

## **GEOFF MITCHELL: MEMORY IN MONTAGE**

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There is a “language” to every means of communication, a system of signs ordered into a vocabulary and by considerations of grammar and syntax. Therefore, no matter how much an artwork has resulted from intuition and spontaneity, its counter-position of elements takes on a coherency according to more than just formal arrangement. The practice of collage and assemblage over the last century has made this apparent to all of us; we expect a certain almost linguistic orderliness from artists such as Schwitters, Rauschenberg and Cornell, a knack for speaking through composition, for making our eyes follow patterns of stress, for arrangements of large and small, sharp and loose, light and dark. Following these collage principles, and the principles of montage that parallel them in photography and film, Geoff Mitchell paints as if he were building rebuses, you know, this + this – this + this = this. But in Mitchell’s work the whole is different than the sum of its parts.

In Mitchell’s lucidly organized canvases, everything, you could say, adds up. Nothing is subtracted from the equation, although some things – some qualities, some clarity, some small part of some element – may be suppressed or obscured in the sequencing.

Mitchell’s montage method concerns itself less with the loss of visual material than with the accretion of meaning – not just the build-up of information, but the generation of new, amplified and modulated sensation. As parsed and measured as an English teacher’s sentences, Mitchell’s stately, often almost heraldic compositions gain their strength and tension not from the drama inherent in their elements, but from the new drama that emerges from their juxtaposition – and, conversely, from the drama that results not from a progressive “reading” of the elements across a visual “sentence”, but from a back and forth between them, a sometimes orbital, sometimes zigzag ricochet of the eyes across and around the painting.

As we thus scan Mitchell’s paintings we immediately notice a recurrence of images at once historical and human, figures at rest or involved in mundane activities whose garb and perhaps stance indicate that they lived a century or more ago. These anachronistic apparitions suggest they ought to inspire nostalgia, but few really do. Rather, they invite speaks in verse. The elliptical relationships Mitchell establishes between his whole, segmented, and excerpted pictures provide narratives too oblique to interpret or translate. Even as they tease us with hints of story or perhaps personal revelation, the image-relationships force us to take responsibility for their meaning. Mitchell makes us not simply the decoders, but the encrypters in his poetic mysteries. The images are up to him; the reading is up to us.

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