



BRENDA FRANCIS PELKEY

A RETROSPECTIVE

A VIRTUAL EXHIBITION TOUR



Exhibition Entrance & Introduction

This retrospective exhibition features the work of Brenda Francis Pelkey, known for her contributions to contemporary photography since the 1980s. A career first, the retrospective considers Francis Pelkey's practice over nearly four decades commencing with her early black-and-white industrial subjects and continuing to her present work in Windsor, Ontario. "Very generally," she explained in 2001, "my photographic practice has centred on subjective experience

and the problematics of meaning and place."

Presented in eight sections, this exhibition is organized thematically and chronologically to show the following major bodies of work: *Foundry* (1987–89); "*. . . the great effect of the imagination on the world*" (1988–90); *dreams of life and death* (1991–94) and *Memento Mori* (1993–97); *Oblivion* (1996–97); *As if there were grace* (1999–2000); *Haunts* (2000–2001); *Spaces of Transformation* (2004–08); and *Site* (2013–ongoing).

Brenda Francis Pelkey began making art in North Bay,

Brenda Francis Pelkey: A Retrospective

EXHIBIT INTRODUCTION

Catharine M. Mastin, PhD
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Art Gallery of Windsor

Ontario, followed by time in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the East Coast, and more recently in Windsor, Ontario, where she has also served as Director of the School of Visual Arts at the University of Windsor (2003–12). Today, she continues an active role as professor and artist. Being the daughter of a father with a military career meant that she and her family moved many times during her youth. Equally, the evolution of her professional life has required successive relocations. The works in this ex-



Sections Seven & Eight: **Spaces of Transformation and Site**

hibition are informed by these biographical experiences as well as by ideas of social geography and psychology. For Francis Pelkey, social geography and psychology are the experiences of public and private spaces which are not mapped in the traditional sense, but rather have the power to create personal meaning. Her works invite viewers to imagine outcomes of events past, present and future which may have happened, may be happening, and could happen in those spaces,

and from feminist viewpoints.

To explore such social and psychological geographies, Francis Pelkey is conscious of her role as female artist and of the times of day in which she is working. Many of her early and mid-career works were created when the subject was cast in partial or full darkness - sundown, dusk, night and sunrise. By manipulating the range of light and dark with the artificial augmentation of intense movie lights and/or long exposures in these photographs, Francis Pelkey brings subjects on the edge of visibility

and darkness into the world of the visible. In more recent works photographed during daytime - depicting starkly lit courtrooms, for example - the viewer is asked to pause over such details as the tissue box placed at witness stand, an object that anticipates the details of courtroom testimonies. Moreover, by photographing nocturnal subjects like strip clubs during daytime when they are closed, the artist challenges the idea of night as the absence of light.

From the particularized suburban front and backyards



Sections Six & Seven: **Haunts** (right) and **Spaces of Transformation** (left)

adorned with elements of personal memory and identity to eerie dark roads at night, expansive coastal ocean panoramas, empty hospital beds, strip-dance clubs, empty bars, courtrooms, and pool scenes, Francis Pelkey exposes the still-gendered and changing contours of contemporary life. Narrative tension and uncertainty are at the centre of her work, and they are explored through themes of feminism, memory, place and autobiography. The historical perception of the

photograph as document, testimony to fact, is challenged to deploy the medium as one of rich social and psychological impact. Here, viewers have occasion to appreciate Brenda Francis Pelkey's legacy within and beyond the medium of her focus and within and beyond contemporary art.



Section Eight: **Site**, showing Cat. 59, **Room with clustered hanging wires** 2013



Section One: Foundry

In the 1980s, Brenda Francis Pelkey worked in black-and-white photography before becoming known for her dramatic full-colour prints in Cibachrome (also known as Ilfochrome). These photographs of factory scenes and their workers were taken at the implement that both seeded and fertilized at the same time,” recently noted Francis Pelkey, explaining that her commission was to photograph inventors in the facility. “The foundry was noisy, dirty and dramatic,” she continued, “It seemed a

place out of time - not in tune at all with contemporary sentiments, which in 1988, were perched on the cusp of the information age.”

For a two-year period, Francis Pelkey was given permission to photograph the facility, and the results are foundry interiors and formal portraits of the workers at their stations, images taken with the consent of her subjects. Francis Pelkey considered the Sutherland Steel Foundry commission her “good-bye” to documentary photography, wherein the photographer and viewer

SECTION ONE **FOUNDRY | 1987–1989**

both consider the image as testimony to fact. Contrary to this tradition, Francis Pelkey worked with a 4”x 5” format camera, over-exposed the images using natural lighting, and left visible the rebate edges. These strategies disclose to the viewer her medium, process and, in turn, her role as mediator of subjects and lighting.



Cat. 9, *Untitled No. 8*, 1998



Cat.15, *Terry Zaback Floor Moulder*, 1998



Section Two: "...the great effect of the imagination on the world", showing Cat. 24, *Front Garden*, Kim Kimberly 1989

The idea for these works began with Brenda Francis Pelkey's larger interest in domestic landscape architecture when she was living in Hamilton, Ontario, an interest she continued to explore after moving to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1980. Produced in colour through the rich tones of the Cibachrome process, the works profile the yards of homeowners whose interests included gardening, topiary, and objects of personal memory and history.

The project was a significant breakthrough to bring the artist's works to the contemporary art scene in a 1991 exhibition organized and toured by the Dunlop Art Gallery.

By working with the permission of the homeowners, Francis Pelkey created a project that became "an exploration into what place means and how one belongs to place and community." "The sites are highly idiosyncratic and deeply meaningful," she observed, "they seemed a manifestation of one's interior world - memory and imagination made material."

SECTION TWO **"... THE GREAT EFFECT OF THE** **IMAGINATION ON THE WORLD"** **1988–1990**

She also recalled the personal stories of her subjects Mr. and Mrs. Kantor, Anna Rusteika, and Kim Kimberly:

"Mr. and Mrs. Kantor had emigrated from Hungary and missed the architecture of their homeland; Anna Rusteika had moved to the city from her farm and decorated her yard with various farm implements and plastic animals; and Kim Kimberly had assembled and decorated his front yard with



Cat. 20, *The Back Garden at 2233 Wiggins Avenue, Bob Hinitt* 1988

memorabilia after the death of his wife. In all instances there was an impetus to bring the individual's past into the present, to make the past visible and integrated into the everyday."

This series marked the first major body of work in which Francis Pelkey used large movie lights to photograph subjects at night. The effect of this method was to illuminate the night landscape and make neighbour-

ing properties disappear into darkness even though the adjacent homes were in close proximity. In these works Francis Pelkey also began using multiple photographic panels to form a single larger image, what she called a "constructed panorama." The result is a widened view that a single-print image would not otherwise offer.



Section Three: **dreams of life and death**, showing: Cat. 32, **Power Pole**, 1988 (left)

Cat. 34, **Untitled** 1995 (right)

In the early 1990s, Brenda Francis Pelkey's work expressed a more personal dimension as the artist reflected on her experiences in youth and in adult life. These two bodies of work, *dreams of life and death* and *Memento Mori*, are here shown together since the latter was a continuation of the former. The works in *dreams of life and death* were photographed in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, but drew on memories from a place of her childhood, Havre Boucher,

Nova Scotia. The body is referred to metaphorically rather than physically, and texts are an integral part of the works' potential meanings. For this series, Francis Pelkey still worked at night with movie lights and used the Cibachrome photographic process. Almost two decades later, she vividly described the psychological impetus of these works:

"The incidents recalled are psychologically historic markers, moments that burn themselves into memory...These highly

SECTION THREE **DREAMS OF LIFE AND** **DEATH | 1993–1994**

MEMENTO MORI | 1994–1996

personal texts recall traumatic events. The narratives are terse. They speak of uncertainties: of events gone wrong, the fragility and instability of identity and the transience of life. Linked with the images the texts are meant to unsettle—to create uncertainty, uncertainty about the place photographed and uncertainty about the story and the storyteller."



Section Three: **dreams of life and death** and **Memento Mori**, showing: Cat. 35, **Untitled** 1995 (left)

Cat. 33, **Untitled** 1995 (right)

In *Memento Mori* the subjects are landscapes seen through feminist viewpoints as Francis Pelkey recalls the stories told to her by women in the community - stories "taken from casual conversations while visiting former neighbours and friends." The artist recently described Havre Boucher as "an area of stunning beauty with hills and vistas of the Cabot Strait." Yet this landscape had a unique function in *Memento Mori*: "I was not looking at these as magnificent views and

open vistas, but rather revisiting places where I had walked and thought, during daylight hours, when I lived in the community over twenty years before."



Section Four: **Oblivion** Cat. 39, *Bush* 1997-99

In keeping with the title of this series, Brenda Francis Pelkey focuses on the processes of remembering and forgetting in *Oblivion*. “Unease or uncertainty of belonging to place is created mainly by visual means, rather than through the unsettling texts of the previous work,” she noted in 2000. More recently, she has emphasized the connection between the works’ formal and conceptual features: “some images are inverted, some repeated, some fragmented, mirroring how we

remember and misremember our own histories.”

Works comprising this series were photographed in the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, and also the Shetland Islands, Scotland, UK, all places linked with the artist’s family history. *Bush*, for example was photographed on her grandparents’ homestead in Saskatchewan after sunset.

SECTION FOUR ***OBLIVION (1996–97)***



Section Five: **As if there were grace**, showing: Cat. 42, *Needle* 2000

As if there were grace is an intensely private project that, for Brenda Francis Pelkey, marked a return to representations of the physical body. Its subject is her late husband - filmmaker, writer and critic, Chester Pelkey, whose untimely passing took place in 2012. The images offer close-up views of various body parts - including Chester Pelkey's feet and hands - while he was undergoing medical treatments for a variety of illnesses. A trying experience for the artist, she remarked:

"This work is very much about my own emotional response to life and circumstance. Viewing through the lens gave me a necessary distance, time to process and try to understand, what was in front of me. The word 'sorry' appears on a number of the images - this was a word constantly repeated by him. This was an intensely difficult time for him, for me and for our daughters, as both his physical health and already precarious mental health were unravelling."

SECTION FIVE **AS IF THERE WERE GRACE | 1999–** **2000**

To make these works Francis Pelkey used the Polaroid camera, a tool known for its portability and convenience, and for its all-in-one capacity to take a picture and produce an image within seconds. These quickly-made Polaroids became sources for the larger giclée prints. Francis Pelkey first exhibited the giclée prints as a stand-alone exhibition at the Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax in 2000, during which time she was teaching a summer course on non-silver photography.



Section Six: **Haunts**, showing Cat. 44, ***Ocean Untitled a-b*** 2001

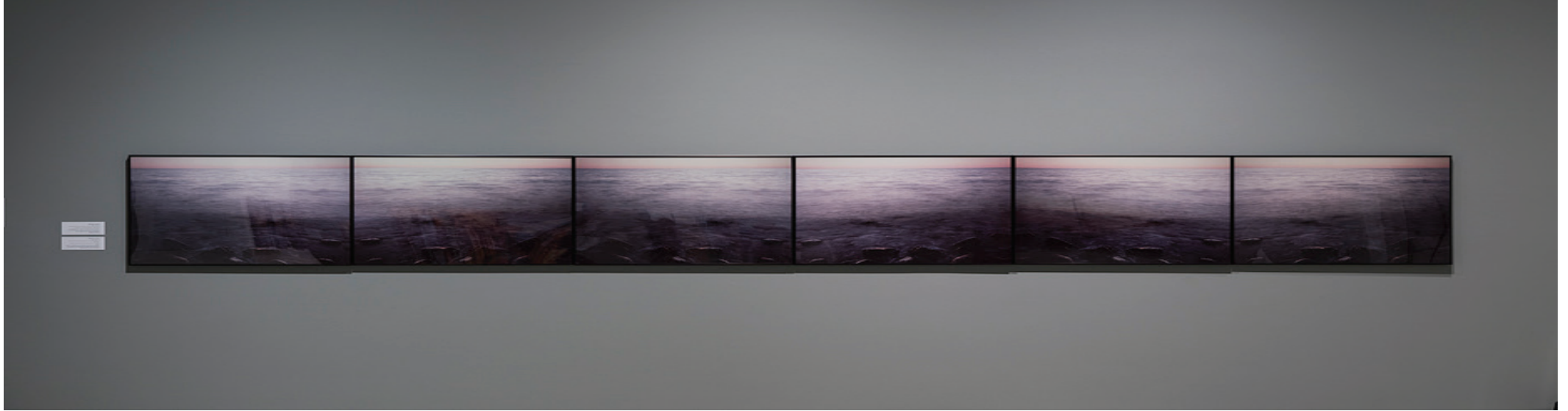
SECTION SIX ***HAUNTS | 2000–2001***

With this body of work, Brenda Francis Pelkey embraces the many meanings of the word “haunts,” evoking ideas of both place and spirit. Especially key to this series are the works *Ocean* (2001) and *Forest III* (2001), respectively comprised of six and eight panels to form expansive landscape panoramas. Both were photographed at Havre Boucher, Nova Scotia, where Francis Pelkey’s family spent time during her youth and where she returned in 2000.

Close study of the works reveals that each one is made from one image, repeated in reverse and then duplicated to form the larger composition. The initial impression may be one of repose and cohesion, yet the working process speaks of the works’ fragmentary nature, wherein illusion is not reality and those places of her past are anything but settling. Photographed at dusk yet appearing as daylight, *Ocean* was made by using a long exposure during darkness, leaving no certainty as to the actual time of day.

With *Haunts*, Francis Pelkey moved from text to soundtracks for *Ocean* and *Forest*. She explained the role of sound in relation to her images:

“The audio consists of the unintelligible voices of a crowd looped and layered with, in one case, [*Ocean*] the sound of waves crashing on a shore, and in another [*ForestIII*] the sound of wind blowing through leaves. The sounds represent what is missing in the images - the trees in the



Section Six: **Haunts**, showing Cat. 43, **Ocean** 2001

photograph have no leaves. The play between the photographs and the audio is meant to represent an impossibility of communication - the profound gap between the rational, represented by the photographic image and the irrational represented by the audio tracks."



Section Seven: **Spaces of Transformation**, Cat. 49, *Whiski-Jacks* 2001

Images of hospitals, bars, strip clubs and courtrooms comprise *Spaces of Transformation*, a series begun by Brenda Francis Pelkey after her move to Windsor, Ontario in 2003. Seemingly incongruent, these subjects continue her explorations of the complex social geographies of urban life. Mostly based in Windsor, they were made accessible to her through formal permission processes with the establishment owners and managers. In all instances these are interior spaces within formal-

ized institutions and/or entertainment spaces where architecture has resonant meanings - from the sterile rooms of hospitals and courtrooms to entertainment clubs where women are paid by men to dance exposed.

These sites, the artist explained in 2016, “all share the potential for threshold experiences (where the extremes of experience reside: life and death; joy and despair).” In these sites are also gendered histories of

SECTION SEVEN ***SPACES OF TRANSFORMATION*** 2003–2008

waged labour where historically men have been doctors and women nurses, men judges and women secretaries, men business club owners and women the objects of a voyeuristic gaze. Here, though, Francis Pelkey removes the action normally taking place in those scenes by photographing when no one is working. The results encourage viewers to reflect on the histories of those spaces and the complexity of experiences which have taken place there (and to which we are not privy). Francis Pelkey is careful not to provide answers or project their futures when they are not known.



Section Seven: **Spaces of Transformation**, showing:

Cat. 54, ***Court, Cobourg*** 2005,
(printed large format 2016)

Cat. 55, ***Superior Court of Justice, Peterborough*** 2005, (printed large format 2016)

Cat. 53, ***Supreme Court I, Windsor*** 2005,
(printed large format 2016)



Cat.51, ***Leopard's*** 2006



Section Eight: **Site**, Cat. 58, *Room with Shovel* 2013, (printed large format 2016)

The subjects shown in this recent body of work depict the Windsor International Aquatic and Training Centre in Windsor, Ontario, a facility adjacent to the Art Gallery of Windsor constructed between 2012 and 2014. A linchpin in the City of Windsor's downtown renewal initiatives following the 2008 economic downturn, it is one of the major commercial construction sites that Brenda Francis Pelkey has explored in her recent work. Gallery and artist partnered with the municipality

to gain access to this site during construction. Francis Pelkey explained in 2016: "These multi-faceted, complex, transitional spaces are in constant change through the duration of their construction. Evidence of ongoing labour and shifting materials mark the sites daily. The photographs map this evidence of labour and its resulting narrative."

Today, none of what Francis Pelkey photographed remains visible. She has taken the viewer inside a \$70 million project, behind the finished gloss of freshly laid tiles, pristine coloured glass and

SECTION EIGHT **SITE | 2013–ONGOING**

paint. Construction commenced in the winter of 2012 and the centre temporarily opened on a tight timeline to host the International Children's Games on August 14–19, 2013, opening officially on January 18, 2014. Photographing during this narrow time window, Francis Pelkey revealed an ephemeral view, a lapsed moment in time not to be recovered. Garbage cans, hanging wires, shovels, tarpaulins, and the detritus of daily construction of yet-unnamed rooms and spaces, including the training



Section Eight: **Site**, Cat. 56, ***Pool with Stanchions*** 2013 (printed large format 2016)

pool being filled with water, are shown. The workers are nowhere present, yet their return to finish the job is suggested, and athletes and spectators have yet to engage with the site as a public experience.

Credits:

This exhibition has been supported by several key stakeholders and supporters deserving of recognition. Thanks are extended to Minister of Canadian Heritage Mélanie Joly and the staff at the Museums Assistance Program, under whose auspices the Access to Heritage program is sustained. Their support for this project has been extraordinary. Ongoing and multi-year support from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts has been continuous and essential. We appreciate the continued support of the City of Windsor through our long-term lease agreement, among other partnerships. Thanks are extended to all of the artwork lenders who have generously supported the loans to this national touring exhibition. Art Gallery of Windsor staff and touring exhibition partners have been equally crucial to realizing this project.

Front page photograph: Brenda Francis Pelkey, Cat. 35, **Untitled** (detail)
from *"dreams of life and death"*, 1993-1994

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