

The View From Here

Luis Jacob

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The View from Here A Response by Elyssa Stelman

I understand Regent Park as a place that has been buried many times over.
—Luis Jacob, 2018

Luis Jacob is a Toronto-based multi-media artist and curator known for a practice that often destabilizes conventional ways of seeing. He is interested in “place” and the socio-political dimensions that are revealed through a visual landscape. He uses formal pictorial elements—light, colour and composition—to frame scenes of ordinary and seemingly banal locations, with the intention of revealing volumes about a local civic identity. With this current work, Jacob reflects on his hometown of Toronto as a cultural space. His interest is in the city as a place divided by its growing inequalities and the widening fault line between “the haves and the have-nots.”

“Diversity our strength” is the motto for which Toronto has become recognized and even celebrated. In the past 30 years, it’s population has transformed from homogenous to heterogeneous; between 1931 and 1966, the percentage of immigrants of British descent declined from roughly 80 percent to just 16 percent as immigration policies relaxed. It moved beyond its strictly protestant touting, “Toronto the Good,” of earlier days. Today it recognizes itself for being a vibrant city of diversification and a role model for social integration. But it is a city that is continually being shaped and reshaped by a set of defining principals and idiosyncrasies.

Like all Canadian cities, Toronto developed as a result of First Nations and settler relations. The Humber River provides a key to understanding the city’s complex history. Toronto was a significant stop on a centuries old river portage route used by the Huron and other Indigenous peoples, later becoming the site of fur trading posts which the British recognized and capitalized upon. These forces—significantly mercantile—existed then, as they do in today’s sprawling metropolis.

Within these photographs of seemingly everyday civic spaces, Jacob highlights sites of critical reflection. *The View from Here* centers on the built environment and the human activity that registers within it. As Jacob states, Toronto is a place, “simultaneously negotiating its ongoing erasure dictated by powers-that-be, and a city deftly recreating itself on the basis of its own

proliferating diversity.” His images address issues of social relationships: how redevelopment and urban planning principles have shaped civic identity; how architecture informs memory; and how the city is re-appropriated and re-imagined in quiet and innovative ways.

Regent Park is a territory that has undergone several transitional changeovers. In *Regent Park, Sumach Street, Toronto* (2018), a couple transports groceries to an inviting brick townhouse on Sumach Street. Backs turned, they are a faceless typology. A suggestive reminder of the faceless waves of individuals that have historically resided here. The Anishinaabe used to walk these same lands. And when the Irish settlers of Cabbagetown were systematically cleared to make way for Regent Park (as it is known today) another wave of immigrants and occupants were eventually displaced in the new urban revitalization scheme.

There is a struggle between the powers that govern and the nameless, faceless individuals who inhabit the city. As poet Dionne Brand points out, “There is a failure of those who rule to truly acknowledge those who live in the city as anything more than the projections of their own fears...” We expropriate the disadvantaged and underprivileged and push them to the peripheries. There is an unwillingness to acknowledge anything that does not correspond with the official public facade. The city of Toronto sign with its motto stands—pristinely maintained—as a symbol of a booming economy and a burgeoning urban tourism. In his work, Jacob captures ordinary individuals, the city’s ‘faceless’: the labourers and the landscapers who beautify urban public spaces, and the construction workers who erect the multi-level high-rises that stand as official symbols of power and state. Here, Jacob reflects too on the unclaimed—the forgotten, the abandoned and the makeshift spaces that reveal a more comprehensive understanding of Toronto’s contemporary urban environment. Embedded in these images are traces of occupation and small interventions: a displaced city pylon, a painted bridge, a temporary garden and a meeting point. Each gesture is a window into an ontology, a creative re-appropriation of ‘lost’ space. In *Leslie Street Spit, Lake Ontario* (2017), for example, he highlights a gathering spot at the water’s edge, temporarily constructed out of urban detritus. There is an indeterminacy that grows out of these collective spaces. They are the informal interventions that reclaim and reconceptualize the spatial structure of the city.

Luis Jacob lives in Toronto, Canada. Working as artist, curator, and writer, his diverse practice invites a collision of meanings that destabilizes conventions of viewing, and opens possibilities for a renewed experience of the world around us.

Elyssa Stelman lives and works in Winnipeg, Canada.

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