industrial polluters, petroleum companies, water bottlers and politicians amidst the dead fish, E. coli, drought and disease strewn about in the wake of the rapacious abuse of the sacred, life-giving element. It is masterful work, notable for its sense of movement, brilliant use of colour and spatial allotment assigned to each character in this epic story. Reminiscent of another Armageddon, the tightly packed cornucopia of humans, angels and bizarre creatures are seemingly chaotic but carefully orchestrated to continually surprise us about the dangers of the global politicisation of water. Yet for all its heavy message, the work is lighthearted and laden with humour, as characters continually appear from behind others, as if floating in turbulent waters—the wash of history—their bodies in various states of contortion, some even in the process of using bodily functions. It is a theatrical performance on paper. Each character was photographed separately, and seamlessly worked into the composition, an action which the artists likened to “painting with light,” evoking the etymological root of the word “photography.” The piece should have a permanent home in a large public space where people gather, like a railway station or airport.

The new direction heralded by their latest works attest to Condé and Beveridge as being among the most significant visual storytellers of the digital age, not only for their captivating manner of telling but for the constancy of their message. They are Canada’s version of Mexico’s Diego Rivera, as cultural theorist Dot Tuer recently stated in a symposium. They continue to tackle subjects that are politically “difficult” and often ignored out of fear of political correctness. For instance, in *Liberty Lost (G20, Toronto)* (2010), Condé and Beveridge created a frighteningly dramatic response to an infamous day of police action in the streets of Toronto during a meeting of G20 countries. The artists distilled a complex story of globalized politics and suppression of freedom into an emotionally arresting composite photograph that has the effect of releasing from our memory banks a plethora of disturbing images that we had digested from news broadcasts. The focus of the work is on robotic and futuristic-looking police violently intercepting a peaceful protest march against the backdrop of Toronto’s financial district and in the shadow of Old City Hall. It is one of their most provocative works, a story that needed to be told, lest it remain invisible and risk repeating itself. Once again Condé and Beveridge are proving that art is political, and necessarily so if we are to use art as an expression of people’s true histories.

Although *Liberty Lost (G20, Toronto)* references Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Guiding the People* (1830), this work is not about the past, but about incipient fascism in the future. According to Beveridge, what we are witnessing now is “polarisation in all aspects, including culture. On the one hand, you have the insane development of the market, and then you have development of an alternative. There is a shift happening, a new generation coming into the museums, and I would think that (our) legacy is the understanding that culture has an essentially political role to play in society.” Condé takes up the segue, “I think that young people today are actually having more sense [than many of us did years ago.] It is possible to do all the things that we thought we were going to do 30 or 40 years ago. I think we’re getting this resurgence...and I’m feeling a hope that our work has some meaning, some use for that group of people.” **POV**

**Vincenzo Pietropaolo** is a photographer and writer who has exhibited widely. His ninth book of photography, *Ritual*, will be published in fall 2016, and he is currently researching a book on the history of work in photography. An exhibition of his work on Cuba will open in October at the Charlotte Hale and Associates Gallery.