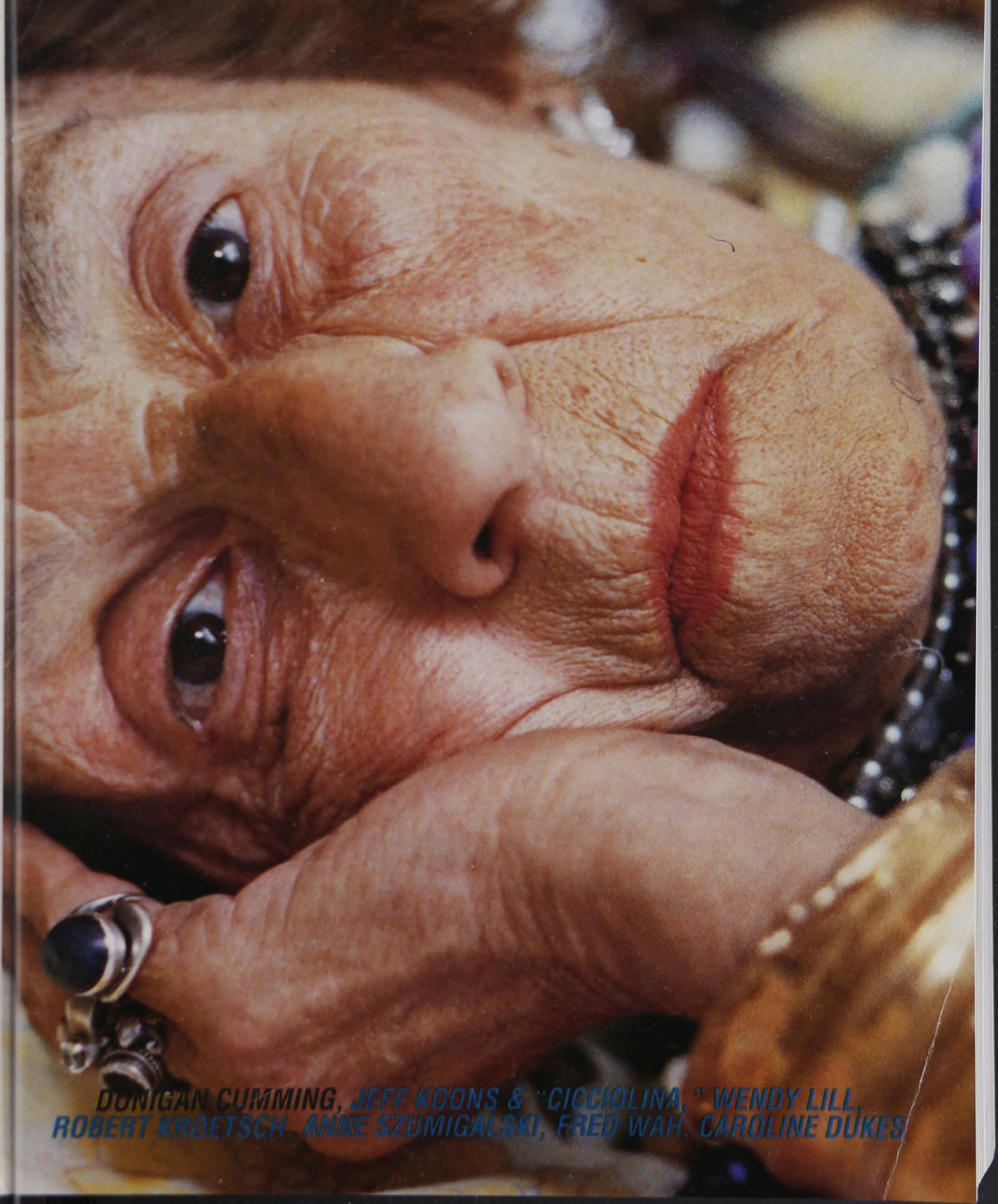


WINTER 1990/91

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BORDER CROSSINGS

A MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS



*DONIGAN CUMMING, JEFF KOONS & "CICCIOLINA," WENDY LILL,
ROBERT KROETSCH, ANNE SZUMIGALSKI, FRED WAH, CAROLINE DUKES*

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EDITOR:
Robert Enright

EXECUTIVE EDITOR:
Meeka Walsh

BUSINESS MANAGER:
Deborah Russell

COPY EDITOR:
Pat Sanders

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS:
Terrence Heath, Stephen Phelps, Wayne Tefs,
Bruce Ferguson, Scott Barham

DESIGN:
Frances V. Kaczoroski
David Stewart

ADVERTISING:
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WAH

LIKELIKE SHINING WORDS TO TELL YOU
I LOVE YOU

FIVE ONES FOR P.

Watch you
and then keep
watching you.

More the body, everything
you've touched
tongue and shoulder,
shoulders
dancing too.

I keep watching
you out there, star
you sail, your sky, your moon
all night long almost
shore to shore.

When I'm out there with you
only to be with you,
why else
you're what I know, see you
always have to.

ALMOST

Almost don't dare look at the sky these nights for the
largest moon of the year October tells and a full red
sky in the West too down to the rivers below Mount
Sentinel huffing it such seasons this valley from our
walk along the back road up past McDougal's tonight and
the dogs dogs more bite in the air than memory scented
all of a sudden up our road under the cedar tree Erika I
know that's yours and your mom's moon again how make
it imagic likewise shining words to tell you I love you
and here, here's some of this hillside of your heart's
such a large large sky.

P YOU SO

too fast five O you're still waiting to dance
antics of old migrations cut through your glance

I want to be with you under every tree
in the hills you hurtle smiles and tongues
scree vectors your legs

fingers thin and tips white thus gloved
miles and miles the rice waits
simmered

a little polka in your eyes this tilt of your shoulder
eyes mouthing hands counter the air you fly so high o
five o five o content's continent so hey Mary
wanna dance

HER HOUSE

Her mind and life-
time, yearning

for her life's
mind on it, heart

dance, literal
with her mouth

shoulders too
today years ago

I married her.
Outside, the distant glaciers

crack and groan
with the same desire.

WRITING THE TRANSLATING

west arm boats all time drift moving and saying left-
over Jenefer you'd know this view maybe from your
northness or what remains of a blond genetic flow your
body getting back up from the fall the ocean of
embarrassment you can remember floating up from the
ice into the heat of July now thawed to a greener place
so that what remains is more than this lake which is
likewise fed by water from somewhere else in turn no
mistake but definition of a further shore of incompleated
driftwood too.

FIVE POEMS BY FRED WAH

Pretty Ribbons

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DONIGAN CUMMING

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT ENRIGHT

IN THE LAST eight years Montreal photographer Donigan Cumming has been involved in an ongoing project with a goal that he himself admits may be absurd: to construct a new model for documentary photography. To put together his model he decided to concentrate on "a counter-imagery of the grotesque," a disposition he finds in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. There's something appropriate about attaching himself to the provisionally truthful genre of fiction because Cumming is concerned to frustrate documentary by capitalizing on its fabrication—what he calls its "visual rhetoric." It's the process of "loading the photograph," he says, "with mannered vocabulary, emotional hooks and multiple versions of decisive moments."

In his most recent work any visual rhetoric is overpowered by the provocation of his subject matter: an investigation of the being and living space of a woman who reveals more about old age in a single photograph than can be learned from an avalanche of statistics and social commentaries. I realize that I've accepted Cumming's alternative to traditional documentary, in that I'm insisting upon the truth of a photograph I know to be set up, a product of a collaboration between Cumming and Nettie Hart, a widow, one-time journalist, occasional actress and friend. Together they have decided upon the setting—Nettie's apartment, "a hot house of hope and nostalgia"—and upon the method—"the public expression of

intimacy"—with which they will realize what Cumming calls his "harsh theatre."

Harsh it is and no less theatrical: look at the colour photograph of Nettie, naked and with her back to the viewer, lying on a chesterfield that sits in the middle of a chaos of newspapers, clothing and jewellery. All this evidence of contemporary ruin seems to have been excavated from a wooden box—a cross between a hope chest and a coffin—that occupies the foreground of the photograph. It's impossible not to read this image as a pathetic metaphor for Nettie's life, emptied out and scattered, leaving her naked and vulnerable. Her apartment is itself a correlative for her body, itself emptied out of health and strength, so that when we see her at what another age would have called her toilette, we are astonished at the damage time is able to effect. Her body in the bathtub, in repose, standing improbably in a sink, is a topography of loss and misdirection—a breast appears like the ear of an old animal; toes are so arthritic they look maliciously broken. As a viewer you ask yourself what you are doing looking in this place; it's the question that comes up just before you ask Nettie what the hell she's doing in these photographs. They are so revealing and so intimate that they become positively ruthless and it's this combination of vulnerability and uncompromising toughness that makes *Pretty Ribbons* unique in my photographic experience.

Ours is a culture obsessed by youth and beauty; it is meticulous and narcissistic and has neither the patience nor the constitution for images which take away the

high sheen of vibrancy from its self-image. Cumming holds up for our consideration another series of images: old, broken, grotesque and powerless. It is a credit to his art that so many of these are such good photographs—the image of Nettie, naked except for a long necklace wrapped twice around her neck and bellying onto her arm, sitting in a room with a comma of a dog on the floor, is a masterpiece of staged documentary. So is the photograph of Nettie indiscreetly covered in a satin nightdress, sleeping on an armchair with a fur shawl casually thrown about, as if it were a prop for a glamorously romantic film. It has about it an air of the brittle, dusty residue of desire. But sitting with her, almost out of the picture, is a framed homily telling us that "a friend is one who knows the best and the worst of us and loves us just the same." In Cumming's world of ambiguous messages, our responses are of equivalent degree and kind: is this a simple clichéd piece of folk wisdom, a petition for compassion and understanding, or an ironic, even cruel joke?

It's all three.

These are photographs of excruciating honesty; they self-consciously show us what it's like to be old and lonely and they do it without apology. The final image in this portfolio shows Nettie's face close up; she is clothed, wears jewellery and lipstick, and is staring back at the viewer. What she confronts us with is the knowledge of what we're just seen, leaving us with the painful and humanizing memory of dealing with a future we haven't yet encountered. ♦