

# Henry Lehmann

THE GAZETTE, MONTREAL, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2005

VISUAL ARTS

Artistic forays  
into human  
condition

# VISUAL ARTS

## Artistic forays into human condition

HENRY LEHMANN  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

To judge by his latest Montreal show, Donigan Cumming, an internationally known local artist, is moving on to a whole new approach in his art.

Cumming, a native of Tallahassee, Fla., who came to Montreal during the Vietnam War era, made a name for himself in the 1990s, with photographic books and videos focusing on a cast of marginal, oddball Montrealers.

In works not altogether unrelated to the photography of Diane Arbus, Cumming's subjects, unable or unwilling to strive for what we call "success," were brought home to us in frightening close-up, often stripped to the bone, both in terms of their psyches and in terms of the clothes they sometimes didn't wear. Some of the nudes are, in a sense, still clothed, their ancient skin hanging from their protruding bones like so much creased parchment.

Cumming's past work flaunted the canon of cuteness, forcing the viewer to plunge right into the eye of that most tempestuous of phenomena, the human condition. Cumming's latest creations are monumental collages. The two largest works are littered with hundreds of grey cutout photographic images of his usual human repertory. It's as though, in taking his new artistic path, the artist needed his former models just a few more times, but now as a jumping off point for artistic ideas no longer relating much to individuals, but, rather, to humanity and to eternity.

The overwhelming work called *Epilogue*, its title borrowed from the lines at the end of a Greek tragedy, is papered with photographs, large and small. Eerily, few if any of the people relate to each other, aside from sharing the format of the works and the crowding, itself strongly recalling the hordes of oddly disconnected people depicted in 14th-century Italian altar pieces.

Cumming's portraits have the look of being simply stuck on - or in - the work's encaustic paint, itself forming a semi-translucent, visually resonant topography that in places seems almost knee deep.

Whatever it is that Cumming's works mean, they are epic in their heroic size and in the number of people summoned to a timeless moment. These are oddly mystical works that look as though they required years of intense, possibly feverish labour to complete, perhaps the inspiration of some otherworldly vision.

To hold together the complex composition, the artist has included a somewhat architectonic superstructure that consists of rows of human figures; these emerge from the distance, wave on wave, layer on layer, bearing witness to something, though we never quite know what.

Cumming painted the spaces between the photos with encaustic. The monumental thickness of the encaustic, a viscous mix of wax and pigment used by some old masters, gives the works an almost epic sense of weight.

It's hard to think of these works as photographic, although the show is done under the auspices of the *Mois de la Photo à Montréal*. Not that the redefinition of photography is all bad: The belief in photography's inviolable link with "reality" has already been put to rest by digital technologies that can create realities of their own.

To some extent Cumming's latest works can be seen as monumental follies, but they also come off as noble artistic forays into new territory.

**Prologue to Epilogue**, by Donigan Cumming, remains on view at Galerie Eric Devlin, 1407 St. Alexandre St., until Oct. 8. Free admission. Call (514) 866-6272 or consult [www.galeriericdevlin.com](http://www.galeriericdevlin.com)