

# The Dark Arts

By [Travis Cole](#) // Posted on December 14, 2017



*Untitled, 1978, David McMillan*

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At a time when Canada was still developing its identity within the landscape of contemporary photography, Walter Phillips Gallery at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity made a historic purchase.

Together with curators Hubert Hohn and Lorne Falk, the Gallery chose seven Canadian photographers for an exhibition called *The Banff Purchase*, which later became part of the Gallery's permanent collection. These seven photographers – Robert Bourdeau, Charles Gagnon, Tom Gibson, David McMillan, Nina Raginsky, Orest Semchishen, and, arguably the most recognizable, Lynne Cohen – were actively redefining the era's discourse on contemporary photography. From Banff, the 120 photographs in the exhibition, including Cohen's unmistakable large-format still life works of found sterile environments, toured prominent museums and galleries across the country. The result? A recognizable Canadian aesthetic in contemporary photography began to take shape.

Inspired by the 1979 exhibition, Kristy Trinier, former Director of Visual, Digital and Media Arts at Banff Centre, continued the conversation on contemporary photography through a new residency called *The Dark Arts*. I was given the opportunity to discuss the project and the residency with both Trinier and Vikky Alexander, Canadian photographer and lead faculty for *The Dark Arts*.

**Travis Cole: Considering *The Banff Purchase* and its influence on *The Dark Arts*, is there a focus on the return to old-form photography?**

**Kristy Trinier:** Definitely. *The Dark Arts* is closely linked to a history of old form photography. In 1978-79, Banff Centre had master classes in photography, and the Centre's professional photography facilities made the project possible. The photographers and artists participating in *The Dark Arts* will have access to the same facilities – eight darkrooms, a print-finishing area, and a lighting studio – as well as the digital photography labs and equipment. Banff Centre has one of the last colour processing studios in the province, and country, for that matter, for printing large-scale colour prints. The residency will invite artists to work within the contemporary context of photography, but they can practice in analogue or digital, whichever they prefer.

**Did you consider history when choosing faculty?**

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**KT:** Yes, there are three incredible lead faculty for *The Dark Arts*: Vikky Alexander, Torbjørn Rødland, and Jan-Erik Lundström, each with distinct, yet linked, practices. Vikky Alexander's work, in my mind, links to the legacy of Lynne Cohen, especially in her early work photographing the mirrored arcade spaces of West Edmonton Mall. Torbjørn Rødland's work links to David McMillan's images from *The Banff Purchase*. The photographs of both artists utilize contradictory compositions arrested in tension to present an unresolved narrative. As a critic and art historian specializing in contemporary photography, Swedish curator Jan-Erik Lundström has worked with both Alexander and Rødland. The backgrounds and expertise of each photographer and photographic curator will ensure a very generative conversation on contemporary photography.

**How does this history inform new and emerging artistic practices for those attending this residency?**

**KT:** Many photographers and artists are ready for a shift in the discourse about contemporary photography beyond technical platforms, but looking again to the meaning and content that these advancements have given to the artistic discipline. For artists with emerging practices, it's an incredible opportunity to be exposed to relevant and complex conversations with peers, while working in the same studios and facilities of some of the most notable contemporary photographers.



Residency

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*Knights of Columbus, Hamilton, Ontario, 1977, Lynne Cohen*

**Vikky, having been involved in several periods of photography in Canada, do you feel like your work has changed along with the advancements in equipment and processing?**

**Vikky Alexander:** I have been working in photography since the early 1980s. I originally worked in the darkroom making my own black and white images, and then progressed to working with colour images and professional labs. In the last 10 years, I have been working with digital images, but I still use professional labs to make the prints, so not that much has changed, except the way the images are stored and exchanged.

**In the last few years we've seen a more multimedia/interdisciplinary approach to photographic practice. Do you think that artists now are savvier when approaching contemporary photography?**

**KT:** Yes, photographers in recent residencies have extrapolated the forms and structures that the photographic image is presented on, while others are cutting, piercing, collaging, and painting during the development phases of processing. The experimentation in both the research and preparation of what image is captured extends to the process of presenting those images.

**VA:** Now I can make images that wrap around buildings, or images printed on the back of glass and the costs are not exorbitant. So that has changed the scope of my work somewhat. There are possibilities of incorporating images with architecture and expanding my practice into the public art realm.

**Artists are returning to film. What's the reason for this return? Is there a difference in the finished product?**

**KT:** Artists choose to utilize the materials that best represent their artistic concept. Digital technology labs study how our eyes and brain read an image, and as we increasingly adapt to resolution and fidelity in the digital image and in viewing images on digital platforms. Artists also take into account how a viewer might encounter the image, all of which lends to which finished product best aligns with their practice.

**VA:** One of the strongest motivators for being an artist is making something just to see what it will look like and examining all the variations. For example, will an image look better on matte paper or on glossy, as a silver print or a digital print, as 40" x 60" or as a contact print? Artists want to try them all in the process of exploration.

**KT:** I am glad we can support artists at Banff Centre by offering options to work in either or both types of rendering the photographic image.

*The Dark Arts runs from January 15 - February 16, 2018. To learn more, visit [banffcentre.ca](http://banffcentre.ca)*

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