

**Portrait of Resistance:
The Art & Activism of
Carole Condé & Karl Beveridge**

A film by
Roz Owen & Jim Miller

Portrait of Resistance
premiered at the 2011
Planet in Focus Festival
(Toronto 13 / 10 / 2012)),
and was also screened at
Reel Artists Film Festival
(Toronto 24 / 02 / 2012)

Review by Chris Gehman

The artists and activists Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge are experiencing one of those moments of overdue late-career recognition that sometimes come to artists who persevere on their own unusual path without regard for widespread public or critical recognition, fame or financial gain. Roz Owen and Jim Miller's excellent new feature documentary, *Portrait of Resistance: The Art & Activism of Carole Condé & Karl Beveridge*, is one of the factors contributing to this welcome celebration of two critical, committed and thoughtful artists. It deftly combines biography, portraiture, and historical and critical commentary in



In response to Toronto's 2010 G20 meeting and the massive police repression that came with it, Condé and Beveridge created this single staged photo work that loosely references Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830).
Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Liberty Lost* (G20 Toronto), 2010.
Image courtesy of anti-amnesiac productions and the artists.

investigating precisely what this duo, who have been married since 1967 and working as collaborators since the mid-70s, are doing in their work, and how they came to do it.

Early in the film, we are presented with a conversation between Condé and Beveridge in front of their turning-point staged photo and text piece *Art is Political* (1975), which also shows the couple engaged in argumentation, struggle and a final coming together, a recapitulation of the process they had gone through over their previous few years as artists. This introduces a method the film develops in a number of technically sophisticated and often witty ways: its documentation of discussions by and about the artists echoes the montage form of their work by combining

images in layers, often allowing figures to break out of their still positions and turn to the camera, or to each other, and speak. Condé and Beveridge are clearly reluctant subjects in some respects (and this creates a number of moments of both humour and poignancy in the film), preferring to keep the focus on their subjects rather than themselves. But Owen and Miller, working patiently for several years, have coaxed them into reflecting on their early lives and family influences, and how they arrived at their particular method of social collaboration and use of text and staged photomontage to create art in the service of social change.

Condé and Beveridge describe their move to New York City in the early 70s, with ambitions to

have careers doing minimalist sculpture. In the environment of the intensely competitive New York art market, they gradually realized that they were competing with one another for attention from dealers and curators, and that Condé's work would automatically be considered secondary since she was a woman. Eventually, this conversation led the artists to a complete break with their former minimalist practice, just at the moment when they had been invited to prepare a show of new work for the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). They turned away from the role of artist as individual creator for the art market, beginning instead to work together as a collaborative team to develop a new role for artists as social citizens.

This controversial show, *It's Still Privileged Art* (1976), caused a backlash from some board members and sponsors, but as the show's curator, Roald Nasgaard, recalls in the film, the withdrawal of sponsorship from the gallery in which it was shown ironically led to it becoming the AGO's first dedicated space for contemporary art. Nasgaard says, "*It didn't look the way art was supposed to look. And maybe it was also some sort of rabid red Communism.*" The show also introduced the basic elements with which Condé and Beveridge have continued to work: staged photographs, often combining text and image, using people as actors,

sometimes playing an allegorical role, sometimes representing themselves. Beveridge sees this break, which also coincided with their return from New York to Toronto, as simply one couple's experience of a larger cultural shift: "*What we were actually participating in was the end of Modernism.*" For them, this entailed a rejection of the art market as a primary source of income and a disavowal of ambiguity as a value in the final artwork.

Over the subsequent decades, Condé and Beveridge have frequently worked with labour unions, on feminist issues, and with other social organizations, researching their subjects through the direct testimony of those involved in social struggles and often involving these individuals in the creation of the photographs.

This fundamental approach, in which art comes from and is intended for a particular community, anticipated much of what is now known as "relational art." But it benefits from the clarity of purpose and method that Condé and Beveridge bring to their work, a clarity lacking in much contemporary work.

By following the artists closely over a number of years, Owen and Miller were able to document the creation of several major works, devoting time especially to a series about mi-

grant farm labour in Ontario, and a dense and detailed restaging of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) as an allegory about struggles over the ownership and control of water entitled *The Fall of Water* (2010). These scenes are sprinkled with appearances by numerous artists and critics, including Ali Kazimi, Lorraine Leeson, June Clark, John Greyson and Dot Tuer, who appear as figures in the photographs and comment perceptively on the artists' work.

Portrait of Resistance is probably as good an introduction as could be imagined to the ideas, methods and work of this important artistic duo, whose political commitments have probably led to their being overlooked by the mainstream art world as major innovators in the area of post-modern, staged photography and photomontage. It elegantly brings together a wealth of visual, biographical and historical material, as well as critical commentary, with compelling wit and clarity.

Chris Gehman is a filmmaker, administrator, and occasional curator and critic based in Toronto. He is currently editing an anthology of writings about the media arts in Toronto and a critical anthology on filmmaker Arthur Lipsett.