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The New York Times
US | Online
July 17, 2025
UMV: 145,000,000

The New York Times

Stan Douglas and the Double Life of Images

One of the most intelligent artists in North America finally gets the retrospective he deserves.

Jason Farago

"Birth of a Nation" (2025) by Stan Douglas. The Canadian artist remakes a sequence from the 1915 movie with new characters.Credit...Video by Tony Cenicola/the New York Times

I knew Vancouver before I ever saw it. I knew it from late-night movies and second-string TV shows, from '80s and '90s American productions — "21 Jump Street," "The X-Files" and the like — that were filmed in the discounted climes north of the border. "Hollywood North," as they used to call it, almost never got to play itself onscreen: The streets around Vancouver's False Creek were recast as San Francisco or New York, and the victims of American horror movies fled through British Columbian forests. The cinema was born in Lyon, it was industrialized in Los Angeles, but Vancouver is the city made of moving pictures.

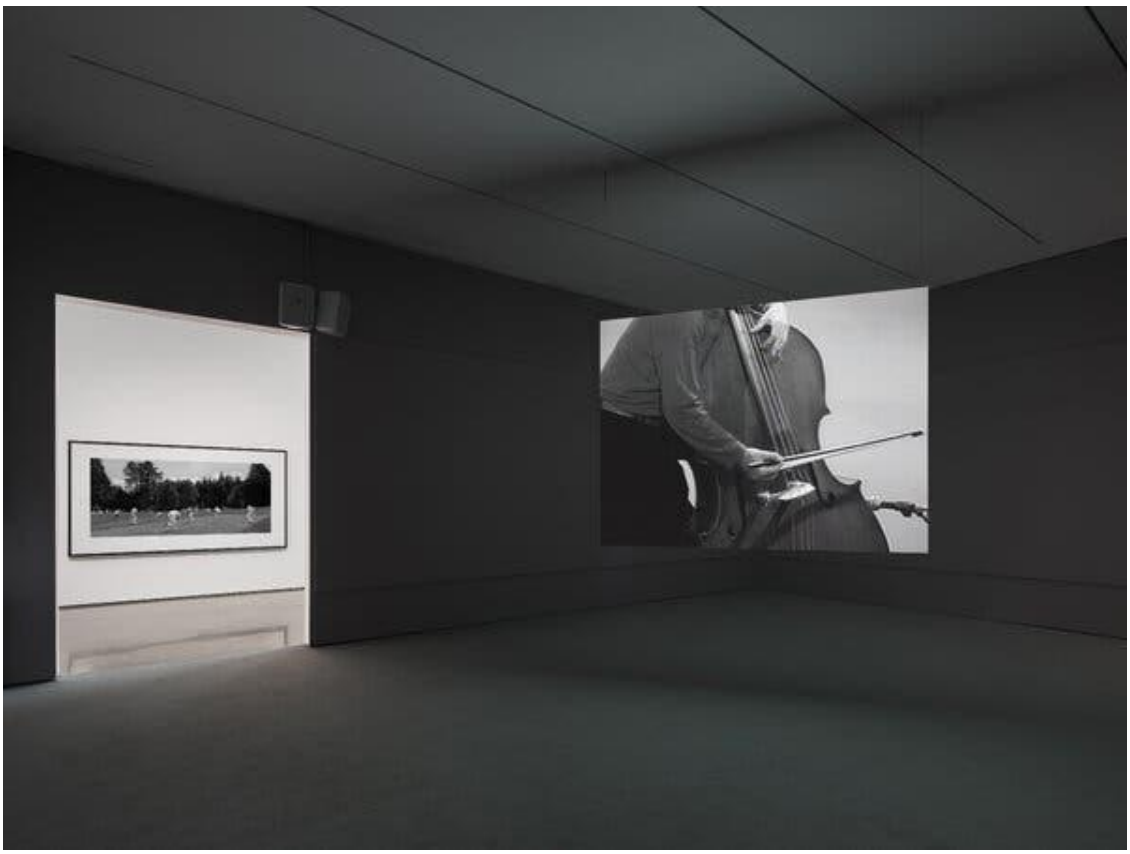
Vancouver's role as Hollywood's secret twin has always seemed suitable to Stan Douglas, the Canadian artist gripped by images and their doubles. Since the 1980s, working in still photography, broadcast television, room-filling video installation and even theater, he has reimagined the widest currents of history as mirror images and not-quite-clones. "Ghostlight," an ambitious retrospective that opened recently at Bard College here in the Hudson Valley, includes some of his most important works in video and photography, built out of 18th-century archives and 21st-century tech. (Given recent presidential designs on a new state north of the 49th parallel, the show also offers an opportune reminder of the distinct dimensions of Canadian art and history: where it dovetails with America's, and where it diverges.)

The show at Bard — organized and cunningly paced by Lauren Cornell, the artistic director of the college's Center for Curatorial Studies — captures Douglas's commitment to art as a practice of reconstitution: of putting the past in the service of the present, restaging turning points and letting the strings show. To make "Luanda-Kinshasa" (2013), he invited the pianist Jason Moran to lead a fictitious 1970s jam session, which Douglas filmed in the manner of Jean-Luc Godard's Rolling Stones doc "Sympathy for the Devil." For a permanent commission of mural-size photos at New York's Moynihan Train Hall, he commandeered a Vancouver hockey arena for tableaus vivants of hundreds of actors — each performing a real episode of war heroes, labor activists and tabloid murderers who really passed through the old Penn Station. For "Birth of a Nation," his intricate and shocking new five-screen video work at Bard, he wrote an entire screenplay adapting D.W. Griffith's noxious epic — which we never hear, as the video is silent.

All of which is to say that if you like your history at name-check depth, you can stick with the Guggenheim this summer. This is serious art for serious people, and Douglas's imposing videos and photos have bibliographies to match: Brush up on your Beckett and Freud.

In "Hors-Champs" (1992), Douglas invited a quartet of American jazz musicians to perform on a Paris soundstage. Here, two moments from their performance.CreditCredit...Video by Tony Cenicola/the New York Times

Douglas was born in Vancouver in 1960, and his early work (regrettably absent here) paid close attention to the psychological underside of Hollywood cinema. His interests grew more historical in the 1990s, and his greatest hits of that decade are at Bard — the first being “Hors-Champs” (1992), his very first multi-projector installation. For “Hors-Champs” Douglas gathered four American musicians (three Black, one white) who had lived in Paris during the late 1960s, and invited them to perform Albert Ayler’s 1965 “Spirits Rejoice”: a quicksilver composition of free jazz, associated as much with Black nationalism in the United States as with left-wing agitation in France. The black-and-white image *looks like* an old videotape, with its soft edges and noisy backgrounds. In fact, Douglas shot this himself on a Paris soundstage, using old cathode ray tube cameras, mimicking the shot-countershot editing and monochrome stages of 1960s European TV.



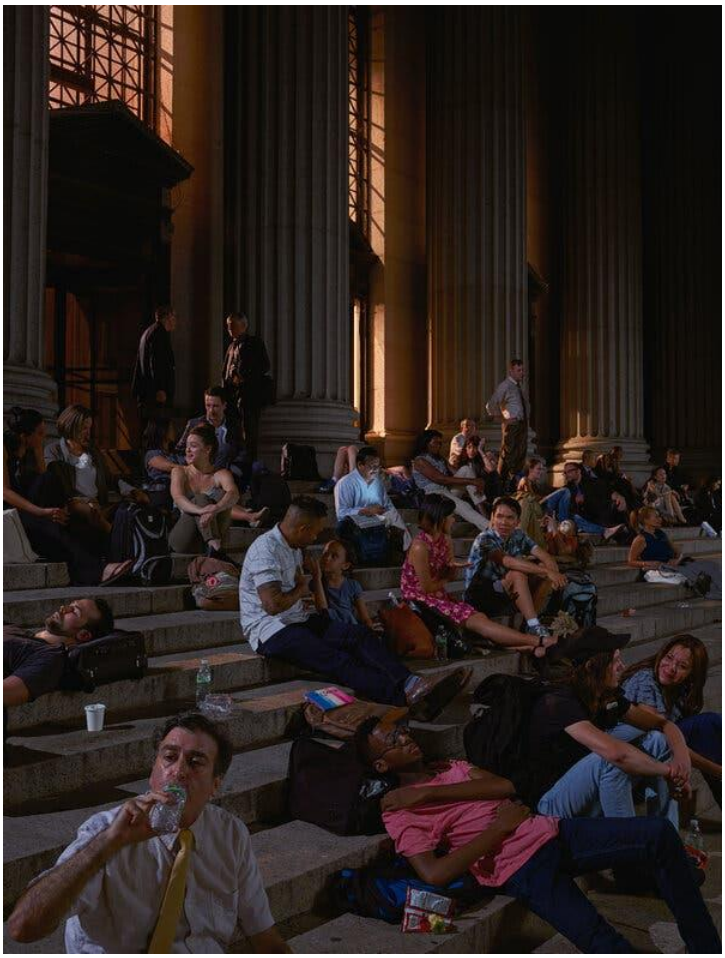
Installation view from “Stan Douglas: Ghostlight,” at the Hessel Museum of Art. Through the door is a photograph from the series “Midcentury Studio” (2010) for which Douglas assumed the persona of a postwar photojournalist. Right, “Hors-Champs” (1992).Credit...Olympia Shannon

The music is so propulsive that you won’t notice immediately that the projections on either side of the suspended screen are not quite identical. On one side, Douglas has edited this free jazz set traditionally, with isolated close-ups of the saxophonist Douglas Ewart and the trombonist George E. Lewis. On the other, he shows everything happening out of frame (or “hors champ” in French, an idiom that also suggests exile or foreignness): They pause for breath, flash complicit smiles, even stare into space. As the four musicians progress from solo cadenza to joint fanfare (and riff on both “La Marseillaise” and “The Star-Spangled Banner”), their performance becomes a media artifact that never actually existed: a specimen, complete with behind-the-scenes footage, of people and sounds on the move.

"Der Sandmann" (1995) by Stan Douglas. One of Douglas's major works, it comprises two films shown on the same screen, with half of each projector blacked out to create a not-quite-whole.CreditCredit...Video by Tony Cenicola/the New York Times

More intricate still is "Der Sandmann" (1995), which also uses two projectors, though these ones are spooling film. Working in post-Wall Berlin, Douglas shot an adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale of a young man whose childhood fears of a nighttime demon haunt his own uncanny days. The camera rotates 360 degrees around what appears to be an unkempt city garden, but a vertical seam at the center of the screen reveals the trick: We are looking at two films, with one half of each projector blacked out, so that the dual images *almost* but don't quite cohere. And we see that Douglas has actually shot "Der Sandmann" twice, on slightly different sets, so that as the camera pans (twice) that central seam appears to transform the man's past memories, or else to devour them.

There's a lot going on here, and I have not got anywhere into the reading list; "Der Sandmann" has a whole subplot about German garden design and the Weimar-era movie industry. But I'm hoping these very bare technical descriptions help clarify not only what Douglas was making, but why they matter: especially today, when the production of images has accelerated to infinity but comprehension is tending to zero.



Stan Douglas, “Stranded,” 2017. The artist’s still photography relies on cinematic staging and deep research: in this case, into the New York blackout of 1977 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012.Credit...via the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner

First, Douglas was relying on loops — whether of physical celluloid or analog video — to turn a stream of moving pictures into a discrete work of art. The loop made the image into an object, something with a shape, with dimensions, which you could scrutinize in the gallery with the same critical distance you bring to a painting or a sculpture. It wasn’t enough merely to point to some small moment from the history of television or cinema and say, ooh, how interesting. He had to sculpt it, recraft it — and, by holding it in suspension via the loop, to spotlight its inner workings. (Later on, by separating the image and audio tracks and tasking a computer to randomize their order, he reimagined video art as both a fixed loop and an infinite channel. “ISDN,” a rollicking video installation now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, has so many branching points that you won’t see and hear the same thing twice for over four years.)

Second, he was using twinned projections not merely for double the fun, but to conjure historically and psychologically fraught reflections or ghosts. In “Hors-Champs,” the back side of the screen comes to appear as shadows of the exiled musicians, lives not lived but also innovations not recorded. In “Der Sandmann,” the not-quite-right double image evokes Freud’s study of the uncanny, not to mention the division and reunification of Germany. A third video at Bard, “Nu•tka•” (1996), interweaves two video sequences of the British Columbian landscape, their horizontal bands coming into and out of registration as two colonial narrators describe their “discovery” of the Nuu-

Chah-Nulth land on what's now called Vancouver Island. In all of these, the double is both dialectical twin and uncanny opposite: friend and enemy, the shadow you cannot see with your bare eyes and cannot live without.

"Nu•tka•" (1996). The horizontal grain on the video screen reveals that Douglas has interlaced two different sequences depicting Vancouver Island.CreditCredit...Video by Tony Cenicola/the New York Times

Third, and most important, he was using the soundstage as an artistic medium: emphasizing the constructedness of his still and moving images, in order to reveal the construction of media writ large. One way he did this was by picturing historical turning points (America and France in the late '60s, Germany at the moment of reunification) using intentionally obsolescent recording technologies: old TV cameras in the case of "Hors-Champs," 16-millimeter film for "Der Sandmann."

An equal and opposite impulse animates Douglas's recent still photography, which relies on the newest CGI technology and digital editing software, but whose titles have false "dates" from decades in the past. The color panoramas of "Disco Angola" (2012), my favorite of his photo series, purport to depict New York and Luanda in 1974 and 1975, but the high-gloss digital prints never disguise that we are looking at a Los Angeles studio, where history is being reanimated and reconceived.

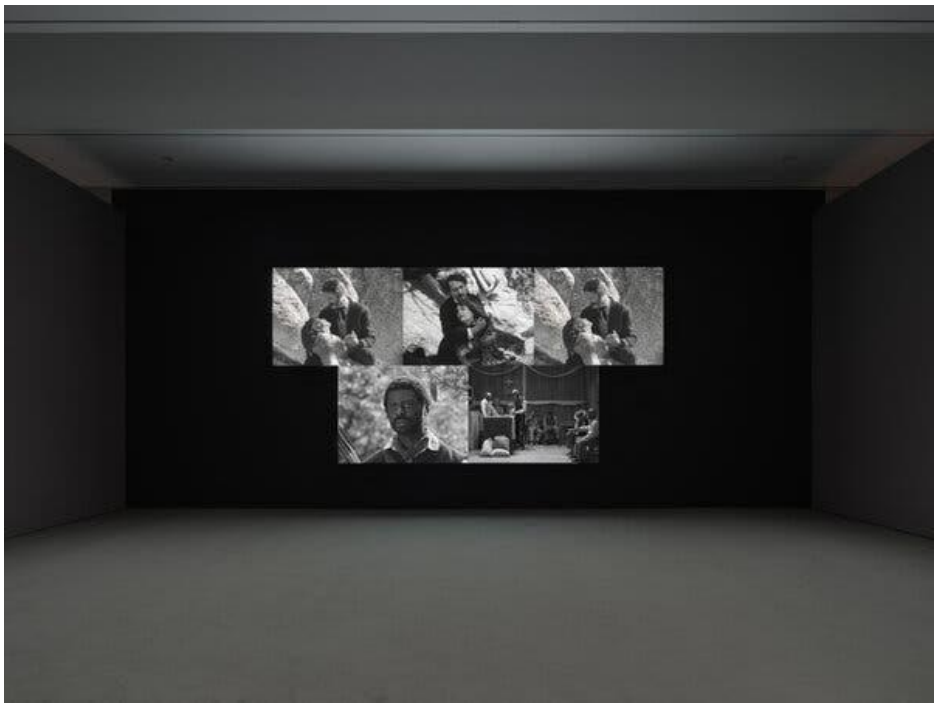
What makes "Ghostlight" not just important but restorative is how it stands against two tendencies in contemporary art that share an unfortunate core. One is biographical: to turn the artist's personality or identity into the object of appraisal, justifying the most lackluster exhibitions through backstories, interviews, disclosures, selfies. The other is referential: to gas up ordinary or careless

work with a string of endless citations, and having the label do the work the artist did not rise to. Both these tendencies, Douglas shows us, are running away from the whole power of art. Mere citation will never suffice, and personal chronicle is a narcissistic nonstarter. (One of his first lessons to his students at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., where he taught until recently: "Unless your name is Malcolm X, I'm not interested in your autobiography.")

Stan Douglas, "Disco Angola: Exodus, 1975," 2012. Douglas gives his high-gloss digital prints false "dates" from decades in the past. This depiction of Luanda was staged in a Los Angeles studio.Credit...via the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner

The pictures still have to work *by themselves*, with both a visual beauty and a conceptual underpinning, or else they just drown in the stream of posts and shares. That lesson reverberates through Douglas's newest work, the 13-minute "Birth of a Nation" (2025), which reinvents the racist epic at the origin of American cinema as a Freudian hall of mirrors. On one of the five screens, Douglas presents the original stomach-turning sequence known as the "Gus chase": a former slave pursues a white woman, she jumps to her death, and the freedman is lynched by the Ku Klux Klan. On four other screens, in high-definition video — contrasting with Griffith's grainy images from 1915 — Douglas adds two new characters of his own invention, both Black freedmen who get caught up in a Hollywood nightmare of misrecognition.

In Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," the first movie ever screened at the White House, the racist caricature of Gus was played by a white actor in blackface. In the P.O.V. shots of Douglas's "Birth of a Nation," though, Gus is absent: only a delusion, a ghost of America's own making. When history calcifies into ideology, when imagery of terror beams from the seat of government onto all our screens and phones, one valid task of the artist is to put the past back in motion — revealing just how its ghosts haunt our waking days. It is a tall order, but we'll never get anywhere if we aren't serious.



Douglas's reconstruction of "Birth of a Nation," 2025. The screen at top center shows D.W. Griffith's original movie of 1915; the others show Douglas's remake, featuring the original characters and ones of his own invention.Credit...Olympia Shannon

Stan Douglas: Ghostlight
Through Nov. 30. Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, 33 Garden Road, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; 845-758-7598, ccs.bard.edu/museum.

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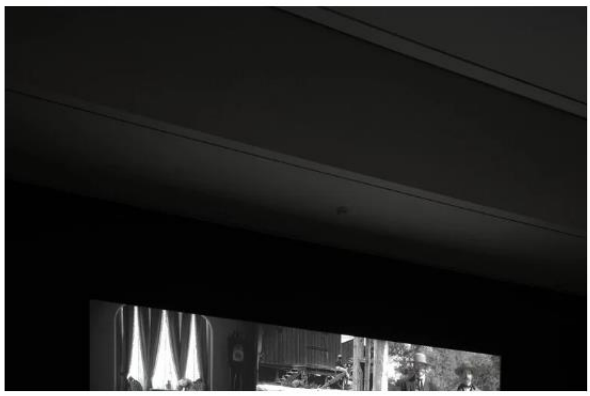

CRITIC'S PICK

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One of the most intelligent artists in North America finally gets the retrospective he deserves.

1h ago . By JASON FARAGO

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

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Gillian Murphy, a Ballerina With Joy and Aplomb, Steps Down

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16m ago . By CHRIS VOGNAR