

RON TRAN

*And You Can Do Anything With Them Under Such Circumstances...*

Lawrence Eng

September 20 - November 1, 2008

Opening Friday September 19<sup>th</sup>. 7 - 9pm

*The photographer made me wear a leather jacket. She also had a sailor's cap, but the leather jacket went far enough already: it was too big and it smelled like old cigarettes. Then the chair came out, and I had to sit awkwardly, rest my arm on the back, and lean in. She told me that I had to look tougher, to clench my fist. I reluctantly clenched, and the flash went off.*

From high school graduation photos to family portraits, studio photography is serious business. Through its development, photographers used everything from threats to drugs to restraining devices to encourage their subjects to cooperate. The title of Ron Tran's first solo exhibition at Lawrence Eng Gallery, *And you can do anything with them under such circumstances*, comes from one photographer's description of the effects of opiates on his subjects. The process of getting sitters to relax is much less extreme now, but it can still be difficult. For commercial photographers, the skill of putting strangers at ease is crucial but not always successful.

In his current work, photographic portraits mediate Ron Tran's interactions with unfamiliar people – in some cases the strangers are nameless people found in lost snapshots, and sometimes they are the portrait photographers themselves.

Over a number of months Ron Tran visited *Photonation*, *Photo Express*, and the *Sears Portrait Studio*, not to photograph people, but to work with the photographers there, to foreground their backgrounds, taking pictures of props. He would bring out toppled columns, guitars and flowers, tires and bats – imbricating inanimate subjects that signify gender, culture, or class. Photographed together, their relationships become complicated, as they should be.

But photographs by themselves don't tell our stories, at least not the way we would tell them. We collaborate with our pictures and build stories around them, stories that we tell others, stories that we tell ourselves. Occasionally, however, photographs remind us of stories that we once told, but don't want to tell anymore. Sometimes we lose our photos, and sometimes we never wanted them in the first place. Sometimes they end up in places we never intended them to be.

Alongside the studio photographs, a number of works in this show draw from a collection of misplaced or abandoned photographs, gleaned by the artist during his wanderings in Vancouver and abroad, or donated to his collection by family and friends. By cutting and sandwiching these photos together, Ron Tran plays with the contingent nature of the photographs, creating new possibilities for narratives from the vestiges of lost ones. With their bent corners and unknown faces, these photographs are props — objects as much as images— *and you can do anything with them under such circumstances*.

-Jesse Birch-