Through the act of painting, contemporary Canadian artists Stephanie Aitken, Stephen Andrews, Chris Dorosz, and Janet Werner meditate and comment on the photograph, studying its formal qualities, inherent expectations and pervasive presence in our culture. For these artists the photograph is a visual artifact in need of analysis; it provides artistic fodder, spurring questions about the way a specific photograph operates in order to evoke a particular response in a targeted audience. In this way Aitken, Andrews, Dorosz, and Werner go beyond a simplistic interaction with the photo as a formal aid to re-present a subject, and instead change the original conceptual intention of the source material by translating the subject from photo to paint. The work of each of these four artists is embedded with tension between their desire to posses the source material as well as its subject through painting, and their subversive emptying of the content of that subject, be it a sublime mountain, an image of war, a party snapshot, or an alluring supermodel. The resulting works expose the gap between the subject and the viewer, mediated by the photographer and the photograph, as well as the painter and the painting.

**Stephanie Aitken** takes on the tradition of the sublime in her work based on found photographs of tourist mountain scenes. In works such as *Aporia* [2006] and *Another Mountain* [2007] Aitken integrates the image from a found photograph into her painting by transferring it directly onto linen. She then paints on top of the mountain scenes with emotive, drippy, visceral oils; an application whose function oscillates between reinforcing the form of the mountain in paint, and obscuring or even obliterating the source image with abstract areas of colour. This act of painting takes away the intended awe of the photograph, which relied on pictorial illusion—a convincing representation of space—by bringing our attention back to the surface and materiality of a painting. Her work speaks sincerely and unabashedly about creating a new romantic and transcendent experience by showing her human hand in moving passages of paint; an attitude about painting that recalls Abstract Expressionism and its grand ideals and lust for the sublime. While at once paying homage, Aitken slyly undermines this historical reference by using a comparatively small canvas and subdued pastel colours.

Aitken's *19 Views of Mt. Assiniboine* [2008] takes a different approach to the sublime and the photographic reference. All nineteen images, painted on paper ranging from 5” x 8” to 12” x 16”, are from a single found black and white photograph. Over and over Aitken repeats the image as if trying to get the representation just right. Here she meditates on the photograph as a record or memory aid. Aitken asks who took this photo and why? Presumably the photographer wanted to capture the beauty she saw in the landscape, reducing a sublime natural experience to a 4” x 6” facsimile that
could be presented to friends and family as proof of her visit. Aitken gives the photograph the attention its taker intended by repeatedly trying to find the perfect shape, the majestic form that inspired, while undergoing her studies in watercolour -- a painterly short hand equal to taking a quick snap.

Janet Werner also begins with found photographs that intend to capture beauty in her series of paintings based on advertising and fashion models. The advertising and fashion industries have long been targeting teens and women to buy products by capitalizing on the longing to become their most ideal, beautiful, sexy selves rampant in that demographic – an unattainable self presented to them as an ultra attractive supermodel. Janet Werner manifests her desire to possess this beauty through her painting practice, by reproducing photographs of models in paintings such as Catgirl 2 [2009], Redhead [2009], and Afro [2009]. What makes her project so interesting is Werner’s own acute realization that her paintings, though powerful and awe inducing, can never conjure the same yearning produced when the subject is presented in the slick photographic format. For this reason she calls this series “failed paintings.” If Catgirl 2 or Redhead are about failure, Werner is reveling in it. Produced to be dominating and confrontational in the enclosed gallery space, we are forced to face the impossible dream present in advertising photographs by witnessing Werner’s refusal to reproduce the consumerist illusion. In Afro, Werner takes a different approach by creating an intimately sized painting that asks that we get close to study the image and the handling of the paint. Its diminutive size makes the painting into an object to be cherished and cared for, perhaps Werner’s way of coddling and maintaining the unattainable desire. By not being able to mimic the sales pitch inherent in fashion photos, Werner empties her canvases of the intended content of her photographic source material, and replaces it with a sophisticated, critical look at what we expect from a fashion photograph, and how that photograph normally makes us feel.

Stephen Andrews asks us to think about the role of the photographer in the news media, and their agenda, in his works Yesterday’s News Remembered Today [2007] and the series P.O.V. [2005]. Through the process of making, Yesterday’s News Remembered Today, a large-scale oil and wax image on Mylar, comments on mediation and memory. The piece is based on a low resolution Internet reproduction of an earlier drawing made by Andrews, which in turn was based on an image from a BBC Internet news story about a friendly fire incident during the Iraq war. The image represented in the final piece has been simplified to the point of abstraction. The content related to the friendly fire incident has been lost in the repeated translation and recontextualization of the image, replaced with a geometric, jumbled, dense series of flat boxes, which are concentrated into an orange bloom and a low desert coloured landscape. The images in the P.O.V. series also use oil and wax on Mylar to create ghosts of recognizable scenes. Andrews used the Google search engine and free association wordplay to locate news-based source images. Though the details have been omitted we can make out some representational information, such as military looking figures in urban landscapes. In this recent work, Andrews breaks the pictorial space of the digital image by keying up its colour and degrading its dpi quality to simplify the pixel and make it visible – putting emphasis on the underlying form of the digital image while taking away the specifics of the particular news related tragedy. This strategy highlights the mediated gap between subject and viewer, reflecting on the distance from which average citizens witness current events and tragedy. Specifically, we are asked to question our reliance on news sources, the media’s ability to weave a narrative, and the speed at which horrific news is forgotten in the context of daily life. By taking images out of the realm of Internet reporting, and re-presenting them in the gallery as stand alone artifacts, the artist
highlights the importance of context in understanding the news, and the role of choice and subjectivity both in his artistic practice and in journalism as a whole.

**Chris Dorosz**, in his series of staple paintings, also breaks down the formal qualities of his source material – personal snap shots – into pixels. Instead of depicting the pixel directly, Dorosz eludes to pixel structure by representing his source material through uniform geometric units constructed out of loose industrial staples glued on their sides. The staples provide a chain-link-like structure with shallow recesses that become receptacles for poured paint. Dorosz devalues the subject matter of the photograph, preferring a formal investigation of design elements such as tone, colour, shape, composition, and surface. He denies our expectations of the photographic image by taking away its specific content. In *Day Into Night* [2007] the canvas is broken down into rectangular grid formations, where each rectangle is understood to be a different snap shot. The composition, basic shapes, and value structure of the source images are maintained within each rectangle, although taken out of focus and drained of colour. Dorosz plays with our expectations of the figure ground relationship – we assume the lighter sections within each rectangle are characters, although we cannot make out their identities or the events taking place. Despite this ambiguity a storyboard is created, as we recognize the composition of each rectangle to be either a long shot or close-up, which indicates a flow of information. In futility, we are left trying to get close enough or far enough away from the painting to make the images come into focus. In *Yellow and Black Make Green* [2006] and *6PM* [2004] the composition of the original image is lost completely, favoring a closer, denser, investigation of pixels, colour, and surface. A restrained palette is maintained in Yellow and Black Make Green, with desaturated yellows punctuating a field of varied warm greys, while *6PM* takes a more liberal approach to colour, where individual cells act like visual candy dazzling the eye. By zooming in on the pixels so much as to remove the subject matter, the underlying form of the image is transformed into something of wonder and beauty. Whether working with obscured representation or pure abstraction, Dorosz creates a feeling of privacy around the subject matter of his paintings, asking us to give up our want for representational information and narrative. The secrecy built up around the subject of the source material – something that might be commonplace – creates a feeling of mystery and possibility.

In their desire to better understand the factors at play in the formal language of photography, Aitkens, Werner, Andrews, and Dorosz turn to the act of painting as a place to break down and reexamine the photograph. Through their process of translating photographic source material into paintings we as audience are asked to not only consider the subject matter but also the media by which the subject is carried. The distance between subject and viewer is widened while all four painters self-consciously consider their role in altering the conceptual outcome of the works. Aitkens, Werner, Andrews, and Dorosz have used photography as a place to gather ideas for their practice of physically making something out of the materiality of paint. Their choice in medium is appropriate for the critical analysis of photography, as paint is a visual signifier of formal analysis – it is imbued with an inherent understanding that paint means creation, fiction, choice, and subjectivity – so when you look at a painting you take nothing for granted; questions about intention and authorship come implicitly. As photography is more commonly understood as its own fiction, undermining the assumption that a photograph equals fact, perhaps the visual language of photography can shift.

Lisa Wood
Curator
First Friday @ MAWA with Janet Werner, co-presented by PLATFORM
Friday 06 November | 7PM (611 Main Street)

Reception
Friday 06 November | 7PM

Influenced by the Lens: Panel Discussion
with Stephanie Aitken, Chris Dorosz, and Janet Werner. Moderated by Lisa Wood
Saturday 07 November | 3PM

Curator’s Tour [sponsored by the School of Art, University of Manitoba]
Wednesday 02 December | 7PM

List of Works

Stephanie Aitken

Aporia, 2007 | oil on linen | 36” x 48”
Another Mountain, 2007 | oil on linen | 36” x 48”
19 View of Assiniboine, 2008 | water colour on paper | dimension variable
all works courtesy of the artist

Stephen Andrews

Yesterday’s News Remembered Today, 2007 | crayon rubbing on Mylar | 70” x 67”
Orange Alert [POV series], 2005 | crayon rubbing on Mylar | 7 7/8” x 9 7/8”
P.O.V. [POV series], 2005 | crayon rubbing on Mylar | 7 5/8” x 9 3/6”
Night Vision [POV series], 2005 | crayon rubbing on Mylar | 7 ½” x 10”
Pink Barricade [POV series], 2005 | crayon rubbing on Mylar | 7 3/8” x 9 7/8”
all works courtesy of Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto

Chris Dorosz

6PM, 2004 | staples, acrylic gel medium, pigment on canvas | 39 3/4” x 32 1/4”
Yellow and Black Make Green, 2006 | staples, acrylic gel medium, pigment on canvas | 27” x 29 ¾”
Day Into Night, 2007 | staples, acrylic gel medium, pigment on linen | 36” x 48”
courtesy of the artist

Janet Werner

Red Head, 2009 | oil on canvas | 55” x 45”
Cat Girl 2, 2009 | oil on canvas | 55” x 45”
Afro, 2009 | oil on canvas | 20” x 16”
all works courtesy of the artist

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Stephanie Aitken is a Vancouver artist working primarily in painting and installation. Stephanie’s most recent project, Headlands, involving mountain iconography, has been presented most recently in solo exhibitions at The Helen Pitt Gallery ARC in Vancouver and at Eye Level Gallery in Halifax. Her work has been both written about and published in The Vancouver Review, The Walrus, and C Magazine. She has been a recent recipient of production grants from The Canada Council and from The BC Arts Council. Stephanie currently teaches at both the University of British Columbia and Emily Carr University.

<www.stephanieaitken.ca>
Janet Werner was born in Winnipeg and lives and works in Montreal where she is Associate Professor of Painting at Concordia University. She received her BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and her MFA from Yale University, New Haven, CT. Werner has shown widely across Canada and in Europe including shows at the Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal; The Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Parisian Laundry, Montreal; and Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg. A survey show of her recent work entitled Is Anything Alright? is currently on view at the Art Gallery of Windsor.

<www.parisianlaundry.com>
Stephanie Aitken is a Vancouver artist working primarily in painting and installation. Stephanie’s most recent project, Headlands, involving mountain iconography, has been presented most recently in solo exhibitions at The Helen Pitt Gallery ARC in Vancouver and at Eye Level Gallery in Halifax. Her work has been both written about and published in The Vancouver Review, The Walrus, and C Magazine. She has been a recent recipient of production grants from The Canada Council and from The BC Arts Council. Stephanie currently teaches at both the University of British Columbia and Emily Carr University.

<www.stephanieaitken.ca>
Chris Dorosz is a visual artist and professor whose practice has centered on using everyday objects to bridge the gap between the digital and physical world. An MFA graduate from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, he has taught painting at the University of Manitoba and currently teaches colour and design at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. The 2003 winner of the Royal Bank of Canada’s New Painting Competition, his work can be found in numerous private and corporate collections including The Royal Bank of Canada and Lotto-Quebec and in the recent publication Carte Blanche 2 an anthology of contemporary Canadian painting.

<www.chrisdorosz.com>