



Fig. 1. Clara Gutsche, *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet*, from “*The Convent Series*,” 1995, chromogenic colour print, 40.5 x 50.6 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Clara Gutsche: *The Convent Series*

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In 1980, when American Canadian photographer Clara Gutsche (b. 1949) first began working on *The Convent Series* (1980–1996),¹ her focus was on the architecture and interior design of convents in Quebec. As the series progressed, she redirected her attention to the nuns in these religious orders. She visited at least twenty-five convents, moving into each of them for a period of a few days and engaging in the rhythm of the nuns' daily communal routines.² With these unprecedented portraits, Gutsche offers a photographic reality unfamiliar to most people.

In 1995 Gutsche travelled to Nicolet, Quebec, in order to photograph the cloistered nuns of Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, who have little contact with the outside world. *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet* (1995) (fig. 1) is a particularly intimate photograph of the women's personal space within these walls. The nuns, dressed in red, white and black, are standing in the doorways of their private cells, which extend along a very long corridor. Above each doorway is written: "Vive le sang de Jesus!" In religious communities such as this one, the nun's bedroom is a quiet place of meditation and prayer, where she can find solitude and be alone with God.³ To take this picture, Gutsche, using a process of long exposure photography, stood front and centre in the place where we connect with this image. From this vantage point, the women, lined up into the far distance, give the image a strong sense of spatial depth. As the hallway appears to narrow, the eye is drawn toward the burst of light erupting from the opening at the end. The reflections of the nuns standing on the pristine, navy blue linoleum strip adjacent to the vast expanse of white floor makes them appear to be floating, thereby emphasizing their holiness. The red apron over the white habit and black veil are striking accents that distinguish

the figures of these women from the whiteness of the doors, fixtures, columns and ceiling. As such, the minimalist colour creates a powerful image.



Fig. 1. Clara Gutsche, *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet*, from “*The Convent Series*,” 1995, chromogenic colour print, 40.5 x 50.6 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

While the focus of the photograph is the nuns, Gutsche still manages to emphasize the decorative and structural details of the interior, such as the strips of blue tiling on the floor, the uniformly framed pictures on the wall and the white columns lining the corridor, which add to the symmetrical coherence of the composition. In this photograph Gutsche recreates the precision and order that characterizes monastic living, which one can see in the perfectly polished floors, spotless wall surfaces, crisply ironed habits and the other repetitive elements within the image. As France Gagnon writes in the catalogue of the 1998 exhibition of these works: "The docility with which the nuns participate in [the artist's] *mises en scène* is just an extension of the

malleability, the dissolution of individuality present in this culture."⁴ Thus, the meticulous qualities of the convent space mirror the dutiful conformity of these women.

The themes in *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet* are also present in several other images from *The Convent Series*, including *Les Soeurs de la Visitation, Lévis, the Cloister* (1992) (figs. 2, 3) and *Les Soeurs Augustines de la Miséricorde de Jésus, the Chapel* (1991) (fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Clara Gutsche, *Les Soeurs de la Visitation, Lévis, the Cloister*, from “*The Convent Series*,” 1992, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned and gold toned.
<http://claragutsche.com/convents-les-convents/>.



Fig. 3. Clara Gutsche, *Les Sœurs de la Visitation, Lévis, the Cloister*, from “*The Convent Series*,” 1992, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned and gold toned.
<http://claragutsche.com/convents-les-convents/>.



Fig. 4. Clara Gutsche, *Les Sœurs Augustines de la Miséricorde de Jésus, the Chapel*, from “*The Convent Series*,” 1991, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned and gold toned.
<http://claragutsche.com/convents-les-convents/>.

In each of these photographs the nuns are showcased in different settings, including a hallway, cloister and chapel. Despite the different environments, these black and white photographs, as in the later colour image *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet*, pay close attention to the cohesive harmonies of the formal elements of these interior spaces. One key aspect these works have in common is the narrowing perspective. Like *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet*, the spaces in these images recede along a corridor toward an open passage, or an altar, as seen in *Les Soeurs Augustines de la Miséricorde de Jésus, the Chapel*. However, in contrast to the light flooding through the doorway in *Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang, Nicolet*, the end of the hallway in *Les Soeurs de la Visitation, Lévis, the Cloister* is completely blackened. Another shared characteristic of these photographs is the notion of uniformity: the sameness of these women in their methodical way of life is evoked through the compositional staging of each picture. The dissolution of individuality is further emphasized in the photographs through the concealment of the nuns' faces. In *Les Soeurs Augustines de la Miséricorde de Jésus, the Chapel*, only the backs of the nuns are visible, their white veils and habits transforming them into ghost-like figures.

Gutsche's photographs are concerned with how portraits of unknown people can convey a profound sense of historical time. This is the underlying theme of *The Convent Series*, as Gutsche explains: "I was mystified by the invisibility of Catholicism and by the vehemence with which many Québécois dismissed their Catholic past."⁵ What she found in these monasteries of nuns were communities completely closed off from the outside world, yet still full of vitality. These women once held significant roles in the everyday lives of French Canadians, but have since faded quietly into the background.⁶ After the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s in Quebec, the Church rapidly lost much of its influence. The term "Quiet Revolution" refers to a significant

period of intense political and socio-cultural change in Quebec's history, mainly characterized by the secularization of society.⁷ One of the major changes during this time was the government's effort to take away control of health care and education from the Roman Catholic Church by setting up ministries for these responsibilities. Before this, the Catholic Church was regarded as the principal organizer of the Québécois family, tenaciously enforcing traditional religious values that defined the roles of men and women and the upbringing of children. In the 1980s and 1990s, after the Québécois family underwent radical transformations with fewer children, women working and couples rebelling against marriage,⁸ Gutsche managed to capture a secluded familial community of older sisters, dwindling in numbers, but still enduring. "Denial is intriguing," Gutsche remarks. She continues, "One character in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* makes the observation, '... that we are what we remember.' Another character replies, 'Perhaps ... we are also – preponderantly – what we forget'."⁹

Above all, what Gutsche reveals in *The Convent Series* is how these religious orders function as a family. She provides us with a look into a community that is not a family in the conventional sense, but is one nonetheless. The nuns act as a family unit: they eat together, pray together, live together and interact with one another in their daily lives. In the four photographs discussed, Gutsche does not focus on individuals but shows the women in unison, as a sisterhood. It is not simply about living in proximity: the women also grow together as a family would. "[I]t is important to acknowledge that most of the structures of religious life were established precisely to help members of the community grow in the practice of virtues."¹⁰ Not only do they grow together, each generation of women is charged with passing on values to the younger generation, depending on new recruits to sustain growth within these religious orders. When the Catholic

Church governed society, the nuns were the ones charged with duties often associated with a nurturing role. They worked as teachers in schools, nurses in hospitals and caregivers of abandoned and orphaned children.¹¹ In addition to these maternal roles outside the convent and a familial life within, the nuns also saw themselves as a family in a religious sense. The Catechism teaches that all nuns are betrothed to Christ. When a nun takes her vows the ceremony is similar to that of a marriage between Christ and His bride. During this ceremony, the nun vows to devote her life to Christ and dedicates herself to Him until death.¹²

As an artist-photographer, Gutsche often portrays children and family life in unconventional ways to make visible their shared characteristics. With *The Convent Series*, she provides a group portrait of a strong community whose way of life today, twenty years later, hardly exists. Numerous photographs of nuns from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries show them performing their public duties among their pupils, invalids or poor people.¹³ By contrast, Gutsche's *The Convent Series* shows us the hidden domestic spaces of aging women in group portraits that express the fortitude of a religious collective female identity.

NOTES

¹ “Clara Gutsche,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed February 7, 2016, https://virtualexhibition.ca/artiste-artist/gutsche_clara-eng.

² “Clara Gutsche: The Convent Series,” Americas Society / Council of the Americas, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://www.as-coa.org/exhibitions/clara-gutsche-convent-series>.

³ “Monastic Life – Monastic Buildings,” Becoming a Trappist Monk or Nun, accessed November, 2015, <http://trappists.org/newcomers/monastic-life/monastery-buildings-0>.

⁴ France Gascon, *Clara Gutsche: The Convent Series* (Joliette: Musée d'art de Joliette, 1998), 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Mathieu Pigeon, “The Quiet Revolution,” McCord Museum, accessed November 2015, <http://www.musee->

mccord.qc.ca/scripts/explore.php?Lang=1&elementid=109__true&tableid=11&tablename=theme&contentlong.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gascon, 17.

¹⁰ Dennis J. Billy, *Living in the Gap: Religious Life and the Call to Community* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2014), 80.

¹¹ “Convent Life: Why Nuns,” What Every Catholic Should Know, accessed November 2015, http://www.whateverycatholicshouldknow.com/wecsk/convent_whynuns.htm.

¹² “Convent Life: Bride of Christ,” What Every Catholic Should Know, accessed November 2015, http://www.whateverycatholicshouldknow.com/wecsk/convent_bridechrist.htm.

¹³ Gascon, 21.

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