

Jean-Max Colard

(ARTFORUM n°6, 2002 Februar)

Like many photographers, Eric Rondepierre travels to find his images. And yet he is not a reporter - and hardly even a photographer in the traditional sense of the term. His journeys of exploration, the first step in his creative process, are forays into the deepest nooks and crannies of film libraries - in Washington, Montreal, Lausanne, Bologna, London... For months on end, eight hours a day, he holes up in the most obscure theaters, eyes riveted to wornout or decomposing film, looking at loops corroded by time or poor storage conditions. A sort of miner, Rondepierre tries to extract from these forgotten archives frames in which strange anomalies appear : a faded gesture or text, nitrate flowing across a face, bodies that have turned an incandescent red in a fire-damaged porno film.

This process resulted in two magnificent series of image, "*Précis de décomposition*" (A summary of decomposition), 1993, and "*Moires*", 1996 - 97, which essentially centered on the distortions of images and bodies. Before that he worked on trailers from the '30s through the '60s, photographing the precise moment at which the letters composing a title, in the midst of appearing, form a sort of thick, almost pictorial paste on the screen, one that distorts the image ("*Annonces*," 1991 - 93). Rondepierre's work has been a true passage through the limbo of cinema - not only the dustiest recesses of its archives, but above all at its moments of agony and death, when the cinematic image falters or breaks down. Rondepierre does not manipulate these image : He simply finds them and then photographs them. But in this simple transfer from one medium to another, from the movie screen to the film roll, something happens : what might be called the salvation of images. These visions, lost to the cinema, once again become possible, new, alive under the photographer's eye.

For his two most recent series, "*Diptyka*," 1998, and "*Suites*," 1999 - 2001, Rondepierre used reels of film salvaged from the basement of an old porno cinema in Athens and from the cinemathèque in Lausanne. He has become interested in the passage from one image to another, frame by frame, and has offered these forgotten films a new life through a new kind of montage : He puts the reels through a scanner, digitally removes any effect of distortion due to the projection, and then groups them in different ways, reframing them using the back line that separates two successive frames. Thus you have before you a single brand-new image composed of two frames. As a result of this practise, which has as much to do with William S. Burrough's idea of the cut-up and with visual simpling as with cinematic montage, the artist dismantles bodies and narratives, turning figures upside down, confusing top and bottom ; on these faces a mouth may open above a forehead. These games of anamorphosis and recomposition of the flat surface signal the underlying presence of painting in Rondepierre's work : a presence recaptured, salvaging the dead images of cinema and inscribing this work within the project of the resacralization of this image.

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.