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Barbara Astman photographed with one of her works at the Jane Corkin Gallery: It all starts with a Paris shoebox.

# The secret life of picture postcards

A Toronto artist brings  
out the iconic side  
of ageing images



JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

The early history of photo postcards is shadowy, though the first ones may have popped up in Paris in the 1890s, advertising the Eiffel Tower.

By 1908, when the postcard craze touched off in Paris was peaking worldwide, the United States Postal Service reported it had handled a staggering total of 678-million cards over a 12-month period, all dispatched by a population numbering only about 88 million. Nobody knows the 1908 figures for the worldwide postcard traffic. The apocalyptic McDonald's motto of "billions and billions" comes to mind.

The annual deluge of postcards has periodically gushed and shrunk since those glory days, though it has never come close to drying up altogether. Most of us

send cards, and just about everybody likes getting them. Trouble is, few of us know exactly what to do with the ones we get. They tend to pile up. But the idea of tossing them into the garbage is, for many, an unthinkable proposition. To solve our postcard problem is surely one reason, among others, that God created shoeboxes.

Browsing in the old-stuff marts of Paris a couple of summers ago, Toronto artist Barbara Astman spotted two shoeboxes containing 700 old picture postcards somebody couldn't bear to get rid of.

While collecting postcards ranks third (behind stamps and coins) as humankind's favourite hobby, your basic tourist in Paris probably would not have given a second glance at those images of railway bridges, rundown riverside row houses, streetscapes and other standard-issue topics of photographic postcards.

But Ms. Astman didn't look at them that way. She could see past the routine subjects depicted in these dusty, inexpensive little pictures — that's one knack marking off artists from the rest of us — and glimpse the sociable path along which the postcards had travelled from hand to hand a century before.

Somebody had been thrilled by a steel span leaping a river, or a tug chugging up a city canal, so they posted these images to folks down home who'd perhaps never seen such modern marvels. Because we live within a thicket dense with mass-media images, it is not easy to imagine a time when receiving a picture postcard of a railway bridge could be magical. One intention of Ms. Astman's new photo-

works, opening today at Toronto's Jane Corkin Gallery, is to stop that yawn and recreate the old sense of strangeness and wonder about the things portrayed in her Paris postcards.

To that end, the artist-chair of photography at the Ontario College of Art and Design first made Polaroids of several scenic postcards found in her shoeboxes. She then began to wear down the imagery, rinsing away the instant-photographic dyes, sometimes lightly, occasionally right down to the dark ox-blood ink used to indicate glooms and shadows.

What was left were traces of the original pictures floating on transparent film. The traces, in turn, were superimposed and layered in various ways. These scratchy or knobby, curiously colourful collages of streets, boats, bridges and such were transferred by digital scanner to a hard drive, then printed out on large sheets of heavy water colour paper. Unlike some other photographers who use computers to process imagery, Ms. Astman refrains from using microchip wizardry to distort her hand-made compositions before printing them.

The large results are handsome and technically proficient — though I suspect viewers who like photography tough will find these pieces too neat and decorative by half. Also, it's hard to see exactly what they add to the experience, which is usually quite wonderful, of thumbing mindfully through any stack of old postcards. Like the greatest artwork — strange to say — even the cheapest picture postcard seems quite complete and unimprovable. But these are hardly lethal reservations about what Ms. Astman has done.

Her works are souvenirs of a serious meditation on ordinary popular photography and its curiously potent ability to exalt ordinary things out of their ordinariness, transforming them into icons of intimacy between the one who sends the postcards and the one who receives and keeps it.

■ Barbara Astman: Paris Postcard continues at the Jane Corkin Gallery, 179 John St., Suite 302, through Sept. 29. (416) 979-1980

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