

## Stan Douglas

VICTORIA MIRO GALLERY | 16 WHARF ROAD



Stan Douglas, *Them Secret Agent*, 2015, six-channel HD video projection, color, sound, 53 minutes 35 seconds. Inspector Heat (Marcello Urgeghe).

"A less amusing set of people never filled the imaginary world of a novelist," carped a September 1907 review of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, published in *Country Life*, the stuffy English periodical (still going strong) devoted to racing, golfing, and the horsey set. Conrad's dark novel, set in 1886, dared to portray the nascent Victorian-era underworld complete with a corruptible police force, foreign-born anarchists, and a sympathetic underclass. These shadowy nineteenth-century figures have been recast as spies, backhanded police commissioners, and dubious embassy officials in Stan Douglas's six-channel HD video adaptation *The Secret Agent*, 2015, in which Conrad's narrative is transposed to Portugal's Carnation Revolution of 1974.

Douglas has long been fascinated by periods of sociopolitical resistance as visualized in their special sites, artistic results, and people. In this show, his delight in *The Secret Agent's* period-perfect settings—colonial-era ambassadorial villas; a claustrophobic, red-upholstered cinema lobby; modernist government architecture in gleaming concrete—was reinforced in the lower gallery's four large-scale photographs showing nocturnal panoramic scenes of lower-class Vancouver neighborhoods as they might have existed in 1948. These are mesmerizing: a blanket of velvety blackness punctuated by occasional glimmers of light revealing a seedy, forgotten world re-created thanks to the latest in digital sophistry. And they feel miraculous—paradoxical hyperdetailed documentary photographs of the past, with a powerfully cinematic feel.

Douglas pays particular attention to the spurts of creative and personal freedom that accompany political upheaval. In two previous works, the photographic series "Disco Angola," 2012, and the video installation *Luanda-Kinshasa*, 2013, makeshift discotheques and jazz-funk recording sessions became allegories of functioning, nonhierarchical collectivities. In *The Secret Agent*, the Soho porn shop that for Conrad served as the spy's cover business becomes a cinema on a back street in Lisbon, proudly screening *Last Tango in Paris* (1972): One effect of the overthrow of the Estado Novo dictatorship was the lifting of its ban on Bernardo Bertolucci's erotic classic.

As images shift unpredictably across *The Secret Agent's* six screens, the lion's share of them seem to be giant close-ups of expressive faces, often ping-ponging back and forth in heated discussion: the Assistant Commissioner shouting furiously at Inspector Heat; Verloc attempting to soothe his uncomprehending wife, Winnie. Douglas seems perpetually fascinated by the often anonymous faces caught up in sweeping events, from the character portraits accompanying his western-murder mystery *Klatsassin*, 2006, to young Nathanael, the reader who dominates the screen in *Der Sandmann*, 1995. The artist is plainly enamored with the history of film, from Hollywood noir to European art house, and holds a special fondness for its most unsavory characters: gamblers, murderers, bootleggers, double agents, pornographers, thieves. Ah, the old days, when spies were stealthy interlopers and not remote-controlled drones; when porn was watched collectively in shady downtown cinemas rather than privately, on bedside laptops; when dirty money was passed along in fat envelopes, not as ghostly Bitcoin flowing through the Dark Web; when forbidden secrets passed from husband to wife in frank confession rather than being accidentally read in a text message. We sense a peculiar strain of nostalgia here, which pines not just for the places and spirit of the past but for its lost human contact even within the folds of its darkest—and often most photogenic—criminal corners. Douglas's complex video work and immense, labor-intensive historical photographs suggest just how far he is willing to go to relive that forgotten past.

—Gilda Williams