ZOE LEONARD

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA

The ancient Greek philosopher Herodotus made the ironically enduring observation that you can never step in the same river twice. But he also lived in a world before photography where, while the river might keep flowing, I can go back and examine the moment when my toes hit the water. Photography is the scratch in the grooves of time’s record: it causes it to skip.

This uncanny relationship between the ossified instant of the photograph and the ineluctable flow of time is what Roland Barthes, in his perennially indispensable meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), pointed to when he linked photography to death; by contemplating frozen time, we can see just how quickly it rushes by. Zoe Leonard’s retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, ‘Survey’, which was initially organized by Bennett Simpson and Rebecca Matalon at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and was overseen by Whitney assistant curator Elisabeth Sherman for the exhibition’s New York edition, takes this haunting aspect of photography to its foundation, and lays upon decades of deeply felt work having to do with love, loss and identity. The result is raging and elegiac, a fitting testament to our times.

Leonard’s work was forged in the crucible of the AIDS crisis, whose devastating effects she experienced first-hand, as the disease rampaged through New York’s gay community, and beyond. Her role as an activist, which included serving as a founding member of the radical queer collective Fierce Pussy, led to what is undoubtedly her most recognizable work, the agitprop text piece *I Want a President* (1992), which graced New York’s High Line park in the form of a greatly enlarged facsimile during the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. The original, type-written manuscript is now on display at the Whitney. The text, which was composed on the occasion of the long-fated 1992 presidential bid of Leonard’s friend Eileen Myles, a poet and activist, howls at the injustice of being lorded over by stuffed-shirted politicians with no connection to the realities of the marginalized people that they supposedly serve. ‘I want a dyke for president,’ it famously begins, ‘I want a person with AIDS for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn’t have a chance about getting leukaemia.’ Now more than ever, it is painfully obvious that Leonard’s wishes are firmly enshrined outside of the realm of possibility.

This page
Zoe Leonard,
*The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (detail), 1993–96, 78 gelatin silver prints and four chromogenic photo prints, dimensions variable

Opposite page
Above
Zoe Leonard,
*Strange Fruit (For David)*, 1992–97, Installation view

Below
Zoe Leonard, Niagara Falls. No. 4, 1986/91, gelatin silver print, 106 × 74 cm
Leonard’s other deviations from traditional photography play better, however. For instance, the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96), which was executed in collaboration with the filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, is a stirring meditation on the fictional life of a black lesbian film actress who struggled, and largely failed, to break free of the grip of racist type casting. Fastidiously produced using period costumes and vintage photographic processes, the faux-archive is a wholly convincing tribute to the many such lives that have undoubtedly been swept under the rug of history.

*You See I Am Here After All* (2005) is another archive of sorts: thousands of vintage postcards of Niagara Falls, grouped by the similarity of their viewpoints. Looking at this cascade of images, I found myself thinking about photography, permanence and Hermitage’s hoary old adage. While our lives may flow by like an ever-changing river, I thought, some vast and powerful things, like the roaring falls of Niagara, seem to stay the same even as they change. This recalled the ending of Leonard’s famous text, which now seems even more dispiriting than when it was written: ‘I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that the president is always a clown: always a John and never a hoofer. Always a boss and never a worker; always a liar, always a thief and never caught.’ Sound familiar?

Chris Wiley