

LAURA MACKIN:  
120 YEARS

january 13th–february 25th, 2012  
artist talk: february 9th, 7pm  
opening: january 13th, 6–9pm  
gallery hours: tues–sat, 11am–5pm

# Laura Mackin

by Rod Slemmons

Laura Mackin appropriates amateur video and commercial post cards to explore the creation and function of visual memory. Importantly, she comes up with several ways to test the distinction between visual memory and photographic memory. Has there ceased to be a difference?

The project “120 years” experiments with two found bodies of work: 60 years of film and video shot by somebody named Dean, and a stash of 314 postcards collected over 60 years of travel by a woman named Mrs. Ernest. Mackin has edited, re-combined and structured these found objects in ways that clarify and celebrate as well as subvert their original use. She has avoided analyzing the difference between amateur and professional and has decided to work at a first or second remove from their original intentions.

Much of the film and video is shot from moving cars. While normally this view metaphorically represents the need and reason for travel, and implies the actual speed of the transaction between the traveler and the trip, Mackin has here speeded up and shortened the view. She has also divided her edited compositions between views from the side window and from the front window. This division makes it harder for us to fall into a simplicity of analysis. We recognize some things—specific mountains, for example—but others are either too fast or too generic. So we



Dean collection, 2008, C-print, 9.5 x 10 inches

are left with an impression of travel based more on non-visual phenomena, like motion or distance. This, by extension, makes us wonder why we place so much value on visual memory and invent devices to mimic it. Because most of us traveled around the country in cars as children, it might also cause us to realize that most of what we visually know about our country is derived from a thin strip along a highway.

Dean got a zoom lens twenty or so years into his moving image adventure and used it, as Mackin notes, somewhat idiosyncratically. For example, he rarely zooms part way, creating long throws that imply a desperate need to see



Dean, all of his sunsets, 2010, C-print collages

something better. To force us to wonder about this, Mackin isolated and grouped the zoom shots so they occur right next to each other and she also speeded them up. We have to go through the collection at least three times before we begin to make conventional observations and begin to recognize things clearly. Through this strategy we acquire unfamiliar tools that help us analyze both what is in front of and behind the camera, and a third position which includes both.

A subtext of both the Dean zoom and passenger seat constructions is the fact that we are seeing a particular, selective view of a life rush past. And this, in turn, implies narrative structure. But we are denied easy access to this narrative by non-chronological ordering of the cuts and the speed of the whole piece. As Mackin points out, careful (very careful) repeated observation reveals people and cars getting older, pets coming and going, and cities and highways evolving. Also, while this feels like an individual life, it might be construed as collective since it is shot from a common position--from a car on a road.

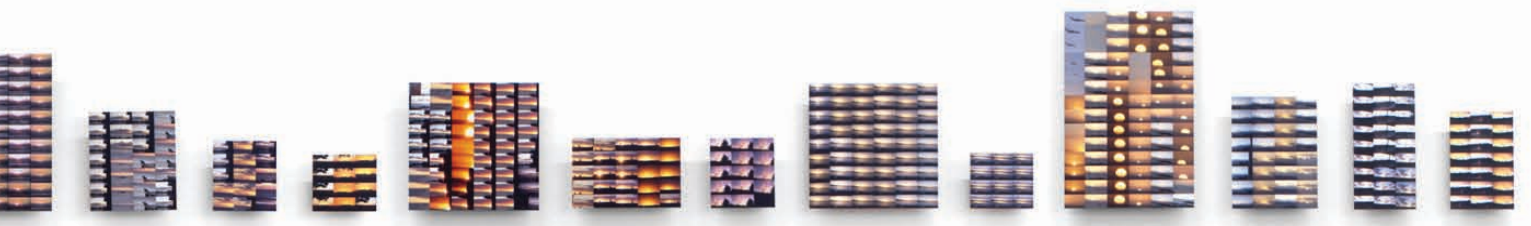
So what kind of handle on the world is photography offering us? Material coming in through our eyes is highly selected. It must be or our minds would freeze up. The video is selective also, but much less so. Andy Warhol made a series of videos pointing his camera at non-moving objects like buildings. In a sense, this static image is completely inclusive in terms of what can come in through our eyes. Dean's videos are less inclusive in the sense that when we look down a highway our visual memories immediately clone the view and relax our need to see it carefully or completely. There is an automatic sampling that takes place that relieves some of our perception from its job. We may have learned this trick from photography.

Years ago I was on the south rim of the Grand Canyon and happened to look into a trash barrel by the overlook. It was about half full of polaroid prints of the view in front of me, all almost exactly the same. How was the decision made as to which was the best view--the one to take home? In the small



Still from *Driving* (Dean, 1946-2006), 2011, digital video, 2 min.

store nearby was a large rack of post cards of the canyon. People were buying a lot of them. It occurred to me that the post cards were somehow sanctioned mementos of the visit to the canyon and the photographs were judged based on the card image. The card has a better chance of becoming an iconic memory of the trip and the visit to the canyon, and from now on its memory will tell us where to point the camera when we are confronted with a canyon. Using Mrs. Ernest's post card collection,



Mackin continues to explore the confusion of photography with memory. She tries to subvert this temptation by mounting the cards in the shape of maps. This expands memory back into the concrete using another form of created icon. Interestingly, Mrs. Ernest did not mail the cards indicating that she thought of them as a collection of memories.

Mackin's imaginative and analytical use of amateur video and commercial cards is important and suggestive. It is easy to forget the volume of such material in the world—and how fleeting. Families will emote about how they managed to save the photo album from their burning home. The next generation will give it to the Goodwill. As the photographer Paul Berger likes to point out, most of the people in photographs worldwide are dead. Mackin notes that the films and images she is working with are based on the judgment of dead people. That, of course, makes it more difficult to communicate with them to find out what they think of recontextualizing and re-doing their work. On the other hand, what is the alternative? Hide them in an archive? Throw them away? It seems that the huge mass of this kind of material is way underused for understanding the ideas and questions that Mackin has opened up.

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Rod Slemmons was the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago from 2001 to 2011 where he taught undergraduate photo history and graduate seminars in the Photography Department. He previously taught photography, history of photography and graduate Museum Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle and has taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2002. Rod was the National Chair of the Society for Photographic Education from 1990 to 1994. He was named Honored Educator at the SPE National Conference in Miami in 2007. Before and during his time at the University of Washington he was the Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Seattle Art Museum for 14 years, producing 35 exhibitions and numerous catalogs, including *Like A One-Eyed Cat*, the first retrospective of Lee Friedlander in 1989. Recently Rod has reviewed portfolios for Fotofest in Houston, FotoFilter in Washington, DC, and PhotoEspaña in Madrid. He is the author of numerous introductions and essays for photography books and journals.

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