

*On to: Night* by David Duncan

During the winter of 2008, the The Karl & Bertha Leubsdorf and Times Square Galleries at Hunter College featured a collection of contemporary artworks gathered together in honor of a deceptively simple theme. Entitled *to: Night: Contemporary Representations of the Night*, the exhibition was imagined by curator Joachim Pissarro while researching the nocturnal paintings of Vincent van Gogh for a simultaneous show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As conveyed by Pissarro within the exhibition catalogue, *to: Night* is inspired by the following question: “Were van Gogh alive today, how would he conceive of the nocturnal reality, and through what kind of media would he investigate it?”

Not surprisingly, the Hunter exhibition suggests that night (or “nightness”) can mean different things to different people. Thomas Ruff’s large c-print of the constellation Puppis (*Stern 17h 51m/-22°*, 1990) depicts a stellar view of an unfathomable amount of space, and yet for all of its grandeur, is literally a work of scientific documentation; the artist purchased the print’s negative from the European Southern Observatory. In comparison, Jeff Wall’s representation of a woman pouring sand from her shoe could be mistaken for an unscripted document, but like most Wall photographs, is actually a painstakingly composed work of fiction. The image is based upon a passage within a novel by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, describing a newlywed’s dismay that her adulterous encounter on the beach may become known to her husband. Like Ruff’s print of Puppis, the work intermingles the familiar and the unknown, and correspondingly, a vacillating continuum of feelings between the poles of possibility and fear.

For other artists, the night is all about stepping out, either to capture the silent remains of the day, or its indeterminate second act—which may become prologue. David Hammons five-minute video *Phat Free* (1995-1999) is startling in its simplicity: A record of a man kicking a metal bucket along the sidewalks and streets of New York City. Considering the location, it appears not an interruption, but a declaration of existence in a zone that favors interruptions. Tim Davis’s c-print *Bradford Pear* captures the fire-like blooms of a tree exposed to the lights of a suburban business park, but the real star of the photo is the Ford Focus parked several feet away. The automobile is hastily positioned with its rear tires on the curb, and its front tires in a handicap parking space. One wonders whether the driver returned to the building to execute a late-night emergency power-point, or something far more extracurricular.

Concerning the subject of sleep, Susan Graham’s spiral labyrinth of egg-white-and-sugar beds conjure one of the most dispiriting events associated with night, and is appropriately named *Insomnia* (2003/2008). Ever the master of spectral analysis, Spencer Finch’s *Moonlight (Luna County, New Mexico, July 13, 2003)* re-presents the colors of night via a single fluorescent bulb, which has been wrapped in translucent filters of various widths. It is both a distilled index suggesting the night physically verifiable, and a play to capture “lightening in a bottle”—meaning beyond its measurable physical properties, the sense of infinity that accompanied the artist’s upward gaze on a moonlit night in Luna County. Rather than evoke a naturalist’s experience through the modification of light, Stan Douglas charts the night’s physical and socio-political reflection when photographing a gritty urban locale. Conceived for a book entitled *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, Douglas stitched multiple digital exposures of what is routinely called Vancouver’s worst

block. At half its publication size (tucked within the artist's book as a pull-out poster), the gallery's 2' x 8' print nonetheless allows one to inspect multiple window frames and doorways as part of an inverted grand pastoral—a place where people struggle, strive, perhaps even succeed, despite the endemism ascribed to this notoriously impoverished block.

Returning to the curator's question regarding contemporary treatments of the night, it may be stated that Finch's abstract ode to naturalism and Douglas's reproduction of a controversial urban locale recall aspects of Van Gogh's paintings, but times have obviously changed. Within *The Starry Night Over the Rhône*—an early nocturnal scene by the Dutch artist—Van Gogh depicts a collection of stars of varying size and brightness, so as to represent their customary twinkle-like quality. Counterposed along the shoreline below, several gas lamps emit a comparatively consistent glow that is only dissipated when reflected upon the river's surface. The scene is lucid yet intensely personal; a record of feeling as much an expeditious study of natural and artificial light. Several months later, Van Gogh produced the iconic *Starry Night*, which depicts a celestial expanse set ablaze by a collection of swirling and pulsating orbs. The effect is all about heightened emotions—a swollen, personal moment—and disinterested in scientific, fictitious, or socio-political implications. Placed within the context of the exhibition *to: Night*, one may wonder whether any current artists producing art of such an intensely expressionistic nature will be known to curators of the next century.