

Retrospective of a ‘truth activist’: ‘John Douglas: A Life Well Lived’

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John Douglas: “Suit Security,” “Homeland Security” Series,
Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Calling himself a “truth activist,” John Douglas’ mature work addressed his passionate social consciousness through filmmaking and photography.

“John Douglas: A Life Well Lived,” a retrospective, is curated by Mark Waskow, President of the Northern New England Museum of Contemporary Art (NNEMoCA).

This is the museum’s first public exhibition and covers many different aspects of Douglas’ work, from the early photography of Chicago demonstrations in the late ’60s to bucolic images of Lake Champlain in 2019. Douglas lived a fully committed life that spanned 84 years from 1938 to 2022 and observed and chronicled this period in unique ways.

As a founding member of the collective film production organization “Newsreel,” Douglas focused on the political issues of surrounding the Vietnam War. The large film still, “Chicago Demonstration,” from his “Summer of ’68” film is an iconic photograph that captures the naïve innocence of the demonstrators, with upraised hands forming peace symbols, their courage and conviction. It is a reminder of a pivotal time in our history, when youth truly believed that change was possible, and stood firm in their conviction about the unjust war in Vietnam. As a child of a military government family, Douglas fearlessly chose the position of counter-narrative to highlight the duplicity of his own government.



John Douglas: “Chicago Demonstration”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Douglas was a pioneer in computer-generated imagery (CGI) and animation. Many of the images shown are digital stills culled from the animations. The series, “The Whitehouse,” features skeletons posed in recognizable domestic settings going about their ordinary lives, conversing, dancing, chatting at a table, ignoring the rising flood waters, until there is no recourse but to climb onto the roof to hail a passing helicopter. The absurdity of so many of our thoughtless human actions is on full display with a sense of the ominous ever present.

The “Autowarming” series again presents images culled from animations that Douglas created. “Rivermouth” is a dark computer-generated print on a textured wood substrate which gives it the impression of a painting. Oil rigs and windmills float in a Turner-esque seascape against a purple sunset. In “Autowarming #1,” a graveyard of rows of parked cars are submerged nearly to their windows in a sea of water that again has oil rigs posed against a distant cityscape. In tones of red-orange and black, with a glowing setting sun, the image is strikingly intense and impossible not to see as a dystopian view of a possible future if humanity continues to ignore the signs of global warming.



John Douglas: “Autowarming #1,” “Autowarming” Series, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

There are digital drone photographs of a tiny island, “Ojihozo in Pe-ton-bowk” (Abenaki for Lake Champlain) which have a lyrical feel. Waskow, in his curator’s statement, offers that “Ojihozo is a sacred place for indigenous Abenaki. As a central part of the Abenaki creation story, Ojihozo was a figure made from dust spread over the planet Earth by the Creator. In these stories, Ojihozo is responsible for raising the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks before returning to the lake to become one again with Earth. This piece of land is the remnant of Ojihozo’s final resting place.” Douglas was exploring the meaning of origin stories, which are inevitably complex in our multi-layered histories.



John Douglas: "Ojihozo, Above", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Douglas' "Homeland Security" series is excellently installed in its own partitioned section of the gallery with the advisory that the content contains frontal nudity. Throughout the series, Douglas used multiple cloned nude images of himself holding an M-16 assault rifle "defending" the "homeland" of oak trees, cows, cornfields, etc. It is unusual to see an expression of aging white male muscularity whose nakedness also reveals a vulnerability in the softening of chest and belly. Douglas comments on the futility and absurdity of misbegotten ideas of "defense" and the toxicity of many such impulses often originating under the guise of American imperialism.

Douglas is unafraid to show his own vulnerability in "Catheter Security," again a naked figure with a catheter inserted into his penis, draining into a plastic bag, still holding the assault rifle, as if pointing out an even more absurd attempt at "defense" against what cannot be controlled. In another evocation, "Suit Security," he appears dressed as a businessman "armored with camera, rifle, bandolier, suit and tie."

NNEMoCA's mission is to engage in an ongoing dialogue in contemporary visual arts and culture and create transformative experiences for visitors by challenging established perceptions. This exhibit is courageous inauguration.

Contrasting with the amplitude of politically inspired statements, are multiple exquisite images of the Vermont that Douglas so loved. “Mist Bow,” a study in shades of blue and gray is a mood portrait of Lake Champlain. “Shadows” and “Gnarly Tree” are striking black-and-white photographs, which emphasize line and shadow in a more classically oriented photographic vein.

“Rox in the Sky,” a computer-generated image, is an ovoid open circle of stones above Lake Champlain with the Adirondacks in the background. It is an ethereal vision like a classic Zen Enso, with peach-colored light breaking through clouds at the center. The form and luminosity epitomize a kind of hopefulness that is also possible, despite the complexities of the world. Waskow states that this series best showcases Douglas’ deep reverence for our planet Earth and demonstrates his continual faith and hope in humanity’s future despite overwhelming odds.



John Douglas: “Rox in the Sky,” “Rox” Series, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Douglas was clearly an extraordinary artist of deep vision and feeling, willing to take risks in expressing controversial views through his art, which has evolved throughout many decades. He once joked that he had been looking through a viewfinder for more than 50 years. His experienced eye and endless imagination have brought us the wonder of this impressive range of work. Kudos to NNEMoCA for showcasing the art of a true “original.”