

VISUAL ART

Susan Dobson

by Rhiannon Vogl

Susan Dobson's exhibition "Slide/Lecture" makes me homesick. Standing in the darkened, silent gallery space, I am transported back in time, twice, to two different decades, two different cities, two different lifetimes.

In the first, I am a child, six, maybe seven. I'm sitting with my father at the kitchen table. It is dark, after dinner, winter months. We are sorting and sifting through a selection of small, clear plastic boxes, opening them carefully, so as not to crack their spine. Inside are tiny squares that hold memories, small, white, hard frames that contain images of the past: my poppa, a mountain range, a party in an ornate apartment. We hold each square up to the ceiling light, only by the edges, squinting and closing one eye to focus on the miniature transparent image contained within. I hand my memory back to my dad, he turns it 180 degrees, and sweeps it with a small grey foam brush before placing it, in chronological order, in the black plastic carousel that sits on the table. When the tray is full, we carry it into the living room, where my brother and mother are tucked together on the green plaid couch. Dad ceremoniously retracts the large silver screen from its tube, sets it up on its stand and dims the lights. He flicks on the projector and begins to recount familiar, if not repetitious, narratives as the slides drop into place. I doze off, watching the dust in the air dance within the projector's beam. My mom claps when the show is over. My dad laughs, my brother asks to watch again.

In the other, I am older, living on my own. I am in a quiet, dimly lit room on the sixth floor of the arts building at my university. Pulling

a yellow and black box with worn and tattered edges from a shelf, I open it gingerly, careful not to tear it any more. Retrieving the black tray, I brush the dust away with my sleeve, and set it down on the pine working table next to my thick, three-ring binder. Moving to the black metal filing cabinets, I trace my hand over their labels until I find what I am looking for. I pull the drawer open cautiously and begin to leaf through the dog-eared papers that divide each section, pink, blue, sometimes cream, fingering through typewritten or handwritten labels, until I reach the one dated "1888," van Gogh's *Starry Night*. I remove the metal square from its place, of course only by the edges, hold it up to the ceiling light, making sure this is the one where the stars are yellow, not orange, the sky sapphire and not turquoise. Turning it 180 degrees, I place it carefully in the tray on the table, and repeat this search process, building the narrative, until the carousel is full. Slipping it back into its box, I walk with it balanced on my binder down the hall to the seminar room where my professor waits. She insists slide images are richer and truer to the original and refuses to use PowerPoint. Handing it off to her, I take my seat in front of the silver screen as it lowers from the ceiling. She flicks the projector on, its motor whirls and a bright beam of light thrusts outward to the front of the room. I catch the dust dancing in it momentarily, before the class begins.

In Dobson's recent exhibition at the Ryerson Image Centre, large-format photographs hang on each of the four darkly painted walls, and show detailed views of the objects used to organize, categorize and store several abandoned art history departments' slide collections. Spurred to take on this subject



matter when the University of Guelph decided to dispose of its significant but recently deemed obsolete slide library, Dobson undertook to photograph the archives of four universities over as many years, wanting to capture the material essence of each—the drawers, the files, the carousels, the labelling systems. Systematic and methodical in her work, this process also revealed to Dobson the biases and blind spots within these collections, the histories that had been selected to be taught, the ones that were left out, generalized, or simplified. The work of male artists makes up the bulk of the contents of these collections, and in one of the documented drawers, "1888," van Gogh's *Starry Night* is given its own entire row.

Shooting most of the artifacts from above, Dobson enlarged the

1. Susan Dobson, *Rembrandt—Rembrandt*, 2020, inkjet print. Courtesy the artist and Michael Gibson Gallery. Photographs courtesy Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

2. Susan Dobson, *Photography After Photography*, 2019, vinyl print. Courtesy the artist and Michael Gibson Gallery.



images in certain ways, to create a more tangible relationship to the human body. Filing drawers were stitched together digitally, to make them longer and taller. The slide carousels are stacked into torsos and shot together, before being individually examined by her bird's-eye lens. She enlarged the images of the individual trays, contrasting their grey plastic skeletons with their white plastic contents. Rhythmic and repetitive, the formal patterns that Dobson draws out from these organizational systems are hypnotic; captured in this way, these outdated art histories and their imaging technologies could risk being fetishized, if it weren't for her close, critical eye to detail.

Dobson has also gathered hundreds of the slides that were destined for destruction and piled

them in a large heap at the centre of the gallery. With the overhead lamps softly diffusing light onto them, the gem-like quality of these analogue relics cannot be denied. Their tactility is irresistible. Bending to take a closer look, I notice a fine dust gathering on them, and think about the contents of the art history lecture I am about to give this afternoon.

Susan Dobson's exhibition "Slide/Lecture" makes me homesick. I tell my dad so over the phone, describing the pile of slides on the floor, their labels, how their metallic frames catch the light. We talk about the rows of black and yellow boxes he has in the basement, doing their own work at gathering dust. He doesn't know what to do with them anymore but can't yet bring himself to throw them away, either. ■

"Slide/Lecture" was exhibited at the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, from September 15, 2021, to December 4, 2021.

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