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# What Will Be

## Christina Battle and Kristie MacDonald

by Daniella E. Sanader

Moving into a new house or apartment is typically welcomed like a new beginning: inviting the opportunity to restart a domestic life, new homes can temporarily obscure unhappy pasts and cushion against uncertain futures. Yet as the architectures pictured by Kristie MacDonald and Christina Battle at Gallery 44 indicate, a well-organized home can never fully protect us from the threats of the outside world, be they forces of nature or politics (or oftentimes both). Shown at the Toronto gallery this past January, MacDonald's *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past*, 2013, and Battle's *dearfield, colorado*, 2012, each challenge the function of the photograph as a straightforward archival document, instead proposing alternatives for how the medium can engage with histories obscured from view.

Processes of history-making are central to MacDonald's various professional lives—both a practicing artist and archivist, she frequently engages with the material histories of collected objects in her work. The source materials for *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* were discarded press photographs found on eBay, black and white images depicting overturned homes in the aftermath of natural disasters. MacDonald endeavored to fix the images and the trauma they imply, rotating the documents until the homes were once again upright, leaving the landscape violently askew. Alongside the static images—framed without cropping to leave the rotation obvious—MacDonald built a table with a projector resting on a motorized trapdoor, steadily rocking upwards and downwards to rotate the image of another upturned home against the wall. Thinking on the projected work in *Mechanisms*, as it rotates in a steady, wave-like rhythm, I'm left with a descriptive dilemma: at what point is the image considered upright? When the photograph is in a standard horizontal orientation, the pictured landscape equivalent to my own? Or, when the home's vertical orientation is restored, the frame of the image drastically lopsided? MacDonald's work plays with this confusion in alignment, a gravitational imbalance between architecture and the external world that surrounds it. It's as if these two spaces (interior and exterior, private and public) can no longer exist on the same register, as if the trauma of destruction and loss has left them radically out of sync.

Battle's *dearfield, colorado* also operates with disjunction at its core. The two-minute video depicts the ruins of wooden buildings in a sunny field, a breeze rustling through yellow flowers and long grass against a perfect blue sky. Save for the distant rumble of a passing car, there are no traces of human life left amongst these ramshackle structures. These are the remains of Dearfield, Colorado, and the picture-perfect serenity filmed by Battle is thrown into sharp relief against the video's captions: "fields sizzled under a metallic sky [...] dust filled the air to a height of 3 miles and filtered into the tightest of buildings [...] everything made of metal was charged with electricity." Founded in 1910, Dearfield, Colorado was a once-flourishing African-American settlement utterly devastated by drought and dust storms during the Great Depression. While 700 residents prospered in Dearfield in

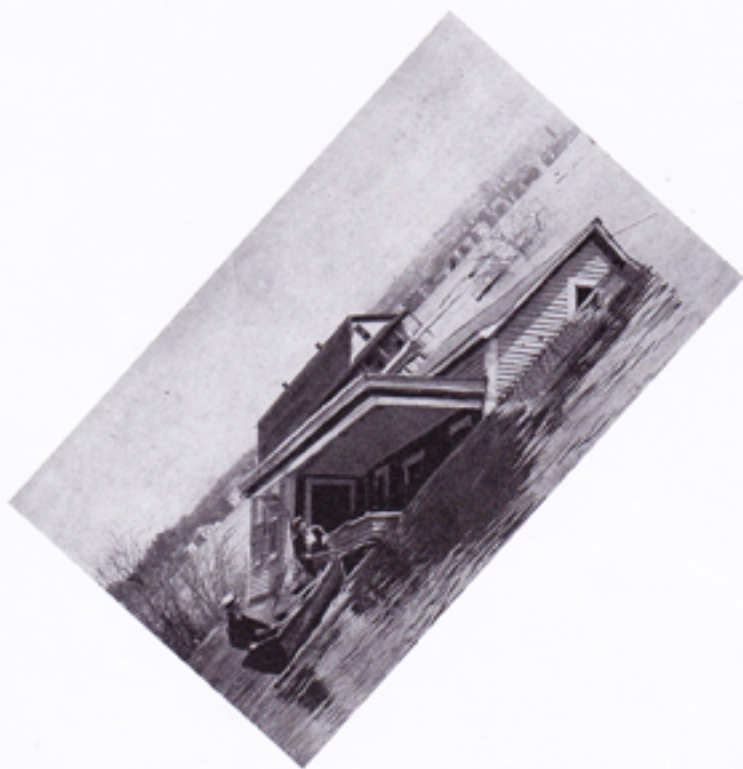
1921, the population was reduced to 12 by 1940. As the first-hand recollections of dust storms appear onscreen, the serene images of Dearfield's ruins take on an anxious quality. The soft crackling of an electromagnetic signal can be heard beyond the rustling grass, and the potent sunlight causes the buildings to quiver with latent energy. Additionally, Battle installed large sheets of aluminum on the floor and walls surrounding the video, allowing the scene to reflect outwards, extending its electrified reach into the gallery itself. As part of a larger series titled *Mapping the Prairies Through Disaster*, Battle's portrait of Dearfield indicates that destructive histories can leave their traces on even the calmest of landscapes.

Much can be gleaned from engaging with *Mechanisms* and *dearfield, colorado* together. In the Gallery 44 catalogue essay, Caoimhe Morgan-Fair writes of how both Battle and MacDonald work as artist-historians; subverting the claims to objectivity and distance often associated with traditional history-making, instead relying on the imperfect frameworks of intuition and memory to re-animate archival material. Other reviewers have pointed to the shared interest in extreme weather conditions, especially as the exhibition was on display during one of Toronto's most brutal winters in recent memory. Indeed, one could argue that the weather acts as a great equalizer: floods and storms affect rich and poor alike, and no one is exempt from the occasional rainy day. Yet as *dearfield, colorado* indicates, natural disasters carry social consequences. While bad weather does not discriminate, post-disaster access to shelter, care, and reparations remains rooted within the imperfectly human (and often racist or classist) realms of politics and economics. For *Mechanisms* and *dearfield, colorado*, then, the presence of life (or lack thereof) remains paramount: both projects seem to ask—obliquely in MacDonald's case, and directly for Battle—what bodies have access to these post-catastrophe architectures, and which others have been eradicated entirely?

After all, history-making, like the construction of shelters and houses, involves the calculated inclusion and exclusion of bodies: as blueprints are drawn and narratives built, some are left out in the cold. For instance, MacDonald uses *Mechanisms* in an attempt to remedy the disasters of the past. However, by creating homes that can withstand destruction and peril, she denies access to these spaces for the people that surround them. When human bodies occasionally appear in MacDonald's photos, they are askew with the landscape, left out of alignment from the homes they once inhabited. *Mechanisms* deftly articulates that the impulse to correct history—to clean up a traumatic past—often obstructs the voices of those who lived it. Conversely, while Dearfield itself remains a ghost town, *dearfield, colorado* imagines the recuperation of a community silenced through disaster. Through intensive archival work and first-hand accounts of the Great Depression, Battle returns lived experience to long-empty architecture. She endeavours to remind us that while the construction of history often obstructs and excludes,



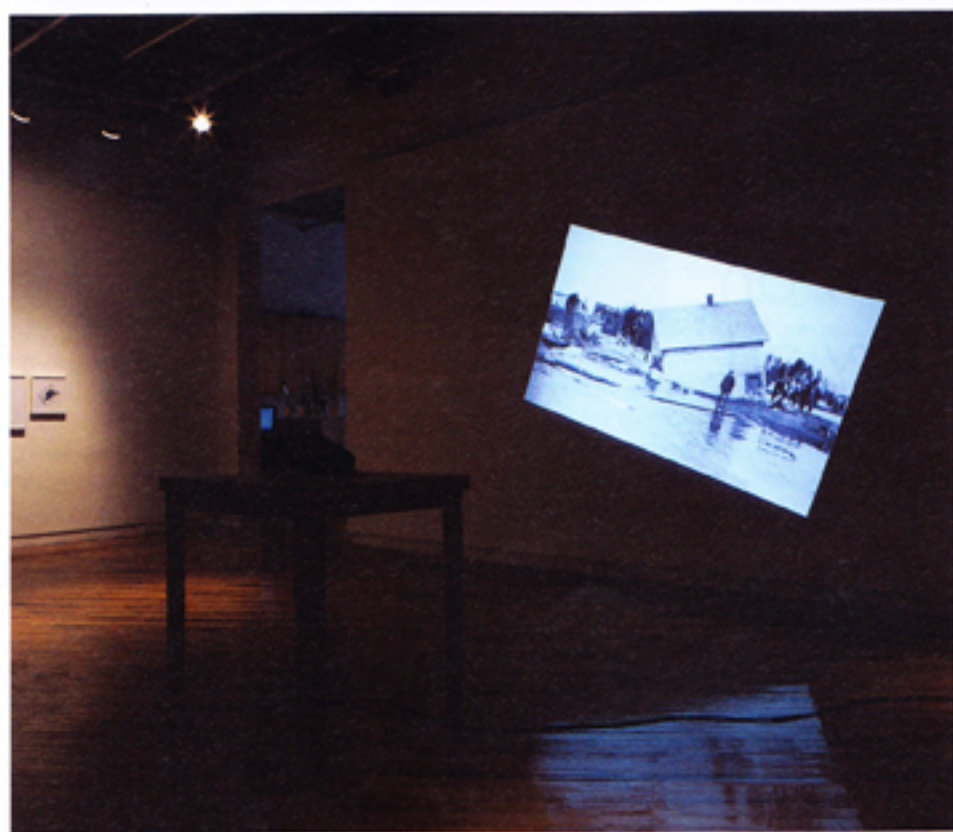




Top: Kristie MacDonald, *Merrimack River Flood*, 2013, image used in *Machine for Correcting the Post*, project, found image, wood, motor, metal, plastic, courtesy the artist and Gallery 44.  
 Bottom: Kristie MacDonald, *image used in Machine for Correcting the Post*, 2013, project, found image, wood, motor, metal, plastic, courtesy the artist and Gallery 44.  
 Previous Page: Christina Battle, *doorfield*, 2014, installation view, courtesy the artist and Gallery 44. Photograph: Merrin Lum.



"Christina Battle & Kristie MacDonald: What Was Will Be," *dearfield, colorado*, 2014, installation view, courtesy the artist and Gallery 44. Photograph: Morris Lam.



"Christina Battle & Kristie MacDonald: What Was Will Be," *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past*, 2014, installation view, courtesy the artists and Gallery 44. Photograph: Morris Lam.

it can occasionally reclaim lost communities and affirm their significance in the present. Ultimately, through archival work and photo-based media, *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* and *dearfield, colorado* engage with the limits of both history and architecture. Through "What Was Will Be," MacDonald and Battle each confirm that providing shelter—from a nasty storm, from becoming forgotten—is both a caring gesture and a political act.

*"Christina Battle & Kristie MacDonald: What Was Will Be," exhibited at Gallery 44, Toronto, from January 10 to February 15, 2014.*

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