

Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives

Audio Tour Transcript

Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives Introduction

Presented by the PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art, *Stan Douglas: Revealing Narratives*, features two major photo series from the artist. The exhibition includes Douglas's latest series, *Penn Station's Half Century* (2021), and *Disco Angola* (2012), shown here for the first time in Nova Scotia.

Stan Douglas was born in 1960 in Vancouver, where he continues to live and work. He was selected to represent Canada at the 2022 Venice Biennale and has a sterling international reputation.

For over thirty years, Stan Douglas has devoted his work to the investigation of the image; the technologies of their making, their aesthetic languages and their dynamics of power.

Through photo, film and video installation, television, theatre, mobile applications and many other digital media technologies, he delves into the recreation of moments in history at a cultural, social and political tipping point, to reveal multiple and divergent narratives in meticulous detail.

Douglas uses archival research to recreate and reimagine historical scenes in digital photographs. His work scrutinizes the very medium of photography, raising questions about "authenticity" by probing the relationship between recorded history and objective truth.

01 & 02 – Disco Angola: Checkpoint, 1975 and Coat Check, 1974

With the series *Disco Angola*, Douglas takes on the persona of a fictional photojournalist living in New York City in the 1970s, who is a regular in the emerging disco scene and travels back and forth to Angola to cover the civil war. The works in the series are dated from 1974 and 1975, which was a critical period for the global political economy, marked by an oil crisis, a global market crash and increasingly strained relations between the US and Soviet Union. It is out of this bleak historical context that disco evolved. This important genre inspired by funk and soul music became heavily embraced by New York City's Black, Latin X and queer communities as a joyful expression of emancipation from oppression. Douglas's alter ego would travel back and forth to Angola to chronicle the country's struggle for liberation from Portuguese rule.

Through intense research into archival photographs, period costumes and decor, Douglas crafted "snapshots" from each of these locations. The series consists of eight, large-scale panoramic photographs, four based in Angola and four in New York, which Douglas arranged into specific pairings that put forth a multitude of contrasts and comparisons.

Douglas uses archival references as a window into history as he recreates pivotal moments in his photographs. He is particularly interested in watershed moments of social, cultural, and political change and upheaval.

Stan Douglas mentions: “There’s a general tendency in my work where I try to look at transitional moments in history where something crucial happens in terms of the development of the society. Usually, some kind of rupture is my interest,” he says.

Checkpoint, 1975 and *Coat Check, 1974* in the G1 space are striking examples of his approach. *Checkpoint* takes the viewer to Angola in 1975, a pivotal year when celebrations of newfound national independence gave way to civil war. In the image, a control post occupies a dry, barren landscape, military vehicles and soldiers are positioned alongside miscellaneous objects like a refrigerator, and a rope stretches across an unpaved road.

In 1974, the Carnation Revolution brought down the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, signalling a new relationship between the Portuguese government and the Angolan liberation movement. Angola successfully negotiated independence, and the official date was set for November 11, 1975. But divisions between rival factions plunged the country into civil war. 1975 was a turning point characterized by revolution, euphoria, and disenchantment, with hopes for liberation from colonial oppression dashed by a civil war that would drag on for decades.

Coat Check, 1974 transports viewers to a bleak period in New York City’s history, when the city was dangerous and verging on bankruptcy. Disco clubs provided a refuge from the doom and gloom. When disco arrived in New York, it gave marginalized groups a space to celebrate their freedom and express themselves through music, dancing, and fashion. Disco is a danceable, transportive music with firm roots in Africa.

03 & 04 – Disco Angola: A Luta Continua, 1974 and Two Friends, 1975

Douglas continues his examination of body language in *A Luta Continua, 1974* and *Two Friends, 1975*. *A Luta Continua* features a woman standing against a concrete wall emblazoned with revolutionary political slogans, including “la luta continua” (“the fight continues”). The wall also bears the flag and logo of *Angola’s Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola* (Movimento Popular de Libertação), one of the factions involved in the civil war. The young woman’s mindset isn’t clear. Her posture and facial expression are ambiguous. Is she disenchanted? Defiant? Reluctant? Impassive? Confused? Like *Coat Check, Check Point, and Exodus, La Luta Continua* depicts a moment that’s adrift in uncertainty. The young woman’s body language asserts her identity while simultaneously conveying flamboyant extroversion and a shift inward.

A comparison between the Angolan woman in *A Luta Continua* and the figures in *Two Friends* reveals parallels: both the Angolan post-colonial revolutionary movement and the hedonistic nightclubs of the 1970s were confronted by forces of resistance. In *Club*

Versailles and Coat Check, the artist depicts the buzz of the emerging disco scene. Here we see “two friends,” a man and a woman seated on the sidelines of the dance floor, likely newcomers to the scene. They’re fashion forward, but their expressions and body language are blasé and aloof. Who are they? Do they support the marginalized partygoers? Are they friends? A bored, disenchanted couple? Or announcing the growing commercialization of Disco?

05 & 06 – Disco Angola: Capoeira, 1974 and Kung Fu Fighting, 1975

Dancing also served as a vehicle for escape and self-expression during Angola’s struggle for liberation from the colonial empire. In *Capoeira, 1974*, a group of rebel soldiers form a semicircle around two comrades who are performing the capoeira. This hybrid of dance and martial arts was created in the 16th century by West Africans enslaved and taken to Brazil by Portuguese colonizers. Forced to abandon their cultural traditions and martial arts, they practised the capoeira in secret.

On his interest in the capoeira, Douglas says “My fantasy was what would happen if there were fighters from South America who came to Angola via Cuba and showed the locals an unfamiliar dance that was in fact their own.”

In *Kung-Fu Fighting, 1975*, a young man performs martial-arts-inspired dance moves in an empty disco club as another young man looks on. Like *Capoeira, 1974*, the work depicts an observer on the margins of a central performance space. In *Kung-Fu Fighting*, the onlooker is slumped back, motionless in his seat. He appears distant, suspicious, and skeptical, but also drawn to the dancer’s fascinating energy and skill. Douglas illustrates the politics of appropriation and migration inherent in the act of dance by juxtaposing the capoeira, with disco music and its African origins.

07 & 08 – Disco Angola: Exodus, 1975 and Club Versailles, 1974

Exodus, 1975 and *Club Versailles, 1974* use the collective choreography of body language to offer a window into moments of historic upheaval.

Based on archival images, *Exodus* is set at the port of Luanda, where resigned and pensive Portuguese colonists with suitcases and crates at the ready await evacuation from Angola on the eve of its independence. The photo evokes the spectre of the civil war that will begin when the Portuguese leave. The clashes spanned decades, from 1975 to 2002. The photo captures a moment suspended between two worlds, one colonized, the other decolonized. The Portuguese slump under the weight of an uncertain future, unsure of their fate and troubled by their reflections on Angola’s colonial past and their involvement in it.

Club Versailles, 1974 is set at the beginning of the disco movement. The dance floor was a diverse space where Black, Latin X, and queer people formed fleeting, euphoric

late-night communities, gave themselves permission to be flamboyant, and surrendered to the music. The photograph has an improvisational, immediate feel that underscores the scene's exhilarating and transitory mood. It brilliantly illustrates how the disco scene provided a powerful outlet for oppressed communities in New York.

09 & 10 – Penn Station's Half Century: Introduction

Since the late 1980s, photography has been a central focus of Stan Douglas's practice. Penn Station's Half Century (2021) represents Douglas's most ambitious exploration of the medium to date. Made with a hybrid of CG and staged photography, the series examines how history manifests in specific places and transitional moments in society.

This body of work was commissioned by Empire State Development in partnership with Public Art Fund in dedication to New York City's new Moynihan Train Hall. The series looks at the life of the city's original Pennsylvania Station through nine vignettes arranged into four thematic panels for the new train hall. From the time of its inauguration in 1910 to its eventual demolition in 1963, to make way for Madison Square Garden.

To select the individual moments for re-creation, Douglas enlisted a researcher to comb through thousands of newspaper and periodical stories and pull out those that mentioned Penn Station, which were eventually narrowed down to the final group of nine single days taking place between 1914 and 1957.

These historical scenes were re-created by Douglas over a four-day shoot in Vancouver, during which over four hundred actors were scanned and re-dressed in one of five hundred unique period costumes, before being posed digitally. The architectural elements were created through an intensive CG post-production process carried out by an Emmy-nominated visual effects studio.

11 & 12 – Penn Station's Half Century: April 22, 1924 and August 7th, 1934

One panel, a diptych, features two distinct moments that occurred at the station's stairwell on April 22, 1924, and August 7, 1934, respectively. In the first tableau, crowds flood the station to witness the capture of Celia Cooney who, with her husband, was a bank robber and petty thief. Her fashionable dress earned her the nickname the "Bobbed Hair Bandit" and she developed a cult following.

The liberation of Angelo Herndon, a Black labor organizer, is depicted in the adjacent photograph. Herndon was arrested for the possession of Communist literature and eventually convicted for insurrection under a little-known Reconstruction-era statute. He served two years before he was released on a \$15,000 bail, collected from supporters through small donations. Upon arriving in New York, the martyred Herndon was greeted by thousands of well-wishers.

On the evening of Sunday, March 1, 1914, a severe snowstorm blanketed New York City, grinding rail traffic to a halt and leaving scores of travelers stuck at Penn Station, a travel hub that connected many destinations. Among those stranded were a large number of vaudeville performers, who typically transferred venues on Sundays and Mondays before beginning a new week of shows. Before the introduction of silent feature films in 1915, live performance was the primary source of mass entertainment for many Americans.

Noticing the talent in the room, comedian Bert Williams organized an impromptu show for the small, gathered audience that featured a number of the marquee names of the day, including the Florenz Troupe, jugglers Joseph and Mary Blank, and popular duos Kate Elinore and Sam Williams and Joseph Howard and Mabel McCane. In this tableau, a band of saxophonists (The Six Brown Brothers) performs at the top of the stairs while acrobats go through their routines on the first landing. On the lower level, other performers watch, nap, eat, or wait their turn.

13 & 14 – Penn Station’s Half Century

In this work, Douglas pays homage to Penn Station as it was in the early 1940s, when it served as a hub for mobilized soldiers traveling for training and deployment. Because of the hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women wishing their loved ones tearful goodbyes before heading overseas, the station held an iconic position in the war-time imagination.

The station’s iconic architecture had become so enmeshed in the cultural zeitgeist that it featured heavily in the plot of the 1945 Vincente Minnelli film *The Clock*, starring Judy Garland and Robert Walker. For the film, a replica of Penn Station’s waiting room was built on an MGM soundstage in Los Angeles, which Douglas has re-created here, littered with props, lighting equipment, and a handful of production staff.

By combining traditional cinematic techniques with new technologies, Douglas has expanded the experiential space of photography in *Penn Station’s Half Century*. As Douglas notes, the span of half a century provided a large time frame to look at how Penn Station, as a social space, affected people’s lives in New York City and beyond.

15 & 16 & 17 – Penn Stations Half Century: June 20th

Douglas’s first thematic panel in the exhibition consists of three depictions of the waiting room in Penn Station at daybreak on June 20—the summer solstice—in different years spread across its half century of operation. On June 20th, 1930, visitors would have seen a state-of-the-art trimotor plane positioned centrally within the space as a promotion for TWA’s new service that offered a route between New York and Los Angeles consisting of a combination of rail and air travel.

As a publicity stunt, the plane had been christened in 1929 by “famed aviatrix” Amelia Earhart. Absent the airplane, on June 20th 1944, the station featured six oversized cut-outs, each approximately forty by twenty-five feet, that symbolized the railroad’s contribution to the war effort. Organized by industrial designer Raymond Loewy and funded by the Works Progress Administration, the cut-outs depicted a conductor, a “red-cap” porter, an engineer, a soldier, a sailor, and a marine.

Finally, on June 20th 1957—only a few years before the original station’s demolition—the waiting room featured a new, modern ticket booth modeled after the aesthetic of LaGuardia Airport. Intended to streamline the ticketing process, in actuality the kiosk created confusion, in some ways marking the final ascendance of air travel over rail that contributed to the station’s demise.

Stan Douglas states: “The station itself had as much of a profound effect on the psychogeography of New York City as it had on the physical one.” Psychogeography describes the effect of a geographical location on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.