

## VISUAL ARTS

## Framing the evolution of photography



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**Becoming: Photographs from the Collection of John and Ginny Soule at the Art Gallery of Hamilton**  
Until Jan. 15, 123 King St. West, Hamilton;  
artgalleryofhamilton.com

**S**till easing your way into 2012? Let me help.

Do not listen to chat shows about dieting. Avoid any store running a Valentine's Day racket. And, take a gentle hour to wander through the Art Gallery of Hamilton's *Becoming: Photographs from the Collection of John and Ginny Soule* – an unpretentious, modest display that resonates with quiet, but earned, confidence.

As the subtitle tells us, *Becoming* is comprised of works culled from the collection of the Soule family, who have been buying photography since the 1960s. Their collection includes works from the first days of photographic practice until the present – i.e. from the 19th to 21st centuries – and is marked, at least as presented in this array by Melissa Bennett (the AGH's contemporary-art curator), by an intriguing lack of rigidity or imposed cohesiveness. The Soule Collection is wonderfully free of the usual specificity narratives that define high-art collections, nor is it bound by an obvious thread of intent or thematic interest. Suits me fine.

The Soules appear to buy whatever catches their fancy: be it a landscape photo, a portrait, a journalistic capture, or a post-digital manipulation. Personally, I detest fussy collecting – it just leads to exactism and completionism, the two great deadeners of the joy of amassing pleasure-giving objects. And the Soules, if this survey from their hoard is to



Barbara Astman's *Untitled #6, Series: Scenes from a Movie for One*. CORKIN GALLERY, COLLECTION OF JOHN AND GINNY SOULE

## IN OTHER VENUES

**The Tsars' Cabinet at the Gardiner Museum**

Until Jan. 8, 111 Queen's Park, Toronto

Last chance to catch this stunning mound of serf-grinding excess from the Romanov era.

**Diana Menzies and Nada Sesar-Raffay at First Canadian Place Gallery**

Until Jan. 13, 100 King St. West, Toronto

Menzies and Sesar-Raffay shove paint around like stevedores pushing freight on a wet dock. There's plenty to savour in these paintings.

R.M. Vaughan

be believed, are far from fussy. Discerning, yes, but not obsessive or fixed in taste. More the benefit to us humble viewers.

If there is a thread in the show, however, it's a simple chronological one; namely, the emergence of photography from its early days as a novelty, or, at best, a kind of low-cost, high-speed response to illustration, to its current status as a coveted fine art. But, as I have noted before in this space, I distrust chronological readings of art, and progress models in general, and this distrust causes me to read even the most casual of early photographs as works made in pursuit of artistic, or at least aesthetic, goals.

So, the gimmick-to-art-form angle in *Becoming*, while undoubtedly present, is one I would happily set aside.

Thus, *Becoming*, for me, is less about the (alleged) growth of photography into high art and more about the changing technologies associated with the practice – and this is where the exhibition shines. There really is nothing more illuminating than looking at a duo gravure from 1907 and then turning to look at a chromogenic print from 2005. Illuminating and question-inducing.

Did technological improvements alter not only the way the camera is used, but also what the camera records? Or, are technological changes merely concurrent adjuncts to the increasing imposition of art-fuelled readings onto photographic imagery?

Or, did it all unfold simultaneously? Was photography's shift from "low" mass-produced novelty to "high" art paralleled by

enhanced technologies and expanded visions/subject matter?

You will not get easy answers from the tumbling time line loosely constructed in *Becoming*, but you will certainly develop your own, probably very conflicted, theories. Looking at this exhibition is a bit like staring at an array of Tarot cards – you know there are answers in the spread, but you have to divine them by building the connective lines, following the subtle under-narratives.

Among the individual works, highlights include a melting, shape-shifting portrait (of sorts), a digital-ish swarm in hard blacks and toxic, too tannic wine colours by Barbara Astman; Horst P. Horst's hypnotic close-up of the spiral staircase-like interior of a sea shell; Liliane De Cock's detail shot of a snow-swept mountain peak, a striated crag that looks as leathery as a cowhand's face, and just as blunt; Edward Steichen's inky snapshot of an overdressed, early 20th-century Parisian crowd enjoying a day at the races; Richard Zolkower's haunting image of a golden white dog galumphing along a mist-covered bridge; and Jesse Boles near-holographic, long-exposure capture of a Hamilton steel factory at night, a minicity bathed in baby blue light, fish-tail trails of smoke and bursts of hot orange flame.

Again, *Becoming* is a quiet show. It does not beg for attention, and its placement, along a narrow, low hallway, hardly helps pull the viewer in. Furthermore, when I saw the show it was sandwiched between a survey of Attila Richard Lukacs's loud and over-calculated skinhead fetish paintings and, of all counterintuitive things, an exhibition of maddeningly well-crafted, proto-Op Art quilts – geometric wonders that induce a delicious vertigo.

Compared to these two eye-catchers, *Becoming* appeared delicate to a fault. But not every story needs to be told in all caps, by shouting and flailing about. As 2012 is likely to be a turbulent year, why not start off with a flicker, a blink, the intangible and fleeting forever stilled?