

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty-five years Ann and Harry Malcolmson, who live in Toronto, have assembled a rare collection of vintage photographs that span the history of the medium. After a long period of collecting contemporary art, they were gradually drawn to early twentieth-century experimental photography, and then began to investigate nineteenth-century material before expanding into classic modernist and contemporary works. This exhibition selected from over two-hundred photographs reveals the scope and depth of their collection.

The exhibition features iconic as well as anonymous images that underscore the Malcolmson's interest in experimental approaches to the medium, from Fox Talbot to Robert Frank. The beginnings of photography is represented by salted paper prints from paper negatives of the mid-1840s and twenty-first century photography, by several of Vancouver's most notable contemporary artists. This range of images draws links between the earliest innovations in the medium to those of today; for instance, Gustave Le Gray's 1850s seascape produced from two negatives precedes the collage techniques of modernist photography that continue in digital practices. While alluding to historical

developments and stylistic periods, the exhibition knits together images from diverse contexts, genres and time frames. The significance of photography as both an artistic practice and mode of perception is considered in relation to its profound impact on visual culture and social history. Many of the nineteenth-century images resulted from commissions for empirical records of significant events and social conditions evident in the pictures of archeological and urban sites. In the twentieth century, more fragmented and prosaic views of the world dominate.

Photography as an act of drawing with light is made palpable throughout the exhibition, from the long exposures that fail to still the breath of a subject, to photograms that record movements of light on paper, to a film montage of moving reflections. Human figures often appear veiled and immaterial, as if apparitions. The surrealist impulse to conflate mind and body and to evoke psychic space is expressed in the bodily distortions of the many phantasmagoric figurative works. A grouping of portraits evolves from stiff formal portraiture of sitters posing in conscious self-portrayal to an increasing focus on isolated gestures and fleeting moments of someone caught offguard. While associated with naturalism, the artificial spatial effect of pho-

tographic optics evident in the condensed spaces and surface details of the nineteenth-century landscapes becomes more pronounced in the skewed and montaged perspectives called for by the chaotic energies and visual dynamics of modern cities. Abstraction and visuality itself as subject matter are prevalent threads in the exhibition.

The exhibition reveals how developments in camera and print technologies impacted "the new vision." The unique character of each vintage print emphasizes the very materiality of photographs—their physical surfaces, the patinas of aging and accidents of chemicals interacting with paper. These visual effects emphasize the mysterious, elusive qualities of photographic images as traces of a moment in time and the strong poetic and elegiac mood in *The Malcolmson Collection*. The vitrine of publication materials offers clues to the importance of the book form, especially albums and portfolios, to the history of the medium. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to witness the scholarship, intuitions and passions of Ann and Harry Malcolmson that has resulted in one of Canada's most unique and significant art collections.

Helga Pakasaar, Curator