

# *Unsettled*

## Scott Walden

Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's

August 9 - October 28, 2001

Scott Walden's photography, as Bruce Johnson points out in his curator's statement, has a lot in common with the work of Walker Evans. Both photographers were motivated to record a rural way of life, a harsh and brave existence thoroughly dependent on nature.

There are no human subjects in the exhibit *Unsettled*, and this is perhaps the most striking difference between Evans's work, published in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and Walden's photographs. Where Evans portrays the weather-beaten faces of share croppers, Walden shows us the faces of abandoned outport homes caught in the ravages of decay. It's impossible not to anthropomorphize these collapsing structures. Clapboards sag, windows stare, paint peels like scabrous skin, a corner sinks into the earth as though on bended knee.

Between 1954 and 1975, approximately 28,000 rural Newfoundlanders left their homes in small outports for larger communities. The resettlement program, designed by Joey Smallwood, provided easy access to health care, new roads and employment. Many Newfoundlanders were forced to leave homes they had built by hand. People left their vegetable gardens, fishing grounds and the graveyards in which their ancestors had been buried since the 17th Century. In short, they left a way of life. And since 1997, Walden, who is originally from Toronto, has been photographing the remains of these communities—houses, churches and gravestones.

Paradoxically, there is something animate in the stillness of Walden's photographs. Their dynamic compositions capture gesture: the motion of falling apart, tipping over and crumbling. Each image looks as though it might

be a frame from a film caught on the cog of a projector; once the film is freed, the buildings will promptly collapse. Perhaps after watching, repeatedly, the footage of the World Trade Center crumbling, one expects a building, if it is to fall apart, to do so in a matter of minutes. But Walden's houses have been falling for three decades, and the photographer has caught their slow, staggering demise.

In the accompanying catalogue, Walden says he'd like his photographs to evoke memory in the same way Marcel Proust's famous madeleine does—the taste of a plain biscuit dipped in tea triggers in Proust's narrator an overwhelming flurry of distinct and achingly nostalgic childhood memories. Proust describes an involuntary reliving of the past bound inextricably to the senses, particularly those of smell and taste.

However, the majority of Walden's audience will be too young to have ever experienced the smells and flavours of these resettled outports. Walden's younger audiences will have heard from grandparents, songwriters such as Anita Best and the literature of Bernice Morgan and, more recently, Michael Crummey, what it was like to grow up in outport Newfoundland. But absent will be the uniquely personal, sensory experience equivalent to Proust's madeleine. For the majority of Walden's audience, these remarkably beautiful, richly textured photographs will not involuntarily trigger memories of rural life, as would a favourite baked treat from childhood, but will instead provoke the viewer to imagine the past. Perhaps even long for it.

• Lisa Moore

