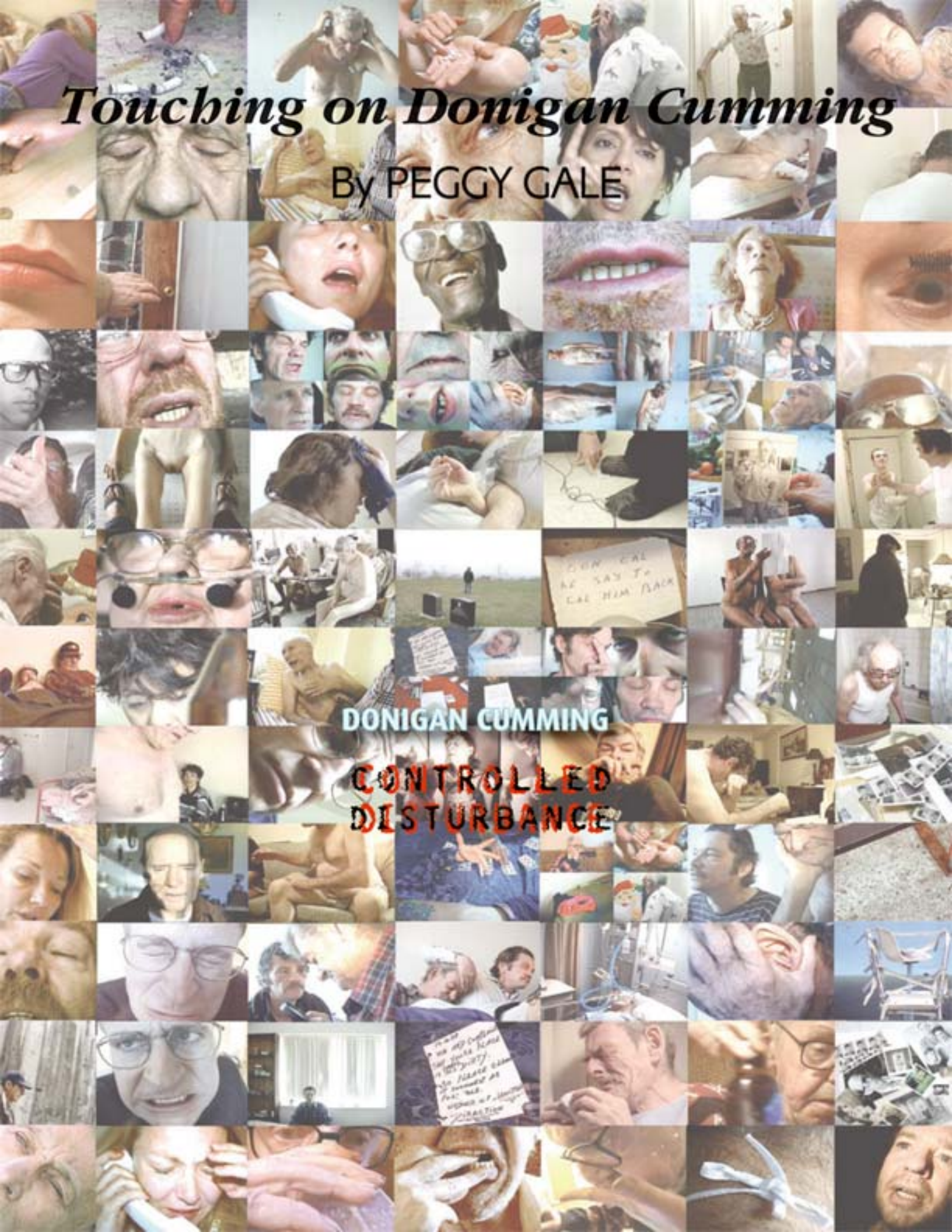
Touching on Donigan Cumming
By PEGGY GALE
DONIGAN CUMMING
CONTROLLED
DISTURBANCE

TOUCHING ON DONIGAN CUMMING

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When reading a narrative or watching a film, one will identify with the central character, as attractive, intelligent,"interesting." The viewer/reader briefly *becomes* that person and lives out those experiences: as film critic Pauline Kael once put it, "spellbound in darkness."

In Donigan Cumming's work, these expectations are largely refused: one is often dismayed, even offended somehow, by the characters portrayed. One might prefer to avoid these people altogether; these lives seem unpleasant, hopeless. And so one assumes the worst of the work's author: he must be cold, manipulative, degrading further these unfortunate persons and experiences. But that viewer would be wrong. Rather than turn away, one must persist, go deeper. There is more than one story here.

There is the surface story, a fragment from the life of one or more of Cumming's collaborators. There is the collaboration itself, both with Cumming and, often, between members of the group. Time passes and circumstances change. Illness intervenes, or threatens. There is love and betrayal, disappointment, depression and desire, tragic memories and mistakes, and addictions of various sorts – alcohol, cigarettes, narcotics – the accumulation of experience through age and sheer perseverance. Oddly, there is not much regret for the past, nor much planning for the future. The *present* may be all there is here, and it's not pretty.

As early as 1982, Cumming was drawn to particular individuals as models in his photographic work. *Pretty Ribbons* was one of the resulting exhibitions, focussed on the octogenarian Nettie Harris as she presents herself – and some of her *self* – to the camera. She likes pretty things, and her body is no embarrassment to her, though viewers may recoil from the sagging breasts, gaunt thighs, creased and puckered belly on display. Is this a memento mori in the classical tradition? Remember that you must die; face death and also aging. *As I am here, so will you be.*

When Cumming turned to video in 1995, he retained his actors/models just as he maintained his fascination with what they evoked. Cumming seeks to know about death and the inroads of age and illness, drink or drugs; he studies unwitting delusion and the circumstances of self-destruction. Yet his subjects are survivors, real people living their lives despite their potential for squalor. We may feel guilty watching here, a little unclean at the contact, virtual though it may be. At the same time we are fascinated to know more, to see more thoroughly, and our curiosity can offend no one: these images already exist. This is the *abject*: mean, despicable, disheartening, from the Latin *abjectus*, thrown away. Society's refuse is laid before us here, a proliferation of unseemly bodies and crowded, debris-filled living quarters, far distant from an approved vision of youth, elegance, self-contained propriety and good taste. As Hal Foster notes, "According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all. It is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it – too much so, in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal

body and the paternal law." [1] For Cumming, however, the abject is to be sought out, made familiar over time. His study reveals the normalcy of the Other and confirms its inherent value. It may also have an important cathartic role for an American expatriate who identifies his upbringing as full of "Gothic Southern stuff" where he was "brought up with Civil War culture, and the wreck of culture." [2]

Foster identifies two main paths for what he terms *abject art*: " The first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow – to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation – to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right." [3] To some extent Donigan Cumming has followed both paths, though he sees his characters, his images, as neither "repellent" nor "obscene." He is their biographer, while they in turn are his teachers, his guides.

> *A Prayer for Nettie* dramatizes the death of Nettie Harris, an elderly woman who was a model for Cumming's photographs between 1982 and 1993. In its ambiguous mix of tenderness and aggression, *A Prayer for Nettie* extends the traditions of the grotesque and the absurd. (catalogue note)

When we see photographs of Nettie, especially in black and white, we see a thin and wrinkled body, haggard in repose; images of mummies spring to mind, curled in a sandy pit, or the leathery and perfect corpses of the Bog People of pre-modern northern Europe. Age is flaunted here, a casual affront: something better not spoken of, for we see it as *mirror* rather than benign external image. Yet this response is an index of our anxiety, for *A Session with Nettie*, Bruno Carrière's film shot in 1991/1993, reveals a very different reality. The film records Cumming making a lengthy series of photographic portraits of Nettie – both nude and clothed, on a bed surrounded with strewn clothing, or hidden behind outsize dark glasses, standing against a window – and makes it clear that she is *not* gravely ill or silent, depressed or dying. Her voice is lively, she is full of suggestions for poses; she recalls when she was a newspaper reporter and took her own pictures. She talks of her daughter's wry comments and the terrible black flies in May during a previous photo shoot in the Laurentians. In short, she is an engaged subject, a lively and interesting woman, working actively with Cumming to get the pictures he seeks. We realise our assumptions were unfounded, an unthinking response to uncomfortable subject matter. Nettie says that at first she blushed, taking off her clothes. She felt shy. Then, she reasoned, he's already seen my legs, my face. What's so different about taking off my dress, my underwear? And having done so, she exults, "I felt *free*. I felt like flying," and she never looked back.

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[1] HAL FOSTER, "OBSCENE, ABJECT, TRAUMATIC," OCTOBER 78 (FALL 1996) P. 114.

[2] DONIGAN CUMMING IS QUOTED FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH HUGH ADAMS, MONTREAL 1999, IN HUGH ADAMS, "PASSING BY ON THE OTHER SIDE." IN GIMLET EYE / DONIGAN CUMMING (CARDIFF: CHAPTER & FFOTOGALLERY, 2001) P. 12.

[3] HAL FOSTER, "OBSCENE, ABJECT, TRAUMATIC," PP. 115–116.

Cumming explains, to Carrière's camera, that he was interested in making photographs of old people, women or men, because they carry with them the evidence of experience, of life lived. He recognises that these figures "rang a bell" for him because of connections with his own family, and when his mother died he felt all the more drawn to Nettie. He considered doing double portraits, man and woman, Harry and Nettie, using edited sections from Harry's diaries . . . but realised with time that Harry was "a repeater," a lesser character than Nettie. The diaries detailed a second failing love affair, and Cumming saw that Harry had learned nothing, would make the same mistake and have the same experience over and over. Nettie on the other hand moved forward through her life and its events.

When we see the images of Nettie with Harry, we cannot know that this "Harry" is playing a part; he is not the man who actually wrote the excerpts that appear with photographs in the exhibition *Harry's Diary* (1993) and indeed Harry is played by several models. The characters are real but they are also performers and at any point may be playing a part: conflicting bits of information that are hard to reconcile. These are fictions of a sort, not true documentaries. And yet the portrayals may also be factual. The play between invention and information is always there, and we may never assume a simple, "natural" scene is being presented. These individuals seem to speak openly to the camera and thus to us, or may seem oblivious to its presence, but it may also be that Cumming has shaped some facts for his own purposes, or concealed certain issues and connections. He knows his audience is radically split, a fact he ascribes to their "fear of death, of growing old." Some cannot accept his images and must simply walk away. Others see his purpose and accommodate his images. Many applaud.

Seeking older figures for his photographs, Cumming met Nettie Harris in 1982. In preparing the exhibition *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986) he photographed over 250 individuals, rejecting half of them after reviewing the results. For the next project, he sought to reduce these 125 models to a core group of about thirty,[4] but for the exhibition *Pretty Ribbons* Nettie was the central character, his star. The images speak age, debility: sunken cheeks and closed eyes, gnarled hands clutching a purse. The mirror does not flatter. And yet these images are surely the evidence of love.

Carrière's film *A Session with Nettie* was recorded in 1991 and 1993, and *Pretty Ribbons* was presented in 1993. At this point Cumming felt he had finished his work with Nettie but the two remained friends, and when Cumming acquired his first video camera in August 1993 he shot some footage with his long-time and familiar model. She died in October, just as *A Session with Nettie* had its Montreal premiere.

[4] THIS CORE GROUP WAS PHOTOGRAPHED FOR THE EXHIBITION *THE MIRROR, THE HAMMER AND THE STAGE* (CHICAGO: THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY,1990).

At first, Cumming presented six fragments of his video, *A Prayer for Nettie,* as accompaniment to a suite of large-scale (six by nine feet) photographs of men referred to as *Les Pleureurs,* an installation also called *A Prayer for Nettie*. Only in 1995 did he assemble the components for release as a single-channel videotape. *A Prayer for Nettie* became her epitaph – *un tombeau* – that was to establish the terms for Cumming's forthcoming corpus in the new medium.

From the beginning, the format is direct: a figure occupies centre-stage and a narrative ensues. One watches the character reveal herself or himself, and begins to construct the back-story from the available fragments. Other characters then intervene, weaving their comments into the sequence. Time structures are irregular. The works are not straightforward documentaries. There is no traditional voice-over, no editorial author guiding one's learning experience. The camera may not be distanced, for Cumming will often interject comments to the viewer or instructions to his characters. He may also turn the camera on himself, or mutter his anxieties and partial thoughts. He questions his motives or actions, and apostrophizes the actions of his friends. Knowing that the presence of an observer will be inflected on the scene before him, Cumming willfully accepts his own role and its results. Events recur and different time periods are intermixed at will.

The relationships between Cumming and his accomplices are complex. Some have become his friends, and stay in regular touch; others surface only in the photos and video works. These touch on the tradition of "concerned photography" with its probing of issues and personal trauma; the resulting images, however, are far from the beautiful photographs that appear now in photo-journalism, as eloquent, even seductive, studies of famine victims or war zones, inner city violence or environmental decay. Ironically, the gritty realities to which we are introduced in Cumming's work, may not be all that they appear, nor even be honest portraits. Facts conflict. They insist on something other than direct or "true" documentation, despite the profusion of information and nuance that they display. Yet while Cumming's work has been reviled on occasion as obscene – that is, offensive or abhorrent to prevailing concepts of morality or decency – the work is highly moral and engaged, and very far from inciting lust or depravity. Insofar as his images are "offensive" one must look not to the artist's intention but to his departure from the sanitized world of contemporary advertising and so-called lifestyle modes. Sex and violence? Not here. Offensive to the senses, disgusting, loathsome, foul? Only from a certain (blinkered) point of view.

While Cumming's exhibition circulated by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography was titled *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), the issues surrounding "documentary" are less evident in his video work. Perhaps we simply assume they are "reality" because the images are unpretty, unchic, unhappy. Why would someone want to invent/imagine such pictures? The narratives are certainly not charming or instructive stories. Yet one cannot really see the tapes as "truthful representation," since everywhere there is evidence of Cumming's interaction with his characters both during and after the original recordings. Individuals who made appearances in photographs from the early 1980s, now reappear on video while they talk about their problems and feelings, or about other people. The dialogue precludes dispassionate documentation; there is too much exchange – even direction on Cumming's part – to suggest a non-committal view from outside. Where the photographs may reference the styles or stylings of respected photographic precursors, Cumming's videotapes and installations bear little comparison with those of his peers. In

their use of "real" people who are playing a part, that is, *enacting themselves* in a given situation, there are links of a kind with *Tristesse modèle réduit* (1984) or *Le Mystérieux Paul* (1983) by Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour. Or one might make comparisons with the works of Norman Cohn, in their following of individuals as their lives unfold, for example in the linked portraits of people in a Newfoundland old age home, *In my end is my beginning* (1983) or the extended portrait of blind and deaf children in *Quartet for Deafblind* (completed 1986). In comparison with these instances, however, there is a challenging complexity and willful contradiction in Cumming's work that is unlike either Morin or Cohn. Cumming is far more ambivalent and enmeshed in the lives of those with whom he has worked over time. Their dialogue may be highly charged, even confrontational. He may do without characters altogether in some cases, roaming through their empty rooms, ransacking drawers to look for a bankbook, or responding simply to collections of snapshots. Such interaction is evidence of Cumming's involvement in his characters' lives, and may trigger the making of the work itself.

Characters reappear. From *Reality and Motive*, portions of which were exhibited as early as 1983, we continue to meet Raymond Beaudoin, who appears in the photographic exhibitions *The Mirror, The Hammer, and The Stage* (1990) and *Pretty Ribbons* (1993); we also see him in the videotape *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995). Nelson Coombs has an extended presence as well, from the first photographs as above, to appearances in *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995)*, After Brenda* (1997), *Karaoke* and *Erratic Angel* (both 1998). Coombs' serious illness and the threat of his death occasioned the complex video titled *Culture* (2002). In a similar manner, Joyce Donnison, Susan Thomson, James Carter and Albert Smith, all graduate from the early photographic portraits to such videotapes as *A Prayer for Nettie* or *Cut the Parrot* (1996). Indeed, it is Albert's death that is the opening crisis that generates subsequent developments in *Cut the Parrot.* In the early tapes we learn little in depth of the characters, but through their stories from rooming-house life at the end of the millennium, images accumulate. Growing familiarity generates layers of impressions, and a ragged sort of community develops over time.

As for other favourite characters, we first meet Colin Kane in the photo exhibitions of the early 1980s, then he appears in the video *After Brenda* (1997) and as the central character in *Erratic Angel* (1998). He is a major presence in *if only I* (2000) with Colleen Faber, who had appeared solo in the brief *Four Storeys* (1999), and he is a second figure in *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001) where Martin Corbin is featured. Articulate, intelligent and well-read, Colin continues his fight against drugs and alcohol, and reappears in *Voice: off* (2003): a regular, and a friend who continues to challenge Cumming. As he says in *Erratic Angel*, "I'm not finished. I don't know how long it's going to take." Colin and Colleen had often used the telephone in Marty's apartment, so that Colleen, Colin and Marty saw each other regularly for a period of several months; that interchange then led to Cumming's desire to record an extended dialogue with Marty himself. The resulting *My Dinner with Weegee* proved to be an important departure in Cumming's work.

Our introduction to Marty is disconcerting, uncomfortable; the opening sequence shows his hand dangling over the edge of an unmade bed, fumbling for a bottle of beer out of sight on the floor. Cumming directs Marty's search: "A little to the right, no, back now, your thumb's almost touching. A little further . . ." What might be seen as a kind of friendly game, an easy camaraderie for the

protagonists, is very different for the viewer who vacillates between desire for Marty's success (get the bottle) and dismay at his state (unable even to sit up). On one level, Marty is an interesting man with some great stories: he was editor of *The Catholic Worker* in New York and a close friend of David Dellinger, one of the Chicago Seven co-defendants in 1969-1970. Marty also worked with Dan and Phil Berrigan in the peace movement, and he calls up tales of photographer Walker Evans and writer James Agee, or touring bars and clubs with the photographer Weegee. Coming eventually to Montreal, Marty taught for many years at Dawson College. As Colin puts it, "Professor Corbin. Arty Marty from New York." Recalling those days Marty chuckles comfortably, his eyes alight with memories. But we see his other sides at different points in the work. He is old now, diminished, alcoholic and depressed, his body giving in to the decades of relentless drinking. His wife left him years ago. He shakes, he doesn't eat, he needs help even to get to the bathroom. The portrait is built in layers, voice-over memories from one period played against images of past photos or present decay, until we are unsure if his delivery to hospital in mid-tape is an end or a new beginning. For the first time we see a sombre, serious Cumming on camera, his tendency to mug for the lens completely abandoned. And we hear his voice:

> "When I was younger I longed for a mentor, I convinced myself that age and wisdom went hand in hand. Years went by. I shook off this idea and realised the obvious. Time improves nothing. Decline, fracture, and loss mark everyone's passage. Cheerfully I took to drink. My alcoholic and cunning companions managed to push all the chips and broken bits from our charmed circle. Bewildering years passed. My thirsty muse drank. My planet flattened. No one reached out to help me. What do I remember? An alley, black night. . . . I am now catching up with those I watch, they're just ahead now, equipped with canes, walkers, wheelchairs, pills, and drink, a wheezing, dirty beacon."

It is impossible to know whose words those are, but they are spoken by the voice of Donigan Cumming. Later, we hear him in conversation with Marty:

> ". . . a rock and a hard place, is the way I talk about it. I mean my years were the '60s, SDS, all that crowd, politically, but I didn't like anybody. I didn't like the left either. No, God, I thought they were all self-interested assholes. We've talked about this before. . . I was in a very anarchistic frame of mind and I did not want to cooperate with the system in any way, and being a conscientious objector was just another way of playing with them. So I decided to get out of the country. Take my body and leave. . .
>
> Marty: "I think you made the right decision."
> Donigan: "Well, I guess I did. Many years have passed, it's thirty years upstream."
> Marty: "Yeah, but it still haunts us."
> Donigan: "Oh yeah, yeah. . ."

But these are hardly the last words on the subject. Colin's voice interrupts shortly, in another voice-over:

> "You're not violent? You *are* violent. Criminal negligence! The same fuckin' story, sitting around judging everybody while you drink yourself to death, discussing Aristotle. Nobody's good enough for you. You're all full of shit, the whole bunch of you!"

Donigan Cumming, Martin Corbin and Colin Kane all lived in Montreal at the time, and shared a long history of antagonism with government policies, with nationalism, with war-mongering, with ethics. They have all, one thinks, faced black times, faced despair, and done what they could to survive. Years later now, we see them interlocked, still angry, still bewildered, still working it through. Perhaps that offers one reason for Cumming's presence both behind and in front of the camera, a foot planted on both sides of the social divide.

My Dinner with Weegee was completed in 2001, and events since 9/11 have returned Cumming's thoughts to politics and to the American reality. In 2003 he completed three works that brought some of those issues to bear on other aspects of his personal past and present.

Cold Harbor (2003), just three minutes long, is a quiet reflection on war. We see an ancient, desiccated black man stretched out in bed, hardly breathing, his eyes sightless. The camera moves in obliquely, circles slowly, as a radio murmurs in the background with news of the Taliban and the then-current war in Afghanistan. At the same time Cumming's voice reads from the memoirs of Civil War General Ulysses S. Grant:

> "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. At Cold Harbor, no advantage was ever gained, to compensate for the heavy loss that we sustained. Indeed, the advantages, other than those of relative losses, were on the Confederate side."

Cumming, born in Virginia, was surrounded as a boy with reminders of "the war between the states," the American Civil War never entirely conceded in the South. But then *Cold Harbor* concludes with a surprise. As a final image, we see a lifeguard's tall white chair with white streamers fluttering in the breeze, gentle, almost glowing, against brilliant blue. This is today, outside: life continues, the weather is fine. Yet one is always alone.

Locke's Way, also from 2003, is recorded entirely in interiors: an aggressive, sometimes frantic search to know Cumming's older brother Julien (also called "Jerry" on tape) through personal memories and family photographs. Cumming is speaking subject as well as cameraman, and his running commentary is a source of information about the photos we are seeing while also revealing his reluctance to deal with the material at hand. "This is the end, it's the end. The end, yeah, completely, the morphine. That's the morphine, right there. That was the end. But there was a beginning. . . " And so we begin with the end, with photos of a woman in her coffin; immediately, we then seek the start of the story, rifling through baby pictures. We hear a life story in fragments, retraced irregularly

as Cumming races from floor to floor, forcing himself back to the basement to dredge up more family images, then escaping upstairs into the light of daily life, only to be compelled back down to face his memories. "Better get back upstairs. Go, go, go, go. But now you gotta go down again, gotta finish the job. Look at these other pictures, look at the big picture." A typed doctor's report from 1942 is checked, repeatedly. Audio tape squeals as the tape is rewound, then fast-forwarded, another mark of indecision. "Ohmigod, there's his father. Not doing too well. But *he* can look good, look great; yeah, there."

These ghosts, hardly skeletons, epitomise Cumming's ongoing search into human interaction and failure. Love is uneasy – guilty, perhaps – for it is seldom unconflicted. He mentions the second child, Julien's sister: "She doesn't have very good memories of this, no. He was very tough as a child." He remembers then, "They sent him up to Saranac Lake because *she* didn't want him, the grandmother. . . . Then she didn't have any responsibility." Or his mother: "I think she was so guilty about that she never got over it." His brother's erratic life has infused Donigan Cumming's conscience and underlies some of his own search for reasons, for justification. "There's got to be evidence of that. Go deeper into those things; it's got to be there." And yet, finally, "You can't go back far enough," and closure is impossible. No matter what the visual evidence, facts are both belied and confirmed by memory, and by a relentless, unfathomable sense of guilt.

As John Locke wrote in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), "Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything." [5] Without reason, we have belief rather than knowledge. Further, a man's identity is basically no different from that of any other animal: "participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organised body." [6] Knowledge may result from the perception of a direct connection between ideas, so that we have "intuitive knowledge." At other times it is indirect, via the medium of other connections and ideas, and then our knowledge is "demonstrative." Where either intellectual incapacity or lack of any actual connection means we can perceive no connection then, "though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge." [77] Cumming's invocation of Locke shows him seeking understanding through the making of connections and the application of reason. Yet the video's title references Marcel Proust as well, recalling *Swann's Way,* the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, with its insistence on the primacy of memory in constructing both past and present, informing both character and knowledge. Finally, however, *Locke's Way* reveals Cumming's failure to understand the enigma of his brother; neither reason nor recollection is adequate to the task.

Voice: off (2003) is Cumming's companion piece to *Locke's Way* and a continuation of the search, by other means. *Voice: off* is a complex portrait of his long-time collaborator Gerald Harvey, who has recently had a tracheotomy in the attempt to rid him of throat cancer. The prognosis is poor: he may have prostate cancer as well. As the story develops, however, this Gerry and the brother "Jerry"

[5] QUOTATIONS ARE TAKEN FROM JOHN LOCKE'S WORK LISTED AS IV. XIX. 14, IN *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO PHILOSOPHY*, ED. TED HONDERICH (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1996) P. 494.

[6] JOHN LOCKE, II. XXVII. 6, IN *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO PHILOSOPHY*, P. 494.

[7] JOHN LOCKE, IV. I. 2, IN *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO PHILOSOPHY*, P. 495.

become conflated, as issues of brain damage, emotional confusion and an aging body mix in intertwined layers. We see images – photographs and video – of Gerry over many years, for he has been an ongoing character in several of the tapes, as early as *A Prayer for Nettie*. We see him with a moustache and big belly, vigourous, then later thin, toothless, a little bewildered, or joking as, voiceless, he writes his comment about lunch: "Horse meat." But spliced with these images of Gerry, past and present, are the family photographs we recognise from *Locke's Way*, implying that *these* baby photos were of Gerry, rather than "Jerry," a sandwiching of identities that on first view can be utterly confusing.

We see Gerry with friends, vaguely isolated, or at home with Geoffrey in the kitchen. We see him in a car, reading aloud through his voice-box attachment, as Cumming prompts him from the driver's seat. Other, older stories enter in as well. A woman talks about her friend's suicide at the Atwater métro station: "Train cut her in three, dragged her on down the track. Right down the track, they dragged her." We see the woman again, later, talking about how Elizabeth was found alone in her room, with a plastic bag over her head. Then the day Albert died is recalled, and they visit his old room: "The burn's still here, six years later. Yeah, 1996. That's where he went down. Heart attack. Died on the floor." Later, we visit a cemetery as Nelson Coombs puts flowers on his wife's grave. And every so often we return again to Cumming's brother: "There he is again with his mother," as if Cumming hasn't yet finished with the material. "You remember a few stories his sister used to tell. Where do you go? To the beginning, back to the beginning."

The central character here remains Gerry, as Cumming turns to the camera to report: "Gerry's throat is swollen, he's going to the hospital at 2 o'clock. He's eating lunch now. . . . I don't think this is going to work out. I don't think it's going to work out, with his throat cut like that. They say he's smoking again, which is crazy." At the end is a montage of photographs of Gerry nude, presented clockwise around the screen, full body and then in close-up: his head, eyes closed and mouth shut tight. This is an elegy, not only for Gerry and his lost voice, but also for Julien/Jerry, the "lost" brother, and for the many others Cumming has worked with, now gone. For the duration of *Voice: off* Gerald Harvey is identified with Julien, "Jerry's" family *becoming* Gerry's. All the stories come together, recounted, reviewed, remembered, as if the complex Cumming family has been overtaken, infused, by this new family of collaborators and friends. Replaced, even.

The video history – ten years now – is among other things a record of loss. In *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995*)* we honour the memory of Nettie Harris, of *Pretty Ribbons*, and meet some of the many other players. Next comes *Cut the Parrot*, which begins with the death of Albert. Flirtatious Colleen Faber, with her soft voice and pretty face, whom we meet in *Four Storeys* and *if only I*, has died of a heart attack by 2002, and Nelson Coombs' passing is memorialised the same year in *Culture*. Marty Corbin died very shortly after *My Dinner with Weegee* was completed, and Gerry Harvey's life is threatened. These links stretch back twenty years, in some cases, and everyone is aging. Some, already, are only memories, captured on video and reappearing with the images of others. For Donigan Cumming the connections are tangled, the implications surely deep.

A photograph – silent, posed, strategically lit, cropped, framed – carries different information than one finds in a videotape, whether three minutes long or thirty. Cumming was first known as a photographer, but his shift toward video in 1995 brought new issues to bear, though he continues to work with many of the same people and interact with their pasts and present. While the video works are rooted in portraiture – of an individual, of a place at a certain moment – they necessarily include *time*, which introduces both narrative and memory to the mix. Now, memory is at the centre – memories of his own to be unraveled, memories of ours to be coaxed forward, memory itself as a comfort and a scourge to the human psyche. Memory is one of the reasons he has sought to portray older people, their accumulated layers. He seeks to locate and understand his own memories through them, both consciously and intuitively. A viewer in turn may discern these links, or suspect them. Working with the same characters over many years, the history of their relationships will also become memory, and the characters in turn will remember the others, or events now gone. Images from several periods are intercut until we lose track of personality, event, timeline, even character. We are left with moving pictures, underlined by sensations of lives lived.

Cumming's older brother Julien, still a mystery after so many years, is one of the triggers for this video work. He appeared to have suffered brain damage at birth and was always different, perhaps retarded, and institutionalized for much of his life. Now Cumming wonders if Julien was ever really *damaged* or perhaps just somehow *different*, and shows him now at home with his girlfriend of thirty years. In *Voice: off* a final clue to Julien's challenge is revealed in another telling of his history:

> " His father was shattered. Shattered, easy to say. His mother was guilt-ridden. And then she had four more children. Hm. Four more. . . Here they all are. There he is. Nothing to complain about there. And yet, and yet, you can't put your finger on it. You just keep moving past it. . .
>
> "When his middle brother was born, he must have been about seven at the time. They [the grandmothers] told her [the mother] there was no way she could keep him at home with the other children. It was impossible. And that's when they took him to Saranac Lake. And then to New Jersey. Then he went to Florida, and he met Vicky. Then he stayed in Florida, and he's still in Florida."
> The "middle brother" is Donigan Cumming.

Cumming's family generally appears unidentified in the video record, but the facts themselves are unusual in the way of many families seen from the outside. To today's novice eyes the 1950s seem increasingly bizarre; the suits, the ties, the cars and bungalows, are foreign territory today, even if one's own eyes were present at that very period. For a younger audience today the 1950s are unremittingly weird, yet the period resides quietly in the background of Julien's story, and thus underlies other stories as well. The past continues to seep into the present.

Cumming seeks "the ethical edge" in his portrayals; he works *with* his models or actors as they go about their lives. Some unfold as games, as in the opening scene of *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001), where we see Marty's hand fumbling for his bottle of beer.

Then there are the maverick turns, like *Docu-Duster* (2000), where Cumming faces the camera alone, his mobile face shiny with sweat as he plays all the characters from a classic western melodrama:

> "You . . . you know I never have been able to give you very much. No pearls . . . no rubies . . . no staircase to anywhere. But now . . . now just by taking Wade to the 3:10 I can pay you all back and leave you with a memory that you'll never never be able to erase . . . Ahhh . . .
>
> Oh Dan . . . Dan . . . how can it be? . . . how can it be Dan? . . . how can you do this to me and the children? . . . We won't be able to keep the farm . . . we'll lose everything . . . Oh Dan . . . Dan . . . Oh Dan you don't have to be a hero. I don't want a hero. . . . I've got to Alice. I've got to! Come on Wade . . . you son of a bitch!"

and so on. What on earth is he thinking? Maybe life really *is* one banal cliché after another as we play out our tired roles, to little purpose, our fine feelings as foolish as base ones. Yet as the catalogue description for the video puts it, "To be a man, to be a hero, to be a wife: these voices in conflict inhabit the body of a documentary filmmaker as he reenacts the climax of a western morality play, *3:10 to Yuma*." [8]

Born in 1947, Donigan Cumming has exhibited his photographs, video works and installations since 1983 in several dozens of gallery and museum exhibitions, as well as festivals and film programs throughout Europe, the USA and Canada. It is difficult work, deeply rewarding.

[8] THE FULL TEXT OF *DOCU-DUSTER* IS REPRODUCED IN *GIMLET EYE / DONIGAN CUMMING* (CARDIFF: CHAPTER & FFOTOGALLERY, 2001) P. 68